

In Their Own Words, Montgomery College Student Veterans

I'll begin by noting that today's panel began with peace building and, somewhat ironically, ends with the impacts of war. That is exactly what I am asking you to think about today: not the impacts of war on foreign soil, but the impacts here, in our communities, and especially in the places where we live and work.

Less than one percent of the American population has actually participated in America's current and ongoing conflicts; yet as educators, we have a special responsibility to be responsive to those students who come to us while struggling to reintegrate both into civilian life and academic culture.

This is an important moment in ways that educators, perhaps especially educators in the social sciences, need to be attuned to:

We are nearly four years deep into the post 9/11 GI Bill: since 2009, 760,000 vets have utilized their education benefits. In three years, the number of veterans on campus has more than doubled, with the majority attending community colleges.

The military plans to demobilize tens of thousands of additional troops in the coming year, and so the number of vets utilizing their education benefits is poised to increase.

At the same time, the US economy faces serious challenges: thanks to a rare bi-partisan agreement, the Veterans Administration has been sheltered from the effects of the current sequestration, but in significant ways, veterans themselves are not protected. Programs that support veterans in every area, from housing to mental health, are about to be drastically reduced, and major employers of vets, including the Department of Defense, have already begun to institute deep-cutting furloughs.

Surely, many affected veterans will return to school, looking to increase their competitiveness in the job market, or even to kill time while they figure out what to do next.

Why do we need to take especial care to be responsive to these vets?

In light of ECCSSA's mission to "nurture the educational process" and treat "the achievement of our learners [with] the utmost importance," consider these stunning facts:

- The unemployment rate for post 9/11 vets is 9.4%, compared with 7.7% for the larger population.

- Over 62,619 veterans are homeless each night; this is considered a conservative estimate and represents roughly a quarter of the overall homeless population.
- About 22 veterans commit suicide each day, up from 18 in 2011; this means that for every veteran killed by enemy combatants, 25 die at their own hands.

Education, for returning veterans, can be a light at the end of the tunnel and the pathway to a productive future.

Many years ago, when I took my first teaching practicum at Temple University, my professor made a remark that has had increasing relevance for me: "Your students are not you."

Back then, that meant beginning to understand that our students had different life experiences and learning styles.

Now—with March marking the 10th anniversary of the conflict in Iraq—it means understanding that our students have grown up in different worlds, and have come to adulthood looking through entirely different lenses.

Where my generation grew up during the Cold War—a standoff that, in some ways, may not have felt entirely real—our current students have grown up during America's engagement in grueling, bloody and protracted wars that have few clear victories.

Increasingly, students in our classrooms have been direct participants in those wars, and are struggling to make sense of a society that, for the most part, still treats war as entertainment; worse, they struggle with stereotypes and institutional pitfalls that damage their likelihood of academic success.

I have not been to war, and these students are not like me. Yet, as an educator, and as the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, I recognize a need to find out more, not only about their struggles, but about the valuable contributions they have to make.

The film I am about to share with you is the product of my Montgomery College sabbatical project, which I conceptualized as an opportunity to bring my role as an educator to my experiences as a person concerned about the long-term impacts of war and conflict.

In 2011, twenty-one Montgomery College student veterans shared their stories with me and became my teachers. One of them, an aspiring film student preparing to transfer to a four-year school, worked with me to create "In Their Own Words, Montgomery College Student Veterans." Featuring twelve of my interview subjects, the film proved an effective way to promote awareness of and increase advocacy for student veterans at my College.

The American Council on Education recently conducted a survey of 600 colleges serving vets: the good news is that many reported increased resources for veterans on campus in the past few years: ¾ had dedicated office space to veterans' programs, and the survey showed a significant increase in veterans' clubs on campus.

However ACE concluded that colleges still are far from doing enough to raise sensitivity to veterans' issues, and specifically remarked on a dearth of training for faculty and staff on how to support veterans and military students.

I share this film with you today in hopes of expanding awareness of the needs of student veterans, and of opportunities for educators to respond to those needs.

I invite you to bring this awareness back into your communities, with a sense of the high stakes involved in increasing our sensitivity to the needs of student veterans.

To see "In Their Own Words, Montgomery College Student Veterans," please visit:

<http://libguides.montgomerycollege.edu/veterans>

This **Student Veterans Libguide** was created by Montgomery College Librarian Kathy Swanson to be a permanent Home for the film, and contains many additional resources, including articles, books and websites.

Thank you,

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