

Examining the Profiles and Pathways of Military Veterans in Ontario

ONCAT R1927 Project Final Report

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to Mark Gallupe, Professor/PLAR Facilitator at Loyalist College of Applied Arts and Technology, Elizabeth Nicholas, Employment and Education Coordinator the Trenton Military Family Resource Centre, Warren Otto, Academic Advisor for the Military Support Office at the University of Manitoba, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert (Bobby) Hall, Personnel Selection Officer at CFB-Garrison Petawawa and Jacinda Keronga, Veterans Affairs Case Manager for their valuable support, guidance and resources throughout the duration of this project.

We also wish to thank the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) for their financial support, which made this report possible.

We would also like to thank the Academic Operations and Planning department for their help in collecting the survey data, with a special thanks to Samantha Logan, Institutional Research and Planning Analyst, for her help and guidance with the survey, focus group preparation and results analysis. A special thanks to Maggie Cusson, Dean of Academic Development and Mao Keo, Project Coordinator for providing leadership and direction on this project.

Responsibility for the analysis and the opinions expressed in the report remain solely with the authors.

Table of Contents

Background and Literature Review.....	4
Population Characteristics	6
Presence in Post-Secondary Education.....	7
Education Training Benefit.....	10
Barriers	11
Research Questions	13
Method	14
Results.....	15
Discussion	20
Next Steps.....	24
Limitations	27
Conclusion.....	28
References	30

Background and Literature Review

The Government of Canada has a long history of supporting veteran retraining that dates back to the end of World War I beginning with the federal Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment, founded in 1918 ("Civilian Reintegration", n.d.). Veterans benefits have been a building block of the Canadian social welfare state and many of the social benefits we have in place today originated in the context of Canadian veterans benefits, including: free hospital coverage, vocational retraining for those with disabilities, federal support to post-secondary educational institutions, business development loans, publicly funded legal aid, income support and home care (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2004). Until recently, however, monetary retraining benefits were not available to active military members who released voluntarily, completed their terms of service or reached mandatory retirement age (Cathcart, 2019). Only medically released service members might have qualified for financial support to use toward vocational rehabilitation.

The face of the Canadian veteran has drastically changed since 1918 and the priorities of these veterans has also changed. World War II saw a conventional type of warfare with a strong sense of moral purpose. Soldiers went away for many years at a time to take part in a fight that many agreed needed to be fought. Recent missions are often divided into six-month rotations that target an enemy that is less-well defined and received only lukewarm support from the public. Veterans today are not as worried about pensions as they are about jobs and education (Galloway, 2010). These veterans are looking for jobs that would approximate the pay they made while in the military and many of them are looking to go back to school to upgrade their skills or shift career focus entirely.

Each year, approximately five thousand new, highly skilled veterans release from active service in the Canadian Armed Forces and reports show that more than thirty percent reported difficulty transitioning to civilian life (Van Til et al., 2017). The Life after Service Survey (LASS) is a national longitudinal survey that collects information on the transition from military to civilian life, general health

and well-being, chronic conditions, labour force participation and other related information. The most recent results from the survey from 2016 report that veterans with recent releases (between 2012 and 2015) had a higher rate of difficult adjustment compared to earlier releases between 1998 and 2012. In 2017, the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman released a publication entitled “Transitioning Successfully: A Qualitative Study” that had the goal of better understanding the factors which contribute to a successful transition, programs and services which facilitate a successful transition and the challenges in the transition process (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2017). The report found a number of factors that contributed to a successful transition, including: being proactive and owning the transition, having a supportive spouse/partner and planning ahead for the transition. Factors that made transition challenging included: finding a new sense of purpose outside of the military, stress towards maintaining financial security and stigma towards injuries, particularly mental health.

For those that have been medically released from the Canadian military, there are a number of transition support services available, with the most common being the Veteran Family Program offered through Veterans Affairs Canada and the Vocational Rehabilitation Program offered through Manulife. The Veteran Family Program offers programs, services and resources to support the unique needs of medically releasing Canadian Armed Forces members as well as medically released veterans and their families. This includes continued and unlimited access to local Military Family Resource Centres and some of the transition-support programs and services include: group sessions on transition topics, mental health first aid courses and financial planning workshops (“Veteran’s Family Program”, n.d.).

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program (VRP) is a component of the Canadian Armed Forces Long-Term Disability (CAF LTD) group insurance plan, administered and managed by Manulife. The objective of the VRP is to provide training and education that focuses on enhancing the former member’s existing education, skills, training and experience to obtain gainful employment in the civilian workforce (“Vocational Rehabilitation Program”, n.d.). This program focuses on the acquisition of a

license, certification, diploma or degree from a recognized educational institution in a field where the former member already has transferable skills while also keeping in mind their medical limitations.

Population Characteristics

The Canadian Armed Forces is comprised of a wide variety of personnel that join for varying reasons and attracts recruits from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, training, education levels, and pre-service work experience and many people join the service for financial reasons (Cathcart, 2019; DiRamio, et al., 2011). According to a March 2019 report released by Veterans Affairs Canada, it is estimated that the total veteran population in Canada to be just under 650,000 as of March 31, 2018 (“Veterans Affairs Canada Statistics – Facts and Figures”, 2019). Of these, almost 90% are male and just under half are under the age of 60. Of the veteran population that receives benefits, 24% have disability benefits for a service-related psychiatric diagnosis and 71% are receiving disability benefits for PTSD.

Military personnel and veterans have elevated rates of medical and psychiatric conditions relative to the general population and up to 75% have service-connected disabilities, of which the most common is a psychological or emotional condition such as PTSD or depression (Bryan et al., 2014). Strickley (2009) describes how veterans may be dealing with the psychological aspects of war or a serious injury or disability as a result of combat, all of which can shape their views on life and higher education. The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has found that a significant percentage of veterans have been exposed to some sort of a traumatic experience. Specifically, “60 percent have been attacked or ambushed, 86 percent have received incoming fire, 80 percent have been shot at, 36 percent have discharged a weapon, 63 percent have seen dead bodies or remains, and 79 percent have known someone who was seriously injured or killed” (Strickley, 2009, p. 4).

The changes from life in the military community to life as a civilian may include relocation, loss of social support systems, reintegration into civilian lifestyle, different or non-existent healthcare services and possibly a new job or career path (Falkey, 2016). Those who are ending their military

service are leaving more than just a job; they are leaving a way of looking at themselves in the world. It involves reconceptualising not only what they do, but who they are, and, often, what they believe (Jones, 2013). The prevalence of self-reported difficult adjustment to civilian life ranges from 25% to 38% for all veterans in Canada with those who were medically release reporting much higher rates of difficulty (Rose, VanDenKerkhof & Schaub, 2018). Medically released veterans are more likely to report being unsatisfied with current or anticipated levels of income and investments (Marshall, Matteo, & Pedlar, 2005). In addition, those that medically released reported higher levels of psychological challenges associated to the stigma of not being “strong enough” to stay active in the military and perform their duties, or a sense of being abandoned by the organization they gave their life to, or that their sacrifices on behalf of the nation have been disregarded (Knutson, 2015).

Presence in Post-Secondary Education

For many veterans, the completion of a post-secondary education is a significant developmental milestone offering self-determination and greater economic opportunities. Employment among veterans is associated with better overall psychological and physical well-being and participation in community life (Norman et al., 2015). Ackerman, DiRamio and Garza Mitchell (2009) found that student veterans listed starting college as the most difficult transition out of the military. Currently, there are no overarching frameworks to guide decision-makers about the type of support mechanisms that should be offered based on their specific veteran population (Evans, Pellegrino & Hogan, 2015). Research shows that student veterans are quite selective about the campus life and academic activities in which they invest their time and typically place great emphasis on academic areas that they find essential for academic progress versus college or university life and activities that are not essential for success (Cole & Kim, 2013).

Student service members and veterans are more likely than traditional post-secondary students to be male, older, married and have children (Bryan et al., 2014). Contrary to popular belief, however, a

large number of student veterans are not much older than their peers. The difference is not the age of the students, but rather the maturity level of the student veterans who have had more life experience than traditional students (Persky & Oliver, 2010). This population of students are more likely to represent the first generation in their families to attend a college or university (Cole & Kim, 2013). A common theme reported in student veteran studies is difficulty connecting socially with the campus and other students (Ackerman et al., 2009, DiRamoio, Ackerman, & Garza-Mitchell, 2008; Jones, 2013). They struggle with the psychosocial effects of war and fitting in on campus and many veterans enrolled in postsecondary do not graduate or take longer to graduate than traditional-age students (Cate, 2014; Wood, 2012).

Veterans entering post-secondary will bring with them soft skills such as initiative, resilience, decision-making abilities and leadership, all of which are desirable traits when pursuing independent study (Cathcart, 2019). Basic combat training while in the military is utilized to develop resilience and a sense of common purpose and teamwork (Church, 2009). Military and veteran students are generally described as emotionally mature, mission-oriented, and experienced leaders who set examples in both college and workplace settings (Lighthall, 2012). Returning student veterans bring with them major life experiences, cross-cultural awareness and a strong motivation to serve others (Money, n.d.). Student veterans expressed that military principles grounded in accountability in discipline resonated with them and that discipline learned in the military was essential in establishing new routines (Gregg, Howell & Shordike, 2016).

Campus culture is quite different than military life, so it is one of the biggest adjustments for the student veteran (Rumann, Rivera & Hernandez, 2011). Service members are accustomed to structure. They are given a mission, shown how to complete it and know what the expectations are for completion. When they arrive at college they expect the same structure. They are looking for an established procedure that tells them how to enroll, when to enroll, and where to turn in their

paperwork (Wheeler, 2012). A number of qualitative and quantitative studies show that many student veterans are facing extensive challenges in working toward their academic goals (Borsari et al., 2017; Normal et al., 2015; Tinuco, 2014). Challenges that have emerged include issues associated with being non-traditional students, mental/physical health problems, being first-generation students and perceived institution-policy inefficiencies in the implementation of veteran benefits.

Veterans entering post-secondary studies after release are influenced by a diverse set of experiences compared to non-military college and university students (Cathcart, 2019). Today's student veterans bring many challenges to higher education, such as relocation, academic skills, lack of continuity in education, physical issues, psychological issues and social isolation (Daly & Fox Garrity, 2103; Hopkins, et al., 2010). Student service members and veterans often share the risk factors related to other adult learners (Wheeler, 2012), in addition to psychological feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and discomfort in academic settings (Persky & Oliver, 2010).

Active military members who are also students behave differently than traditional students because of the unpredictability of the military system such as deployments, training requirements and reassignments (Bryan et al., 2014). Flexibility is an important consideration for military students and distance education, particularly online courses, can provide this flexibility for non-traditional adult learners (Kolowich, 2010). Online courses do not solve all problems, however, as active military students may run into issues with disrupted internet access, or even no internet access. In addition, there may be security features on military computers that prevent students from accessing information needed to study (Machuca, Torres, Morris & Whitley, 2014). Active military students frequently have heavy demands on their work schedule, with those in combat zones under particular stress and being aware of these demands is important for instructors (Smucny & Stover, 2013). For service members in general, there is often stigma associated with reaching out for help given a military culture that is predominantly against showing weakness (Danish & Antonides, 2009).

Many student veterans are undergoing a constant dynamic tension as they transition from a previous state (active military) to several simultaneous current states (post-secondary student, civilian and/or employee) all while creating and recreating their individual identities along the way (Jones, 2013). The way in which veterans created meaning for their life in the military is often quite different then the way they create meaning as students on campus. This dichotomy is a key challenge for student veterans transitioning to higher education (Jones, 2013).

The total number of active military and veteran students attending post-secondary institutions in Canada is not well known as this data is not consistently tracked or reported on. In 2018/2019, it was reported that 1,027 veterans accessed the Education Training Benefit and it was forecasted that this number would increase to 2,400 in 2019/2020 (“Veterans Affairs Canada Statistics – Facts and Figures”, 2019). This number does not reflect the number of active military students attending post-secondary and it does not include those who are pursuing post-secondary using other benefits offered through Veterans Affairs Canada or students who are paying for their education on their own. It is not known how many active military or veteran students are currently attending Algonquin College or Loyalist College.

Education Training Benefit

In the past, only service members who were medically released might have qualified for financial support to pursue post-secondary or other approved training program with the intention of vocational rehabilitation in mind. This changed, however, when the Government of Canada introduced the Education and Training Benefit (ETB) on April 1, 2018. The ETB, administered by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), provides eligible veterans with funding to help them achieve their college, university or technical education goals. Funding is also available for short, informal courses. The intent of the ETB appears to be grounded in providing an opportunity for veterans that honours the “implicit social covenant” between the nation and the service member (Cathcart, 2019). In other words, the ETB is not

allocated on the basis of particular needs (i.e., vocational rehabilitation), which allows veterans to seek out new challenges. Veterans who have been honourably released since April 1, 2006 and who have served for six or more years are eligible to receive the benefit.

The funding support available as part of the ETB presents post-secondary institutions with a unique opportunity to welcome qualifying veterans into a wide variety of programs and has several implications (Cathcart, 2019):

- Veterans can augment previously attained skills and knowledge, thereby expanding career-specific employability
- Veterans who possess a non-transferable skill may be able to pursue new educational and career goals

The cumulative effect of offering this benefit is that more veterans will be able to access a robust training and education subsidy package that has not been available in the previous seven decades. The ETB is poised to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on releasing veterans and post-secondary institutions need to be aware of the potential implications (Cathcart, 2019).

Barriers

The most common factors that put post-secondary students in high-risk categories are delayed entry, financial independence, full-time employment, part-time enrollment, dependents, single parenthood and lack of a high school diploma or GED (Wheeler, 2012). Veteran students report that two of the main reasons they do not attend post-secondary studies are difficulties they face with regard to the organizational bureaucracy and challenges faced when trying to fit into the academic environment (Daly & Fox Garrity, 2013). Navigating the governmental and institutional bureaucracies can be daunting. Education and health care benefits applications are complicated, sometimes requiring dozens of pages of paperwork, with wait times of more than six months to schedule an appointment, and even

longer to receive benefits. When veterans experience these issues on a concurrent basis, they often feel lost, overwhelmed and dismayed if they are not provided with mechanisms of support that are informed by an understanding of the difficulties veterans face during transition (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Brown & Gross, 2011).

When it comes to obtaining credits for the work they completed while in the military, veteran students are often dissatisfied by inconsistent credit transfer rules among departments, frustrated by unexpected parts of the transfer process and confused by institutions' decisions regarding credit transfers ("Benchmarking Financial Aid and Credit Policies for Military Students", 2019). Veterans' persistence in higher education often depends on their ability to make rapid progress and build on the knowledge they established in the military (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In the United States, the American Council on Education (ACE) publishes the Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services, which provides recommendations to post-secondary institutions on evaluating academic transcripts that are provided by the military for active-duty service members and veterans ("The Military Guide", 2020). The guide's credit transfer recommendations are based on reviews of military coursework by a panel of university faculty members convened by ACE. These faculty members review military coursework and occupational training descriptions pertaining to their own academic disciplines and evaluate them. Reports, however, show that the ACE evaluations have significant variability and lack clarity on specific credit transfer policies (Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010).

To date, no such equivalent of the reviews and evaluations conducted by ACE exists in Canada. The decision of whether military experience will be counted for academic credit is left to the discretion of each post-secondary institution and as a result, wide variability exists. In a recent benchmarking analysis, Hanover Research (2019) found few Canadian institutions that are marketed explicitly as "military friendly" and those that did offered a wide range of services, supports and credit transfer options. In their analysis, Hanover Research documented four Canadian institutions that were marketed

explicitly as military friendly and most used ad hoc partnerships or non-diploma programs to serve military-connected learners. Only Royal Roads University, located in Victoria, British Columbia, advertises a comprehensive list of offerings toward military-connected students and the institution's history as the Royal Roads Military College likely has something to do with this.

The process of successfully transitioning to civilian student life can be hindered by the drastic shift from a role where authority is unchallenged and job descriptions are clear, to one where rules are loosely interpreted and followed, and college students are expected to act autonomously and be self-directed (Evans, Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015). Veterans are a unique cultural group within the civilian population and these differences may be amplified in a post-secondary environment given the change in organization and social structure and an unfamiliar and uncertain hierarchy, and some may face culture shock (Cathcart, 2019). Adjusting to an academic culture, which emphasizes individual accomplishment, independent organization, and a fairly slow pace is directly opposite of the military culture, which can make transition even more difficult (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Kurzynski, 2014). All branches of the military rely on strict adherence to a chain of command and operate with a high power distance. The location of veteran campus services may negatively affect the potential interactions between the student and employee if the student veteran perceives that the person is of a high ranking position (Daly & Fox Garrity, 2013).

Research Questions

In April 2018, the Government of Canada released the Education and Training Benefit and post-secondary institutions can expect to see a rise in the number of veteran students looking to access post-secondary education after they have released from the military.

1. What are the characteristics of the veteran student population in Ontario?
 - How many are accessing transfer pathways?

- What are the needs of this population?
 - What are the general characteristics of this population?
2. What are the motivations and expectations of this population of transfer students?
 - What are the expectations of these transfer students? Did the services provided meet their expectations? If not, why?
 - What factors influence the expectations and motivations of transfer students?
 3. What are the obstacles and challenges faced by this student population?
 - What kinds of systems or agreements are already in place to promote and facilitate transfer between institutions?
 - How can post-secondary institutions support this population best? What type of support systems need to be in place or created?

Method

Participants included 73 college students from Algonquin College of Applied Arts and Technology (Algonquin College), located in Ottawa, Ontario (n = 49) and Loyalist College of Applied Arts and Technology (Loyalist College), located in Belleville, Ontario (n = 24). Most participants classified themselves as veterans (58.95), with reservist being the second most popular (30.1%). A small percentage of respondents were still active in the military (10.9%). A majority of participants (53.4%) were enrolled in a 2-year diploma. A smaller proportion (19.2%) were enrolled in 3-year advanced diplomas and 11% of respondents were enrolled in a Bachelor's degree. A significant portion of participants were enrolled in full-time studies (91.8%) and a majority (45.2%) did not work or have responsibility for any children (54.8%).

Potential participants from Algonquin College were recruited by responding to an email that asked if they were a former or active military member. Their response included contact information,

which was then used to send the survey. Participants at Loyalist College were recruited by sending out an email invitation to all registered students. Those that fit the criteria were able to move forward with the survey. 35% of respondents from Loyalist College were removed from further analyses as they did not meet the criteria. Those that met the criteria were invited to participate in the survey, which was hosted on SurveyMonkey. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to go to a separate page to enter their contact information for a chance to be entered into a draw to win one of 25 \$25 gift cards to either Starbucks or Amazon.

At the time of survey distribution, participants were also asked to provide their contact information if they were interested in participating in a focus group to discuss their experiences in further detail. The focus groups were scheduled for the middle of March at Algonquin College and the end of March for Loyalist College. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, all in-person events and gatherings were cancelled. Interest in focus group participation was low, so it was decided that we would complete the report without the focus group portion of the study.

Results

As can be seen in Figure 1, a greater majority of respondents (47.6%) from Loyalist College indicated the Education Training Benefit (ETB) had a major influence on their decision to enroll in post-secondary compared to Algonquin College (28.6%). In total, 39.3% of respondents indicated that the ETB had a major influence on their decision to pursue post-secondary. Table 1 shows a breakdown of funding sources for student veterans. A little over a quarter of participants (26.4%) were actively using the ETB to fund their education with the use of CAF-LTD/Manulife funding being the second most used way to fund education (20.8%). As can be seen in Table 2, just over half of the respondents (51.4%) indicated that they used their own personal savings to fund their education, 30.8% used their earnings from work and 22.2% received funding from federal or provincial loans.

Figure 1. Influence of Education Training Benefit

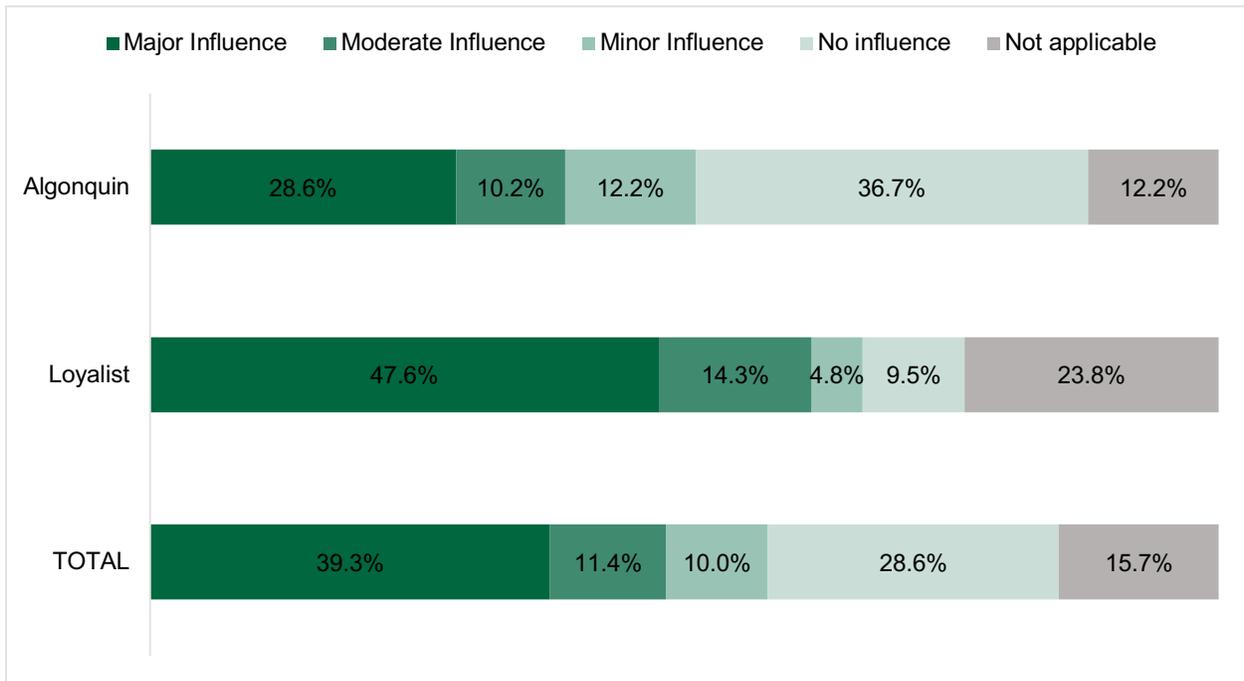


Table 1. Education Benefits Used

Education Benefit Used	Algonquin		Loyalist		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Education Training Benefit	12	24.5%	7	30.4%	19	26.4%
CAF-LTD/Manulife Funding	8	16.3%	7	30.4%	15	20.8%
CAF-ILP	3	6.1%	5	21.7%	8	11.1%
Other	8*	16.3%	2	8.7%	10	13.9%
None of the above	23	46.9%	5	21.7%	28	38.9%

Table 2. Other Financial Services Used

Other Financial Services	Algonquin		Loyalist		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Private scholarships or grants	2	4.1%	1	4.3%	3	4.2%
Federal or Provincial student loans	13	26.5%	3	13.0%	16	22.2%
Private loans from a bank or other institution	2	4.1%	0	-	2	2.8%
Credit card	2	4.1%	3	13.0%	5	6.9%
Unemployment benefits	0	-	2	8.7%	2	2.8%
Earnings from work	16	32.7%	6	26.1%	22	30.6%
Personal savings	27	55.1%	10	43.5%	37	51.4%
Financial support from spouse or other family members	11	22.4%	2	8.7%	13	18.1%
None	13	26.5%	8	34.8%	21	29.2%

Almost half of the respondents from Loyalist College (42.9%) attempted to transfer credits to their current program and a small percentage of respondents from Algonquin College (12.9%) attempted to transfer credits to their current program (see Figure 2). Out of the successful number of credits transferred, the majority fell between one to three credits with only one respondent from Loyalist College reporting success in transferring seven or more credits. There was an even distribution of 6 students being satisfied with the number of credits transferred and 6 being unsatisfied with the number of credits transferred.

Figure 2. Percentage of Attempted Transfer Credits

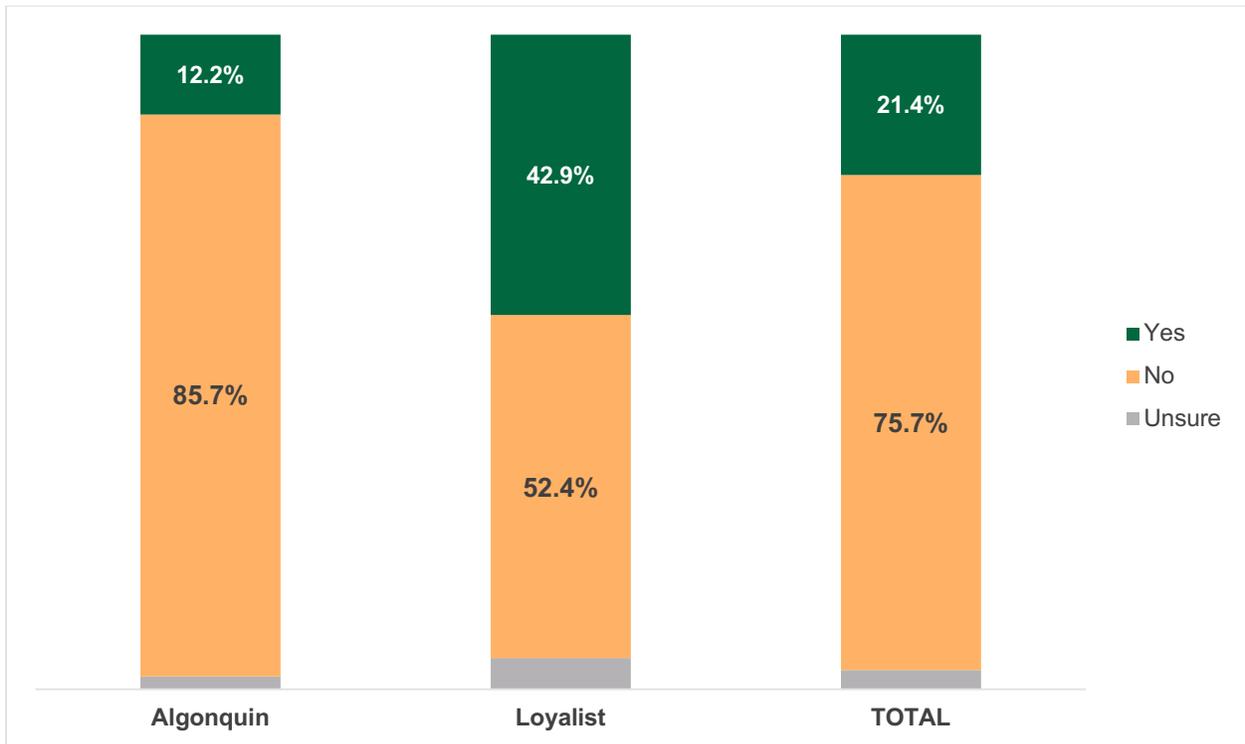


Table 3 provides a breakdown of the challenges faced by student veterans. 26% of respondents found that balancing coursework with other responsibilities is a major challenge. Financially supporting themselves and/or their family was indicated as a major challenge by 23% of respondents and 21% of respondents felt that finding peers or staff who understand their perspective as an active military member or veteran was a major challenge. 36% of respondents felt it was a minor challenge to meet their professors' academic expectations and 54% felt that they experienced no challenges when enrolling in the courses needed for their program plan. Only 27% of respondents agreed that receiving the benefits they had applied for posed no challenges.

Table 3. Challenges to Success in Higher Education

Challenges to higher Ed success	Major challenge	Moderate Challenge	Minor Challenge	Not a challenge	Not applicable
Understanding how to navigate the Education Training Benefit	14%	16%	29%	17%	24%
Receiving benefits you've applied for	14%	17%	26%	27%	16%
Financially supporting yourself and/or your family	23%	13%	44%	17%	3%
Obtaining academic credit for your military service and training	17%	10%	13%	14%	46%
Enrolling in the courses you need for your program plan	10%	10%	16%	54%	10%
Balancing coursework and other responsibilities	26%	27%	30%	16%	1%
Meeting professors' academic expectations	10%	20%	36%	34%	-
Coping with a service-related injury or disability	19%	10%	20%	19%	32%
Finding peers or staff who understand your perspective as active CAF member or veteran	21%	19%	24%	24%	11%

Table 4 breaks down the resources that respondents have accessed or not accessed on campus. Out of the list of resources, 90% of respondents found that their professors were either quite or extremely helpful as a resource. Almost half of respondents (47%) felt that an academic counsellor/advisor on campus was either quite or extremely helpful. 44% of respondents had no experience with this resource. A third of respondents (33%) found that connecting with other veterans

they knew on campus was at least quite helpful as a resource. 90% of respondents had no experience with a student veteran organization on campus and 81% of respondents have never accessed the career center on their campus and 74% of respondents have never accessed the tutoring or writing center on their campus.

Table 4. Helpful Resources

Resources	Extremely Helpful	Quite Helpful	Not Helpful At All	No Experience
Academic counsellor/advisor on campus	11%	36%	9%	44%
Financial aid office on campus	6%	19%	10%	66%
Student accounts office on campus	7%	27%	1%	64%
Tutoring or writing centre on campus	11%	9%	6%	74%
Career centre on campus	3%	10%	6%	81%
Counselling/mental health centre on campus	7%	12%	7%	74%
Professors in your class	41%	49%	7%	3%
Student veteran organizations on campus	4%	1%	4%	90%
Other veterans that you know	13%	20%	9%	59%

Discussion

Unfortunately, due to extenuating circumstances, portions of this project were not able to be completed. Focus groups and survey responses from active military members who have not yet transitioned to post-secondary studies were two areas that we were hoping to complete as part of the project. The current pandemic situation of COVID-19 has paused all in-person activities and has shifted

the priorities of active military members across the country. The focus of this research report given the change in circumstances has shifted to more of an exploratory analysis of what student veterans are currently experiencing at two post-secondary institutions in Ontario. Many of these student veterans come with credentials that have the potential to be used toward their current program, including previous military experience and completed credits from another post-secondary institution.

More and more CAF members are retiring or opting to release from the military with the intention of pursuing post-secondary education with the assistance of the ETB. As these numbers continue to increase, it is clear that specific support systems need to be in place to ensure this population of students feel connected and engaged with the post-secondary institution. As noted by one respondent: "...the system seems unable to account for long-service veterans with academic qualifications that seek to make a career change or pursue trade qualifications. It seems as if the system's view is that all veterans are between 30 and 40 years old with no formal education past high school. That's not the case. Yet there is no flexibility to account for those that do not fall into this profile." 90% of respondents indicated that they had not accessed a veteran support centre on campus, which could be due to the fact that such a centre does not even exist.

Obtaining credit for prior experience in the military typically falls into the area of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), and while this does fall outside of the scope of this project, it is noteworthy to mention that very few respondents even attempted to transfer credits to their current institution. Out of the 70 respondents, just under a quarter attempted any credit transfer. Out of the respondents who did attempt to transfer credits, a quarter of them were unsuccessful. A deeper dive into the reasons why only a quarter of respondents attempted to transfer credits is needed, but research has pointed to a number of reasons for this, including administrative red tape, lack of awareness in what can be transferred and hearing about the challenges that other veterans have faced in successfully getting credits transferred (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Vacchi, 2012).

Challenges for student veterans are not just specific to obtaining transfer credits for prior learning but also include balancing coursework with other responsibilities, financially supporting themselves and their families and successfully applying for benefits. For some, going to school is a full-time undertaking on top of full-time work, which results in a complicated game of competing priorities and a lack of balance. Some students are still active members in the military and struggle to maintain balance between the two. As one respondent indicated, “sometimes I find it hard to balance my school and CAF responsibilities – I do not have much time to myself between the two.” For those that have families, there is an additional layer of responsibility that might be compounded with difficulties that the student veteran is experiencing in transitioning from a career in the military to a full-time student. As noted above, the drastic differences between the two are stark and one respondent indicated “difficulty in transitioning from a military environment to a civilian oriented environment.” Another respondent found that there exists a “very large gap between military [sic] routine to civilian routine. Just the mentality, showing up for classes on time, respect in classes and campus...” Being in a classroom with fellow students that are much younger also poses a challenge to student veterans. One respondent indicated that “after 12 years in the CAF including 2 deployments, being surrounded by children felt weird.” One respondent, however, did not see being with younger students as a negative and found that it was “interesting to see how education is now delivered and it’s interesting and enriching to interact with much younger classmates.”

Professors continue to play a key role in the success of their students, and student veterans are no exception. As described by one respondent, “The college system had no idea what to do with me. Thank goodness for (name removed), the program coordinator for my program who spearheaded my transition and has been an inspiration.” Only 7% of respondents didn’t agree that their professor was a helpful resource for them on campus but that is still 7% too many. In the research conducted on support services for student veterans at post-secondary institutions in Canada, no specific resource that could

help guide faculty in supporting these students was found. Reaching out to staff and faculty that are also veterans would be a great starting point in an effort to make connections and seek their expertise in where to start with developing resources for faculty.

There are existing services in place at post-secondary institutions that are doing what they can to support their student veteran population. In addition to their professor's, almost half of respondents felt that a counsellor/advisor on campus was a helpful resource. Professors and counsellors/advisors are often the first people on campus that students have extended contact with and having a positive relationship with these individuals is a significant indicator for retention, student engagement and student satisfaction (Cummings, 2016). If connections with other veterans on campus are made, it can be a significant source of support and engagement. Many student veterans have discussed at length the unique benefits that come with meeting and connecting with other student veterans (Jenner, 2019). For many, there is an unspoken language and camaraderie that cannot be found elsewhere.

Not all existing support services are being utilized as a significant majority of respondents have never accessed support services such as the career, tutoring or writing centres on their campus. Engagement with support services at most post-secondary institutions is a constantly evolving situation and specific student populations are known to engage even less with their campus environment and fellow students. In fact, there are many services in place at various institutions that directly target those specific populations, including first-generation students, international students, indigenous students, at-risk students, etc. Thus far, less attention seems to have been gone toward support services targeted to the student veteran population but with the release of the ETB, it is hopeful that this will change in the near future.

Next Steps

The student veteran's success relies not only on the individual, but also on the institution (Hermann, Raybeck & Wilson, 2008). Veteran-specific programs at post-secondary institutions may not be new, but comprehensive support services seem to finally be catching up with the demand as millions of veterans have returned to the post-secondary setting to utilize the benefits provided through the modernized G.I. Bill in the United States and the more recent ETB in Canada (Cathcart, 2019; Kurzynski, 2014). To meet the needs of this unique population of non-traditional students, post-secondary institutions could benefit from understanding student veteran challenges, developing appropriate solutions and continuing to refine their services based upon assessment data. When campuses offer veteran-centric services such as priority registration and veteran-specific academic and financial counsellors, student veterans reported more positive experiences on campus (Norman et al., 2015). Campuses supportive of military culture through a visible presence of other veterans and veteran-specific co-curricular activities are also a positive step.

In the United States, the Military Friendly Company, owned by VIQTORY, has set a Military Friendly standard that measures an organization's commitment, effort and success in creating sustainable and meaningful benefit for the military community. Military friendly schools ratings are assessed through the evaluation of both public data about the institution and proprietary data gathered through their free Military Friendly Schools survey. Final survey results and ratings are determined by combining an institution's survey scores with the assessment of the institution's ability to meet minimum thresholds for student retention, graduation, job placement, loan repayment and loan default rates for all students and, specifically, for student veterans ("Military Friendly", n.d.).

There is currently no equivalent standard in Canada to the Military Friendly program, but there are a number of post-secondary institutions with services in place that are specific to the needs of active

military members and veterans. In a recent benchmarking analysis conducted by Hanover Research, there are very few Canadian institutions that are marketed explicitly as “military friendly” (“Benchmarking Analysis: Military Friendly Campuses”, 2019). Instead of comprehensive offerings, several Canadian institutions use ad hoc partnerships or non-diploma programs to serve military-connected learners, but this approach seems to be changing and the change is coinciding with the release of the ETB. A brief review of benchmarks used in the Military Friendly program and services offered by some Canadian post-secondary institutions can be found in Table 5.

Table 5. Benchmarks in Military Friendly Program and Services Offered at Canadian Institutions

Common Military Friendly “Top Ten” Benchmark	Algonquin College	Loyalist College	University of Manitoba	Ryerson University
Active duty or reserve military student returns without penalty after deployment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Offers weekend programs	Yes	No	Program/Course dependent	No
Offers evening programs	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Offers accelerated courses (i.e., 6-8 weeks course completion time)	Not in 2-3 year diploma programs	Not in 2-3 year diploma programs	Spring/Summer only	Spring/Summer only
Tuition discounts specifically for military students	No	No	No	No
Additional scholarships specifically for military students and veterans	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Formal mentoring or advising program in which faculty or staff members who are current or former members of the military mentor students who are military service members or veterans	No	No	No	Yes

Dedicated social space for gathering (e.g. a student lounge or veteran center) reserved specifically for military service members and veterans	No	No	No	Launching in 2020/2021
Veteran-to-veteran peer mentoring program	No	No	Not within the University	Yes

The University of Manitoba has a well established Military Support Office that offers a one-stop shop for credit assessment, degree program planning and advising, and administrative support that is specific to active military, veterans, civilian employees of the Department of National Defence and their dependents (“Military Support”, n.d.). Those attending the University of Manitoba benefit from a number of special considerations, including: degree credit for specific evaluated military courses and training, reduce residence requirement on select degree programs, withdrawal and tuition reimbursement when unforeseen military duty interferes with university study and degree program planning, military credit assessment and support requests for student-related administrative issues.

Similarly, Ryerson University offers a Veteran Transition to Education (VTE) program, which provides academic and non-academic peer assistance to the veteran community and currently serving soldiers. The goal of the program is to provide access to all applicable support programs within Ryerson University and puts veterans and active members in touch with a veteran transition advisor who provides support during all phases of study (“Veteran Transition to Education”, n.d.). Some of the services the VTE program offers include: flexibility in education, funding assistance, academic upgrades, a certificate to degree laddering program and support with non-academic issues.

Algonquin College has established an innovative partnership with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) whereby active military members and veterans who have successfully completed particular types of CAF occupational training may be eligible for credit recognition within certain programs (“Credit for

Military Training”, n.d.). Algonquin also offers a Military Families Fund, which is a bursary created by the Ottawa Senators Hockey Club to support military or family members demonstrating financial need (“Military Families Fund”, n.d.). In 2007, the CAF and Algonquin College entered into a multi-year agreement to deliver a specialized two-year geomatics training program in partnership with the Canadian Forces School of Military Mapping. In this partnership, the College would deliver the academic training, while the CAF provided military-specific instruction unique to the geomatics occupation. Algonquin provides classrooms and an access-controlled geomatics computer laboratory, with peripheral geomatics hardware and an information support network that could remotely access the Department of National Defence network (“Geomatics Technician Program”, n.d.).

Limitations

The study was not without its limitations and some were the direct result of the COVID-19 outbreak. One purpose of the focus groups was to dig a little deeper into the possible reasons behind why only a small percentage of respondents attempted to transfer any credits to their current program. A second goal of the focus groups was to get a better sense of what support services student veterans would like to see in place on their college campuses and to get valuable insight into what existing services are doing well. Given the timing of the pandemic response, survey responses from active military members stationed at CFB-Garrison Petawawa was not possible. This information would have provided valuable insight into the percentage of respondents who were intending to pursue post-secondary studies after they retire as a result of the release of the ETB. Survey responses from active military members would have also provided both Algonquin College and Loyalist College with information regarding what support services these potential future students would find helpful and useful once they arrived on campus.

The presumably low response rate at both Algonquin College and Loyalist College is a common issue when it comes to online surveys (Manfreda, et al., 2008). We state that the response rate is presumably low because there is no way to track exactly how many students at either post-secondary institution identify with the CAF in some way (e.g., veteran, reservist, active-duty). To date, there has not been a way to accurately report how many student veterans or active military members are attending either college. A low response rate can run the risk of encountering sampling bias, which means that the views reflected in the results do not accurately reflect the reality of this population. Future studies should focus on obtaining responses from a wider range of post-secondary institutions to obtain a better representation of the province.

Conclusion

This study has provided Algonquin College and Loyalist College with a starting point on the needs and experiences of their existing student veteran population. It calls to attention that transferring credits has not been accessed by many, which could speak to a lack of direction or administrative red tape that prevents student veterans from attempting to get prior experience and education recognized. Professors and program Counsellors/Advisors are, not surprisingly, a helpful resource for these students but many feel they are not able to connect with other student veterans on campus. Engagement with other support services on campus is low and this could speak to a need to more directly tailor some of these services to student veterans.

Reviewing what other institutions in Canada and the United States are already doing to serve their student veteran population has shown that there is a wide variety of ways in which colleges and universities are providing support. Compared to the United States, Canada has not yet established their services as firmly into many of their post-secondary institutions and lack a unified response to the acceptance of transfer credits, the types of services available and accommodations that can be made.

Some post-secondary institutions in Canada, like the University of Manitoba and Royal Roads University, can be looked at as examples of best practices for what they are doing to serve the veteran student population.

The student veteran population is one that is only expected to grow significantly in coming years and post-secondary institutions would be well served to ensure they have the services in place to meet the unique needs of these students. Some student veterans may fall into other special student populations, such as first-generation students, but many student veterans come with skills, life experience and needs that would be best served by individuals who know and ideally, can relate to them. One thing that is not yet clear is whether any one approach to integrating veteran's services is better than another but one thing is for certain, it is imperative that we meet students where they are. Collaboration across the province and country to share feedback and ideas is an important next step and we would be well served to accurately identify and track student veterans at our respective institutions to ensure they are made aware of and provided with services and supports they need to be successful in their studies.

References

- Ackerman, R., DiRamio, D., & Mitchell, R. L. G. (2009). Transitions: Combat veterans as college students. *New directions for student services*, 2009(126), 5-14.
- Bonar, T. C., & Domenici, P. L. (2011). Counseling and connecting with the military undergraduate: The intersection of military service and university life. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 204-219.
- Borsari, B., Yurasek, A., Miller, M. B., Murphy, J. G., McDevitt-Murphy, M. E., Martens, M. P., & Carey, K. B. (2017). Student service members/veterans on campus: Challenges for reintegration. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(2), 166.
- Brown, P. A., & Gross, C. (2011). Serving those who have served – managing veteran and military student best practices. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 45-49.
- Bryan, C. J., Bryan, A. O., Hinkson Jr., K., Bichrest, M., & Ahern, D. A. (2014). Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and grade point average among student servicemembers and veterans. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 51(7), 1035-1046.
- Cate, C. A. (2014). An examination of student veteran completion rates over service eras: An in-depth analysis of the 2010 National Survey of Veterans. *Student Veterans of America*, 2(1), 1-5.
- Cathcart, D. G. (2019). Veteran-friendly colleges and universities: A primer for Canada. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 5(1), 127-130.
- Church, T. E. (2009). Returning Veterans on Campus with War Related Injuries and the Long Road Back Home. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22(1), 43-52.
- Civilian Reintegration. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/after-the-war/veterans/civilian-reintegration/>

Cole, J. S., & Kim, Y. M. (2013). *Student veterans/service members' engagement in college and university life and education*. American Council on Education Center for Policy Research and Strategy.

Credit for Military Training. (n.d.). *Algonquin College*. Retrieved October 22, 2019 from <https://www.algonquincollege.com/military/home/credit-for-military-training/>

Cummings, C. (2016). Navigating academia: A mixed methods analysis of sense of community, student-faculty relationships, and student success. *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal*, 10(1), 4-14.

Daly, D. D., & Fox Garrity, B. K. (2013). From boots on the ground to seats in the classroom: An assessment of institutional structure and veteran students. *American Journal of Business Research*, 6(1), 5-17.

Danish, S. J., & Antonides, B. J. (2009). What counseling psychologists can do to help returning veterans. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 37(8), 1076-1089.

DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R. L. (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 73-102.

DiRamio, D., Jarvis, K., Iverson, S. Seher, C., & Anderson, R. (2011). Out from the shadows: Female student veterans and help-seeking. *College Student Journal*, 49(1), 49-68.

Education and Training: History and Timeline. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/history.asp>

Evans, J. J., Pellegrino, L., & Hoggan, C. (2015). Supporting veterans at the community college: A review of the literature. *The Community College Enterprise*, 21(1), 47-65.

Falkey, M. E. (2016). An emerging population: Student veterans in higher education in the 21st century. *Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education*, 12(1), 27-39.

Galloway, G. (2010, November 10). The changing face of Canadian veterans. *The Globe and Mail*.

Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>.

Geomatics Technician Program. (n.d.). *Algonquin College*. Retrieved October 22, 2019 from

<https://www.algonquincollege.com/military/home/cf-corporate-training/geomatics-technician-program/>

Gregg, B. T., Howell, D. M., & Shordike, A. (2016). Experiences of veterans transitioning to postsecondary education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(6), 7006250010p1-7006250010p8.

Griffin, K. A., & Gilbert, C. K. (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 71–97.

Hanover Research. (2019). *Benchmarking analysis: Military friendly campuses*. Arlington, VA: Kurfist, A.

Hanover Research. (2019). *Benchmarking financial aid and credit policies for military students*. Arlington, VA: Kurfist, A.

Herrmann, D., Raybeck, D., & Wilson, R. (2008). College is for veterans too. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 73-94.

Hopkins, C., Herrmann, D. J., Wilson, R. B., Allen, B., & Malley, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Improving college education of veterans*. CreateSpace.

Jenner, B. (2019). Student veterans in transition: The impact of peer community. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 31(1), 69-83.

Jones, K. C. (2013). Understanding student veterans in transition. *The Qualitative Report*, 18, 1-14.

- Knutson, D. (2015). *Yukon veterans in transition: factors affecting post-service transition and reintegration processes of ex-Canadian Armed Forces service members with peacekeeping and combat experiences* (Master's thesis, Universitetet i Nordland).
- Kolowich, S. (2010). Buying local, online. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/07/23/buying-local-online>
- Kurzynski, K. (2014). Veteran services in higher education: Going above and beyond. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 30(3), 182-190.
- Lighthall, A. (2012). Ten things you should know about today's student veteran. *Thought and Action*, 80.
- Life after service survey*. (October 28, 2019). Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5172>
- Machuca, A., Torres, K., Morris, P., & Whitley, W. (2014). Challenges faced by undergraduate military students at American public university system. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 13(4), 441-450.
- Malley, L. (2010). How can institutions of higher education support citizen service members, veterans and their families. C. Hopkins, D. Herrmann, R. Wilson, B. Allen, & L. Malley, *Improving college education of veterans*, 229-246.
- Manfreda, K. L., Berzelak, J., Vehovar, V., Bosnjak, M., & Haas, I. (2008). Web surveys versus other survey modes: A meta-analysis comparing response rates. *International Journal of Market Research*, 50(1), 79-104.
- Marshall, V. W., Matteo, R., & Pedlar, D. (2005). Work-related Experience and Financial Security of Veterans Affairs Canada Clients: Contrasting Medical and Nonmedical Discharge. *Paper prepared under contract for the Research Directorate of Veterans Affairs Canada*.

Military Families Fund – Sens Foundation Bursary. (n.d.). *Algonquin College*. Retrieved October 22, 2019 from <https://www.algonquincollege.com/military/home/mff-sens-foundation-bursary/>

Military Friendly. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.militaryfriendly.com/>

Military Support. (n.d.). *University of Manitoba, Extended Education*. Retrieved from <https://umextended.ca/military-support/>

Money, K. (n.d.). The Transitioning Student Veteran. Retrieved from https://www.insidetrack.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/OneSheets_InsideTrack_LeadershipSeries_InsideTrack_KarinaMoney.pdf

Morin, R. (2011). The difficult transition from military to civilian life. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/>

Norman, S. B., Rosen, J., Himmerich, S., Myers, U. S., Davis, B., Browne, K. C., & Piland, N. (2015). Student veteran perceptions of facilitators and barriers to achieving academic goals. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 52(6), 701-712.

Persky, K. R. & Oliver, D. E. (2010) Veterans coming home to the community college: Linking research to practice. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35(1-2), 111-120.

Rose, S., VanDenKerkhof, E., & Schaub, M. (2018). Determinants of successful transition literature review. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 4(1), 90-99.

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81(4), 431-458.

Rumann, C., Rivera, M., & Hernandez, I. (2011). Student veterans and community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2011(155), 51-58.

Smucny, D., & Stover, M. (2013). Enhancing teaching and learning for active-duty military students. *American Sociological Association Footnotes*, 41(3), 1-8.

Steele, J. L., Salcedo, N., & Coley, J. (2010). How Military Veterans Are Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Adapting to Life in College.

Strickley, V. L. (2009). *Veterans on campus: A white paper*. Little Falls, NJ: Paperclip Communications

The military guide. (2020). American Council on Education. Retrieved January 15, 2020 from

<https://www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Credit-Transcripts/Military-Guide-Online.aspx>

The origins and evolution of veterans benefits in Canada 1914-2004. (2004). Ottawa, ON: Veterans Affairs Canada.

Tinoco, E. M. (2014). Student veterans in higher education: A transitional challenge. *Community Investments*, 26(3), 28-44.

UBC to become a more veteran-friendly campus by 2020. (September 9, 2019). Retrieved from

<https://news.ubc.ca/2019/09/09/ubc-to-become-a-more-veteran-friendly-campus-by-2020/>

Vacchi, D. T. (2012). Considering student veterans on the twenty-first-century college campus. *About Campus*, 17(2), 15-21.

Van Til, L., Sweet, J., Poirier, A., McKinnon, K., Sudom, K., Dursun, S., & Pedlar, D. Well-being of Canadian regular force veterans, findings from LASS 2016 survey. Charlottetown PE: Veterans Affairs Canada. Research Directorate Technical Report, June 23, 2017.

VanTil, L. D., MacLean, M., Sweet, J., & McKinnon, K. (2018). Understanding future needs of Canadian veterans. *Health Reports*, 29(11), 20-25.

Veterans Affairs Canada: Facts and Figures. (March 2019). Retrieved from

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/news-media/facts-figures>

Veteran family program. (2019, February 9). Veterans Affairs Canada. Retrieved November 25, 2019

from <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/family-caregiver/education-and-jobs/veteran-family-program>

Veterans Transition to Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://continuing.ryerson.ca/contentManagement.do?method=load&code=CM000080>

Vocational Rehabilitation Program. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.sisip.com/en/insurance/long-](https://www.sisip.com/en/insurance/long-term-disability/vocational-rehabilitation-program)

[term-disability/vocational-rehabilitation-program](https://www.sisip.com/en/insurance/long-term-disability/vocational-rehabilitation-program)

Wheeler, H. A. (2012). Veterans' transitions to community college: A case study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(10), 775-792.

Wood, D. (2012). Veterans' college drop-out rate soars. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from

https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/veterans-college-drop-out_n_2016926?ri18n=true