

Called to Lead

Discovering the Connections Between
Military Service and Higher Education
Leadership

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to and inspired by the life and legacy of Dr. E. Grady Bogue, a veteran turned university president and professor whose care, inspiration, fatherhood, and friendship shaped the lives of countless individuals and students—including his son's, Barrett, the lead author of this paper—and sent into society cohorts of leaders who are called to serve with purpose and integrity.

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Introduction and Executive Summary

America has a long-standing commitment to funding post-secondary education for service members, many of whom would otherwise have delayed enrollment or deemed the opportunity of a higher education unaffordable altogether. The commitment began in earnest in 1944 through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, which provided federal benefits to veterans to defray the cost of unemployment, education, and purchasing a home. This landmark legislation established the GI Bill, led to a historic increase of veterans pursuing a degree, and effectively democratized higher education. America's promise to service members and veterans in higher education remains vibrant through the 2017 Forever GI Bill, which made education benefits for military-connected students available for life. Nearly eight decades later, the GI Bill continues to pay dividends. Student veterans in college campuses across the country engage as some of the best-performing nontraditional students compared to other adult learners.¹

Simultaneous to the GI Bill's evolution, higher education also evolved with a distinct set of challenges in the 21st century, including a changing demography of prospective students, increasing out-of-pocket costs and decreasing state support, and growing skepticism on the value of a post-secondary degree. Service members and veterans who earned a degree through the GI Bill, or by other means, will choose to enter higher education as a career and continue to serve an important role leading, teaching, and mentoring the next generation of Americans. This report examines the connection between military service and veterans who work in higher education, and how they navigate profound change in the higher education landscape. The report also provides recommendations to explicitly target the recruitment of veterans into higher education leadership roles and support their careers.

Higher education in America is at an inflection point. The rapidly changing demography of its prospective students, persistent increases in the out-of-pocket costs for an increasingly low- to middle-income student demographic, growing skepticism of the value of post-secondary attainment, and the compounding student debt owed by Americans place increasing pressure on the seams of our nation's post-secondary educational infrastructure. The country must continue to address these challenges with a sense of urgency, and we must continue exploring new ways to approach solutions to these challenges. Developing a critical mass of adaptive leaders across organizations is critical to higher education's success now and for generations to come.

While military service provides a critical avenue for the development of skills and competencies required for success in higher education leadership, there is (1) an inadequate understanding by many in higher education, as in the general public, about the virtues of military service in forging the knowledge and skill profile required for higher education leadership roles; and (2) a gap in the literature and corresponding policy recommendations about pathways for service members and veterans into executive-level higher education leadership roles. Therefore, the purposes of this study are (1) to identify the connections between military service and higher education leadership competencies; and (2) offer recommendations for growing the number of service members and veterans who are positioned to assume leadership roles in higher education settings.

Using a semi-structured qualitative interview design of currently serving higher education leaders and practitioners with prior military service, this paper identifies the reasons why veterans choose to work in higher education, captures the leadership skills and traits learned in the military that practically apply to their roles, identifies current challenges in higher education's mission to serve students, and provides recommendations for recruiting more veterans into leadership roles. Among this paper's most significant findings are:

- Veterans choose to work in higher education as an extension of their military service because of overlapping values, traditions, and progressive leadership opportunity. Budget management,

empowering teams toward mission attainment, and being adaptable in the midst of constant change and uncertainty are broad skill categories gained through military service and applied in higher education that have fostered an unquestionable desire by veterans to continue what began when they joined the All-Volunteer Force.

- Veterans who work in higher education have leadership tools gained through military service at their disposal, including, among others: mission focus, strategic thinking, adaptability, resiliency, comfort with ambiguity and leading change, experience working with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and personnel and budget management experience.
- The leadership tools identified above will help veterans navigate our system of higher education as a corps of *adaptive leaders* ready and willing to confront profound challenges that, when asked, they identified as:
 - Higher education's slow pace of change relative to the changing needs and characteristics of today's students
 - Decreasing perception in the value of a post-secondary degree
 - Decreasing enrollment
 - Aging infrastructure and unsustainable cost to the student
 - The lack of focus on the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion by campus leaders, and competing spheres of influence on campus.
- Solutions to the key challenges confronting higher education can be supported, in part, through a critical mass of adaptive leaders, and military service provides fertile ground for the development of adaptive leadership skills.
- Through intentional academic programming, recruitment efforts, and partnerships, the higher education, nonprofit, and government sectors can help veterans view higher education not only as a waypoint for separating service members, but also as a viable career opportunity.

Background, Methodology, and Report Design

BACKGROUND

July 28, 1943, was a day for bravery and bold ideas. On one side of the globe, U.S. and British forces courageously descended on Hamburg, Germany, destroying military and civilian infrastructures to overcome the Nazi stranglehold on the region in an effort to halt Hitler's evil mission. On the other, Americans huddled peacefully around their radios listening to President Franklin D. Roosevelt deliver words of opportunity that would change the course of American history and higher education: "While concentrating on military victory, we are not neglecting the planning of things to come... among many other things we are, today, laying plans for the return to civilian life of our gallant men and women in the Armed Services."²

The plan President Roosevelt outlined to listeners of his fireside chat included employment, housing, and education benefits for veterans transitioning back to civilian life after their courageous tours of duty concluded. It was a comprehensive package of readjustment benefits, including tuition for post-secondary education, intended to ease the integration struggles experienced by veterans of past conflicts—and to prevent another economic depression with millions of service members expected to demobilize and reenter society. In June the following year, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, into law.³

The effect of the GI Bill on higher education participation and economic outcomes is both profound and well documented. Under the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more than 10.3 million veterans attended colleges and universities; what is more, the percentage of U.S. citizens with undergraduate or advanced degrees rose from 4.6 percent in 1945 to more than 33 percent by 2016.⁴ This first iteration of the GI Bill alone has contributed to the post-secondary success of 450,000 engineers, 240,000 accountants, 238,000 secondary teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 122,000 dentists, 17,000 writers and editors, three Presidents of the United States, and six Justices to the U.S. Supreme Court.⁵ A congressional analysis by the Subcommittee on Education and Health of the Joint Economic Committee found that for every dollar paid in GI Bill benefits to World War II veterans, the nation received \$7 in return due to increased tax revenue from greater economic and workforce outcomes among those who utilized their benefits.⁶

More than 60 years later, the GI Bill is still simultaneously shaping the contours of the American middle class and higher education infrastructure. The Post-9/11 GI Bill, passed in 2008 and enacted in 2009, alone has translated into post-secondary opportunity for more than 1.6 million veterans, translating to an investment of greater than \$65 billion in GI Bill benefits to colleges, universities, and communities across the United States.⁷ Evidence on the initial impact of the newly enacted Forever GI Bill, passed in 2017, is still being captured. Congress' reauthorization of the GI Bill since its World War II beginnings has created multi-generational, middle-class opportunity for millions of Americans who have bravely and selflessly served their nation.⁸

Reviewing the impact of the GI Bill on the post-secondary participation rates and economic outcomes of service members and veterans offers too limited a view of its impact on American society through the lives of those who have used this program to pursue their educational and workforce goals. Indeed, the GI Bill has served as a leading vehicle through which service members and veterans have pursued and obtained highly valuable credentials for success after service. But a deeper inquiry on linkages between the military experiences of veterans and the skills, experiences, and interests brought to civilian employment is necessary to understand the impact the GI Bill has helped cohorts of transitioning service members achieve on American society.

Researchers have only begun to discover the connections between military service and civilian employment. Ferguson, Rybacki, Butts, and Carrigan compared what leaders in civil service and military leadership roles report as the top macro-level challenges they confront in their respective roles.⁹ Though the order and magnitude of the challenges differed between military and civil service leaders, each group ranked organizational operations and performance, managing and motivating subordinates, and personal leadership as their top three macro-level challenges. Within the organizational operations and performance category, military and civil service leaders also were aligned with workforce shortages, budget, and resources as the top three challenges they are managing in their roles. Walter Ulmer offered important insight into the application of military service as a prerequisite for success in business settings.¹⁰ While personal subject matter expertise is important, notes Ulmer, the leadership attributes often introduced or reinforced through military service are more critical for success: trustworthiness, character development, consistency, integrity, and commitment, to name only a few. The *2018 Veterans' Well-being Survey* by Edelman Intelligence surveyed employers and found that veterans were more likely to be viewed as heroes instead of strategic assets in the workplace, which further reinforces the need to explore the skills and traits veterans bring as a value-add to higher education.¹¹ Indeed, the skills and responsibilities identified through extant literature uncover important linkages between military service and its resonance in other fields. What these studies point to is the military's development of adaptive leaders whose skills are applicable in civilian settings.

What is adaptive leadership and how does the military prepare adaptive leaders? Linsky, Grashow, and Heifetz (2009) characterized adaptive leadership as the practice of navigating teams to change when problems are recurring and there is no obvious solution available. Adaptive leadership is inclusive, systematic, reflection- and learning-oriented, and calls upon leaders to empower their teams to challenge the status quo.¹² Uncertainty becomes part of the fact-finding and problem identification process: What do we currently not know that, if discovered, could help us address the problem that continues to confront our organization? Empathy is at the heart of the problem identification and solution process: How do the problem and solution affect the lives of those in our workplace, as well as those impacted by the work we do? Adaptive leadership is not an ad hoc approach but an iterative one characterized by ongoing reflection, learning, and self-reflection: What are we learning along the path to address the problem, how is our organizational and external context changing, and how can we take this information to strategize our short- and long-term actions? Adaptive leadership leaves no one behind: How can we ensure ongoing cooperation and collaboration among our team, our stakeholders, and our broader network to ensure collective needs are met and mission is attained?

Military service reinforces adaptive leadership. In *Developing Adaptive Leaders*, Wong examined the complexity and unpredictability soldiers had to navigate in postwar Iraq to draw out the development of adaptive leadership skills among junior officers.¹³ Junior officers held critical roles in the nation-building effort embedded in Operation Iraqi Freedom, experiences characterized by the number and highly complex, challenging, and changing nature of the responsibilities they held. One officer commented, "You are not just trying to learn one job, you are trying to learn several dozen jobs. Everything from being a politician to being a war commander. That is just an incredible amount of information for someone to carry around in their head." Indeed, these adaptive leaders centered their work on empathy, asking those in their company what they needed, calibrating and recalibrating to be effective, and placing the needs of others and their mission above themselves.¹⁴ As noted by Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel William Cojocar, adaptive leadership is embedded in the training and preparation of soldiers.

The complexity and uncertainty embedded in military service requires personnel who can think critically and adeptly, navigate uncertainty with precision and speed, and lead within constantly changing environments with a strong sense of comfort. In fact, the *U.S. Army's Field Manual 5-0, The Operations Process* outlines competencies that introduce and reinforce adaptive leadership as the foundation of military education and training exercises for those responsible with leading Army operations.¹⁵ The manual's contents are designed to help military personnel navigate "ill-structured problems and ways to

develop approaches to solve or manage those problems.”¹⁶ In *The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War*, General Charles C. Krulak, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, described the adaptive leadership challenges for junior enlisted Marines tasked with executing our nation’s battles in post–Cold War complex environments.¹⁷ Krulak identifies the enormous weight of responsibility placed on small unit leaders in combat zones and calls for their independent autonomy and empowerment as a means to more effectively delegate leadership and the commanders’ intent. These strategic corporals, many faced with unthinkable challenges, are transitioning into civilian settings today. The link between military service and its application to effective leadership in civilian settings warrants further exploration.

Given the ties between military service and the development of adaptive leadership skills, higher education is an area prime for further exploration of the promise of veterans to serve effectively in college and university leadership roles. Indeed, higher education is facing a litany of adaptive challenges. Overall enrollment across all sectors is down 5 percent from its peak in 2010, for example, raising questions about the operational vitality of our nation’s higher education enterprise and stoking fears about institutional closures and consolidations. Further, college tuition has increased by 260 percent since 1980, outpacing the price of consumer goods, which grew 180 percent; as such, many colleges and universities are urgently attempting to identify ways to ensure a sustainable cost for students and a viable business model.¹⁸ In addition, Americans owe \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt while the nationwide six-year graduation rate for two- and four-year institutions combined is nearly 60 percent, leading many students to question whether college is the right choice, and leaving many stakeholders with questions on the barriers to this path for middle-class opportunity.¹⁹

Not only is higher education navigating a cost and budget paradigm that appears unsustainable, but the rapidly changing demographic profile of higher education’s prospective students also is raising questions about the readiness of colleges and universities to meet the diverse needs of today’s students. Thirty-seven percent of today’s students across all sectors are over the age of 25.²⁰ And despite steady growth in college participation among racial/ethnic minority high school graduates over time, the immediate college-going rate of minority high school graduates continues to lag behind their white peers.²¹ At neither the national nor the campus view are these problems technical in nature, and neither are they fully and clearly understood. At their core, these problems require adaptive leadership approaches. Our current and future higher education leaders require content knowledge to be complemented by a strong leadership skill set reinforced by empathy, collaboration, creativity, integrity, reflective and learning-oriented practice, appreciation for diverse individuals and cultures, and many more in the adaptive leadership tool kit. Of course, there are many pathways to garner these skills; however, the field of higher education can be intentional and strategic about growing a critical mass of adaptive leaders ready to address the critical challenge of our time. Indeed, linkages between military service and the transference of these skills into higher education settings merit further exploration.

What is more, today’s cohort of student veterans represent a broad cross-section of American society, presenting an opportunity to grow and diversify the higher education workforce. Nearly half of service members and veterans identify as a racial/ethnic minority, though only-fifth are women.²² Compared to other nontraditional learners, a student veteran using the GI Bill in college today is more likely to be older, married, have a disability, and have a full- or part-time job.²³ A majority will pursue a major or earn a degree that is not similar to their job in the military, and they will be the first in their family to attend college.²⁴ The most popular degree programs are business; healthcare; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).²⁵ Student veterans using the GI Bill also achieve a higher post-secondary success rate than their peers.²⁶ Almost 82 percent of the 2.9 million post-9/11 veterans who enter post-secondary education are prior enlisted service members.²⁷ Fueled by the education and experiences accompanying military service, and complemented by undergraduate and advanced study, our nation’s military-connected individuals add layers of empathy in understanding America’s college students as the field reshapes policies, practices, and programs to encompass the diverse needs and characteristics of today’s college students.

In exploring the connections between military experiences and the promise for success in higher education leadership roles, it is important to push back on the deficit-modeling and one-size-fits-all thinking that often characterizes the post-secondary narrative of service members and veterans.²⁸ In fact, the average GPA of student veterans is 3.34/4.00 compared to 2.94/4.00 for traditional post-secondary students.²⁹ Bearing the stigmas and nuances in mind, researchers and practitioners alike must not also perpetuate one-size-fits-all narratives in uncovering the connections between military service and leadership; that is, while combating the stigmas and deficit-modeling veterans often encounter among their civilian peers, scholars also must be careful not to establish one-size-fits-all narratives on the readiness of *all* veterans to serve in any one particular employment setting. A careful inquiry is necessary to discover the potential linkages—bearing individual interests, backgrounds, strengths, and goals in mind—between service and potential career pathways, including higher education.

Not every veteran is suited for a career in higher education leadership; in the words of one individual, “military service provides you the opportunity [emphasis added] to become a leader, but it’s how you approach your service, how you embrace it, how you grow, that makes the difference.” Therefore, we balance the opening of new lines of inquiry, policy, and practice with the recognition that these findings are not universally applicable.

There are myriad paths to higher education leadership roles, and there are generations of exquisite civilian faculty, staff, and administrators taking charge to solve higher education’s most pressing challenges; however, this paper explores the linkages between military service and higher education where they may exist to support the development of a critical mass of leaders who are well positioned to leverage their service, and the GI Bill’s generous and multi-generational investment back into American society, to enter the field and make a positive difference in the lives of students, on the growth of communities, and the vitality of our nation’s economy and workforce.

Like that fateful evening in 1943, each day presents an opportunity for our actions—no matter how large or small—to shape the contours of the present and future. Given the link between military service and the development of adaptive leadership qualities, our nation’s service members and veterans, in many ways, are called to lead in their post-military lives. What is more, the GI Bill educational benefit earned through a service member’s sacrifice is an opportunity to create a pipeline of career-ready leaders. Exploring and discovering the connection between military service and college/university leadership roles offer an important moment to explore the next evolution of how service members and veterans can continue shaping American higher education.

There exists an opportunity through this exploration to open new lines of inquiry, and to blaze additional pathways to higher education leadership. Reinforcing the development of a critical mass of adaptive leaders who are ready to help colleges and universities will confront the challenges of today and the opportunities of tomorrow.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a semi-structured qualitative interview design. Semi-structured interviews provided information about the background, experiences, insights, and recommendations of currently serving higher education leaders and practitioners with prior military service.

The population from which the researchers sought participants included faculty, staff, and administrators at American two- and four-year colleges and universities who held active duty roles in any branch of service in the U.S. armed forces. The population spanned every branch of service and ranged in age from early 30s to late 70s. Service in the military ranged from junior enlisted to general officer. Professional roles ranged from faculty of distance education programs, to student affairs administrative personnel, to senior administrative and vice-presidential roles, to college and university presidencies and chancellorships, and to chief executive officer roles at the state coordinating board and governing body levels. Reflecting demographics of the military population, the interview sample was predominantly male. The population was predominantly white but included racial/ethnic minorities who identified as black or African-American.

The interview protocol was composed of six major inquiries: current occupation and motivation to serve in a higher education setting; personal and professional experience in military and higher education settings; perceived challenges confronting higher education; the role military service plays in preparing an individual to confront these challenges; their personal definition of leadership; and perceived strategies to recruit veterans into higher education leadership roles. An open-ended prompt was added at the end of each interview to allow the informant to share any additional information not provided earlier in the interview.

The researchers used a snowball convenience sampling methodology. During each interview, the researchers would gather recommended informants who held prior military service and are current faculty, staff, administrators, or chief executive officers with leadership roles at the campus or coordinating/governing board levels. Data collection continued until insights reached a point of data saturation; that is, insights reinforced those already garnered in prior interviews. A total of 15 veterans were interviewed for this exploratory inquiry. Personally identifiable information was redacted from reporting to protect the privacy of those interviewed.

The researchers first reviewed data independently and wrote a preliminary list of in vivo codes based on the words and text noted in the interviews.³⁰ After several rounds of reviewing transcripts and writing an initial list of codes, the researchers independently modified their preliminary list of codes according to similarity. When the codes were grouped according to similarity, the principal investigator generated patterns between the participants, noting similarities and differences between the participants on each question. Each researcher independently aggregated a set of preliminary themes in relation to each research question. Upon completion of the independent phase of analysis, the researchers then compared their independent analysis to verify themes and present the findings. Personally identifiable information was redacted from the findings to protect the confidentiality of study participants.

Member checking and data triangulation were used to ensure trustworthiness of the study's analysis and findings.³¹ The researchers conducted an initial independent analysis of the data garnered from interviews to gather preliminary patterns and themes, and then cross-checked their findings collectively. Only minor discrepancies were observed in the wording of particular patterns and themes, but the discrepancies were negligible and did not confound the integrity of the findings reported in this brief.³² The researchers also followed up with interviewees to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations of insights gathered through interviews.³³

Findings

This study focused on exploring how this corps of military-turned-higher education leaders (1) draw upon their background of military service in pursuing a career in higher education; (2) navigate their college and university settings to address adaptive leadership challenges; (3) perceive the work of higher

education leadership during a period of profound change; (4) define leadership; and (5) perceive the value of cultivating a pipeline of veterans to serve higher education.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE IN MILITARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The cadre of higher education leaders interviewed for this analysis had a diverse background in military service before they entered higher education, holding progressively greater positions of responsibility in the military, with some exposure to the higher education landscape before they separated. A majority were officers who entered the military through a commissioning program, completed Reserve Officers' Training Corps training on campus then entered through an obligated period of military service, or began their military career as enlisted personnel and were subsequently commissioned after earning a post-secondary degree while on active duty.

Practitioners and educators represented all branches of the armed forces except the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Space Force. A minority completed the entirety of their career as enlisted leaders in the military. More importantly, a majority of participants had significant progressive leadership experience in the All-Volunteer Force for more than a decade. Finally, participants held positions and occupations in a variety of military specialties and fields, including intelligence, infantry, public affairs, field artillery, flight officer, biomedical research specialist, behavioral health specialist, airfield operations, recruitment and training, and faculty at a U.S. military academy.

The researchers interviewed veterans in higher education at different points in their career from the early stages of campus leadership to executive-level presidencies and chancellorships. Nearly a third of participants held positions that engaged directly with the military-connected student population on campus. They were charged with recruiting prospective military-connected students to campus, to serve as the focal point for campus-based programming, to build academic or cohort-based programs for military-connected students, and to develop community-based partnerships to enrich and sustain their offices. There was no commonality for where these offices were placed inside the campus hierarchy. They operated in locations such as financial aid and the school of business, or were functionally attached to the institution's president. A majority held executive or administrative roles on campus in progressively higher leadership responsibilities. This includes campus leadership roles in development, recruitment, admissions, financial aid, academic or faculty deans, external affairs, and presidencies and chancellorships. A minority held part- or full-time lecturer or faculty roles in leadership studies, business administration, or management and organizational theory.

EXTENDING THEIR SERVICE TO OUR NATION: VETERANS' MOTIVATION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION CAREERS

Shepherding dates back millennia as an occupation whereby a person places the benefit and protection of their flock above their own. It is an apt description for veterans who chose to work in higher education. When asked to describe why they chose higher education as a career, one theme emerged paramount: They choose higher education to continue the service they started in the military for the benefit of American society.

A majority of participants worked fewer than five years in higher education while the remainder worked longer. When citing why they chose higher education as a career, all demonstrated some exposure to higher education, whether through teaching at a U.S. military academy or earning a degree while in the armed forces. At the time they chose to work in higher education, participants were familiar with how it functioned and was organized, and the roles and responsibilities within the landscape. Given the overlap in skill prerequisites and duties in their military and higher education roles, some saw their service in higher education as an extension of their military service; for example, one former general noted, "Working in higher education gives me the opportunity to continue to do the same things I was doing [in the military]." And another prior enlisted leader noted, "But even as I transitioned, I would always often

say I'm still serving because being at a public institution, I feel like I'm still in the position of service." The participants reported budget management, empowering teams toward mission attainment, and being adaptable in the midst of constant change and uncertainty as broad skill categories that helped them develop a sense of extended service from their military roles.

Mentoring, teaching, the opportunity to lead, and the pomp and circumstance of a college campus all were cited as motivation for why they chose to work in higher education. The participants centered their comments on the ability to affect mission attainment, which, to many, meant doing their part to support the educational mission of the institution. As one former officer and current educator said, "If you're going to be in higher ed, at least in my beliefs, where we can contribute, is really caring about the students." Continuing to make a positive impact was another draw that extended from mission attainment for the informants. One's "extended service" that contributed to mission attainment and serving students focused on their role as a policy leader at a statewide higher education coordinating agency: "What I realized early on is that most higher education policymakers follow a very staid path. I realized there was a dearth of nontraditional voices in higher education. And I thought that was important. I thought it was important to have a veteran who had gone to college as a nontraditional student involved with policymaking."

The major driving factor between this theme of "extended service" for military veterans serving in higher education settings were the cultural similarities. As one former infantry officer observed, "The culture of service in the military is not different from the culture of service on a college campus." The participants emphasized notions of serving others and attaining mission above one's self interests.

TRANSFERENCE OF MILITARY SERVICE TO HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Military service provides a set of training and other educational experiences that provide the opportunity for veterans to develop skills and experiences they may carry with them throughout their lives: content knowledge in a variety of areas, adaptability, integrity, the ability to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and others. Those traits and characteristics were displayed in the conversations with service members and veterans currently practicing in higher education leadership roles. Those traits and characteristics have been reported in two distinct categories in the results: (1) traits and characteristics that military veterans in higher education apply internally to their tool kits; and (2) traits and characteristics that apply externally to aid their institutions' missions.

While time is the most valuable asset, the leader's tool kit should be considered a close second. Veterans interviewed in this study shared the skill sets they developed through their service that are valuable in higher education settings. We identified their internal leadership tools as follows:

- Progressive Responsibility
- Adversity Under Pressure
- Teamwork and Collaboration
- Exploring Different Value Sets
- Internal Locus of Control
- Discipline
- Maintaining Levity
- Practicing Accountability
- Goal Oriented
- Task Focused
- Personal Responsibility
- Personal Growth
- Prioritization
- Being Organized
- Decisiveness
- Adaptive Leadership
- Organizational Savvy
- Bureaucratic Mastery

These tools were accessed and expressed in a variety of situations by participants. When faced with implementing a campus-wide program to support student veterans, one professional cited their

experience dealing with the bureaucracy—the internal tug-of-war between military branches for resources, policy actions, and other strategic decisions—as a value-add to their role in higher education. As one higher education executive noted, “What I found was that the military leadership fosters innovation. I [first] had to figure out what are the relevant questions? What are the resources I have? What steps do I need to do in order to answer this question? Then I would have to do some strategic planning and figure out how to get those things done with the resources I had.”

Working across campus departments was no different than working interdepartmentally across military branches. Others cited their experience in the military as an opportunity to maintain perspective when faced with challenges in higher education, albeit in a macabre fashion. A former enlisted leader shared, “The military also is just a fantastic life foundation of perspective and when people in my field are getting totally wrapped around the axle about certain things. It’s refreshing to be able to just remember if I haven’t been shot at today . . . pretty much everything else is gravy. And to learn that in your early 20s is a pretty valuable life foundation.” Multiple veterans involved in this study reported a sense of levity and comfort in being able to respond to challenges they encounter, knowing that things could be much worse as they engaged in their roles to address problems and critical priorities on campus.

Participants shared a profound commitment to adaptive leadership to overcome challenges on campus. One higher education executive observed, “Everything I did in the military well prepared me to be successful in higher education, it’s just that I wasn’t prepared to succeed on those terms in the higher education environment. I had to adapt. I really had a learning curve. I had to—I still could use everything I learned in the military—but I had to learn how to be more Sun-Tzu-like, to use the indirect approach.” Finally, practitioners and educators pointed to a host of individual skills and traits that helped them be more effective in their roles. Specifically, discipline, accountability, organization, decisiveness, task-focus, and personal responsibility were identified as traits participants exercised daily to serve in their current higher education leadership roles. All these, however, describe a rich constellation of internal resources on which to effectively manage programs, implement change, and work within the confines of higher education.

Military service imparts a significant amount of externally applied leadership skills and traits participants identified as integral to their effectiveness, whether it be engaging with faculty members, creating new academic programs, or bridging cross-campus divides. When we explored their traits and skills, participants identified the following:

- Navigating Relationships
- Mission Focus
- Comfort with Ambiguity
- Thinking Tactically, Strategically, Organizationally
- Resiliency
- Community and Coalition Building
- Leading Change
- Investing and Mentoring in Others
- Managing People, Equipment, and Budgets
- Fostering Innovative Change
- Immersed in Diversity
- Delegating Down
- Tackling Complex Problems
- Leading Large Organizations
- Aligning Strategy with Tactics

Nearly all participants described their ability to focus on the mission as a trait they learned in the military that applied to their work in higher education. It was the paramount trait they identified more often in their ability to achieve meaningful change in the workplace and to contribute in their current roles. This provided a profound advantage as an employee working in higher education. They adapted to different cultures on campus and diverse student bodies thanks to the unifying experience of having served in the military. As one higher education executive noted about his military service and fellow service members,

“We were diverse in our training, we were diverse in race, we were diverse in geography, we were diverse in skills, and we knew each other really well. We knew how to play off each other’s strengths to take care of the job. I learned the power of a team that is diverse as far as being able to get the work done.”

Veterans in higher education leadership roles were comfortable with budgetary and fiscal responsibility. They were adept at building campus programs and staff around serving students and driving innovation, including large-scale program design. They pushed responsibility down based on the military practice of delegating authority. As one campus senior executive noted, “One of the things I’ve learned from the military is the push of youth to be able to handle significant responsibilities. And I’ve carried that forward as well.” They built community coalitions to fund-raise—in one instance raising more money to support military-connected students on campus than the entire athletic department—and to drive recruitment of adult learners to campus. Participants quickly assumed teaching and mentoring roles based on their desire to lead change, to give back to the next generation of students, and to share their wisdom.

The progressive leadership experience in military service led participants to feel comfortable operating across campus departments in the interest of the students they taught or the campus personnel they interacted with daily. Veterans were familiar with ambiguity and creating order from chaos, and could adapt to campus challenges by understanding how to motivate and speak differently to others. Finally, they were experienced working in complex environments by combining their ability to think tactically and strategically to achieve their goals.

The leadership skills and traits developed through military service and identified here are not exclusive to veterans. However, the breadth and depth of what the participants shared suggests there exists a skilled and experienced population of prospective employees for higher education among the ranks of the transitioning military who are ready to contribute and lead on day one, and to continue learning and adapting in their understanding of leadership throughout their careers. As one higher education executive offered, “If military service is not a singular preparation for higher education administration, it is an important one. These young men and women have demonstrated their capacity to work to advance shared goals in complicated organizations.”

What is more, participants addressed the adaptations that must occur between military and higher education leadership. The move from hierarchical structures in the military to the highly democratized structures of higher education’s governance environment was one such dynamic reflected upon by participants. They recognized and navigated the difference between receiving orders and the expectation to garner consensus. They were forthcoming in their assessment of higher education to counter the lack of dialogue they experienced. As one former enlisted leader observed, “The thing I identify immediately is higher education is often incapable of handling blunt talk. There is a real gap in higher education because we are so sensitive to any criticisms.” They valued gathering input and generating buy-in. Importantly, they employed mission focus and managed large projects and wide stakeholder audiences with a sense of vigilance to achieve stated goals.

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES CONFRONTING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Participants’ perceptions of the key challenges confronting American higher education are aligned with the field’s broad literature base. When confronted with observing their own institutions, we asked participants to identify one or two challenges each faced and how their military experience helped them address the challenge(s). Participants stated their institutions’ inability to adapt to the changing demands of today’s students; the decreasing perception in the value of a post-secondary degree; decreased enrollment; aging infrastructure and unsustainable cost; the lack of focus on the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion by campus leaders; and competing spheres of influence on campus, as the challenges with which they were confronted.

Participants were eager to capitalize on the promise of flexible educational models that respond to the changing demography of students. One participant’s own experience in teaching a fully online program

led to her own concerns of the quality in the program's learning environment as the institution attempted to serve geographically place-bound learners. "Unfortunately, I do see an impact on the quality of learning," she said, "it's just not as personalized as the face-to-face environment at the moment."

Practitioners and educators interviewed for this study cited public skepticism on the value of four-year degrees as another key challenge facing higher education, largely driven by bifurcated messaging on higher education's access and success narrative. On the one hand, noted participants, is the promise higher education holds to future economic and workforce opportunity by providing access to students. On the other, participants observe that a significant number of students begin post-secondary education but never complete their degrees, often strapping them with student debt and putting them even further behind from achieving gainful employment and a reasonable standard of living.

Practitioners and educators identified the inclusion of veterans on campus as part of a larger trend toward a more diverse student body and desire to increase under-represented minority students on campus, but noted some schools were struggling with the most effective way to do that using the student veteran community as an example. As one practitioner noted, "veterans come from diverse backgrounds," as their institution seeks to create campus and academic programs that support their varied needs. There also was the perceived struggle over how veterans were treated on campus; as one practitioner noted, "In California, veterans are a protected class, so it's a protected community. And in my experience as a student and as a practitioner and administrator working in higher education, it's the only population that I know of that can be knowingly, openly discriminated against in a class by a leader within the classroom without significant repercussions from the students and other members of the community." This is happening while others noted veterans and under-represented minorities are attending failing institutions with poor academic outcomes. Yet participants pointed to their own military service as an advantage adapting and overcoming this challenge. As one offered, "One of the things that's a real advantage to people with military experience is this ability to work with a diverse group of people, male and female, all different races and backgrounds and abilities. That's really desperately needed in higher education. That is very much taught with military service and is a great advantage when people transition from military to higher education."

It was these perceived challenges that veterans interviewed for this study were driven to help their colleagues change. As one prior military officer observed, "We lead true change repeatedly because of the idea that commanding officers in the military continue to change every year or every two years. Any new administration that comes in, wants to make their mark, and you go through a continual change type of process and you're used to that change. You're used to accepting whatever that change is and doing the best that you can with what you have in that regard. And I think that is just a fantastic asset that the military brings to higher education in the ever-changing world."

PERSONAL DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

We asked participants to define what leadership meant to them to discover their leadership philosophy borne through military service and honed within higher education. What emerged was an adaptive leadership philosophy which sought to place the needs of the collective over the individual, to focus on empowering others to achieve success, to be inclusive, and to ensure accountability was commensurate with the mission. Practitioners' and educators' definition of leadership included the following themes:

- Inspiring and Empowering Others
- Distinguishing Authority and Influence
- Achieving a Mission for the Common Good
- Partnership and Coalition Building
- Inclusion

- Prioritizing a Sense of Service and Care for Others
- Turning Vision into Action

All these were placed in the context of an active and engaged campus partner. As one participant noted, “It’s critically important to, no matter what your job is, whether you’re working as the director of transportation, bookstore manager, in development, or the academic side, recognize that you want to be a good campus partner in everything you do.” Practitioners noted leadership styles antithetical to higher education including “rigid” or “authoritarian” styles among some veterans in leadership roles who were quickly marginalized on campus. This perception was accompanied by recalcitrant faculty; as one educator observed, “I actually have faculty here in the business school who prefer teaching management because they believe leadership is abstract, more complex and philosophical, and cannot be defined. I would say, well, come spend a day with me. I’ll take you to Camp Pendleton and you’ll come away with a better understanding. Veterans have exercised or been personally impacted by leadership. While people in academia will have had similar experiences, they tend to approach the study of leadership in a more abstract manner.” Despite this, participants focused on building character as a leadership trait. As one campus executive noted, “Character is the number one thing that’s going set you apart in life. You can be really smart, but if people can’t trust you, you’re just not going get very far. It’s not necessarily a part of what we talk about in a university.”

The participants painted a compelling leadership portrait. These veterans, based on their progressive leadership experience in the military and higher education, were the *adaptive pathfinders* higher education needed to navigate the complex change and challenges it will face through the 22nd century. One executive noted, “I think veterans can be an asset to all of society just because of the experiences that they’ve had and how they can contribute differently than people without that experience. I do see a dearth of that in academia and that requires changing the conversation.” Upon entering higher education, veterans were well positioned to adapt to the cultural challenges on campus. As one participant noted, veterans in higher education leadership roles “adapted to that new culture. They discovered the currency then they took advantage of it. They built capital within higher education and they utilize it in a positive way.” Veterans sought to coalesce around a mission or task by empowering intra- and inter-campus personnel to achieve a meaningful objective through community outreach, mentoring, the art of influence, or a combination of all three. As one participant succinctly noted, “Just cause I’m not in charge doesn’t mean that I’m not a leader within my organization.”

STRATEGIES TO RECRUIT VETERANS TO HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ROLES

Participants were asked to identify existing pathways or pipelines for veterans into leadership roles in higher education to change the industry into a destination instead of a waypoint. No practitioner or educator could identify a national pipeline dedicated to recruiting veterans into professional higher education roles. One educator identified the University of Iowa’s College of Education, which does prioritize recruiting and supporting veterans into post-baccalaureate programs. The program, the intent of which is to produce graduates who will transition into working inside the Iowa community, should serve as an example for best practices to recruit veterans into higher education leadership roles.

Interviewees provided other recommendations as well. A majority recommended building a bridge between higher education and the armed forces that goes deeper than the Transition Assistance Program administered by the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs. They prioritized formalizing connections in the armed forces to socialize and teach service members the merits of working in higher education as a career. This included exploring the mission of higher education, the professional advancement and leadership development opportunities, and describing different roles in higher education and how well they complement current military occupations. This could be done through an identified campus advocate tasked with recruiting service members into higher education leadership roles at nearby military installations, or as an expanded mission and program offered through a nonprofit. Other concepts included a campus fellowship program whereby a veteran could circulate through separate and distinct roles in colleges across campus to explore their best fit and which mission they aligned with.

Veterans are a protected class in some states. Several practitioners and educators suggested current employees coordinate with campus human resource offices to identify how to actively recruit this population into campus roles to meet minimum state and federal quota requirements.

All participants agreed that a national pipeline should exist and expressed a sense of urgency for its potential impact to the country and future students. One former officer observed, “God help us if we don’t get people with a military background into a world shaping the minds of our kids. We would have kids educated without any exposure whatsoever to veterans, and they’re going question, ‘What good are you guys?’”

Recommenations and Conclusion

The perspectives and insights offered by the participants, coupled with the literature base on the relationship between military service, adaptive leadership, and the challenges and opportunities facing higher education, raise important questions and observations about future research, practice, and policy action supporting veterans and higher education alike.

Further research is needed to explore the connections between skills and experiences garnered in the military and various higher education leadership roles; those studies can build off of this exploratory analysis and the related literature base developed to date in order to broaden the understanding of the relationship and connections between service and higher education.

The evidence garnered in this paper strongly suggests an opportunity to create programs and foster policy actions that support the pursuit of higher education leadership roles by our nation's service members and veterans. The recommendations below outline future research, practices, and policy actions by colleges and universities, nonprofit and industry trade organizations, and state and federal policymakers drawing from the extant literature and the perspectives shared in this study to support the pursuit and attainment of post-secondary career opportunities for service members and veterans.

FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Establish college- or university-based graduate academic degree programs in higher education administration that specialize in the translation of military leadership skills and experiences into the practice of adaptive leadership in higher education.
 - These programs should serve as a preparation academy for future cohorts of military-to-higher-education professionals who are readily able to apply their leadership skills toward the adaptive challenges facing two- and four-year public and private colleges.
2. Advance further study on the relationship between military service and the adaptive leadership challenges confronting colleges and universities in the United States. This should include:
 - How project and operations management techniques in military settings can be applied within highly democratized, shared governance structures in higher education to advance solutions to enrollment, budget, public outreach, and accountability questions.
 - A quantitative nationwide needs-based assessment identifying the professional development needs of veterans who work in higher education.
 - Research identifying the connection between military- and veteran-adjacent populations that work in higher education, including spouses and dependents, that expands current understanding and opens new recruitment pipelines.
3. Conduct marketing and targeted outreach to military veterans for participation in graduate study that leads to employment in higher education faculty, administrative, and senior leadership roles.
 - Marketing and outreach should be facilitated to prospective employees and should draw upon the virtues of extended service, adaptive leadership opportunities, and many other assets outlined in this paper that motivate veterans to pursue careers in higher education.
 - Illustrate how military service translates to higher education as a career to military-connected students who seek pathways to extend their public service orientation to civilian life.
4. Host training for college and university employees to build understanding of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives that comprise the military-connected population, and to address misconceptions civilian employees may possess about service members and veterans.

5. Establish a Center for Veterans in Higher Education Leadership at a college or university to serve as a national beacon for attracting military veterans into higher education as a career. This center will:
 - Advocate for their needs with local, state, and federal policymakers.
 - Increase public-private financial support for their academic journey.
 - Represent their interests within America's system of post-secondary colleges and universities.
 - Make additional contributions to the body of scholarship on veterans in higher education.
 - Offer specialized graduate degree programs as described above.

FOR NONPROFIT, PHILANTHROPIC, AND INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

6. Increase the pipeline of military-connected individuals to careers in higher education through funding research that illuminates the link between service in the military to service on campus.
 - In addition to recommended research questions above, Molina and Morse's summary of cogent research questions outlined in their work, *Military-Connected Undergraduates: The Current State of Research and Future Work*, provided additional direction in building on higher education leader and practitioner understandings of the diversity of service members and veterans in higher education in an effort to bolster educational access and success.
7. Distribute best practices, industry standards, and policy recommendations through fostering partnerships between the nonprofit, philanthropic, and industry sectors, and the military-connected community, and state and federal government entities.
 - Opportunities abound to more intentionally link education-to-career opportunities to create a pipeline of veterans into higher education leadership roles. Possibilities include (1) funding academic centers charged with producing cohorts of veteran leaders through college- and university-based graduate and professional programs noted in the section above; (2) developing and distributing best practices in fostering access and outcomes for military-connected individuals to achieve post-secondary credentials that help them seek higher education faculty, administrative, and senior leadership roles; and (3) professional development training and credentials that enhance the skill sets of leaders in higher education and other industries who seek to enter executive-level roles in colleges and universities.

FOR STATE AND FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

8. State workforce development agencies should promote career options and pathways that lead to gainful employment for transitioning veterans to higher education administrative, faculty, and leadership roles.
9. The Department of Defense (DoD) should aggressively recruit institutions of higher education to participate in its SkillBridge program to rapidly expand the number of part- or full-time roles for separating service members, to gain knowledge and understanding about higher education as a profession, and to close the military-civilian divide. DoD must view America's system of post-secondary higher education as an area of opportunity for separating service members to contribute as leaders while serving as ambassadors to the All-Volunteer Force.
10. The Transition Assistance Program, jointly administered by the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs (VA), should modify its curriculum to include higher education as a meaningful *career* destination commensurate with vocational, technical, and entrepreneurship opportunities. This includes early adoption in the military transition life cycle to better educate separating service members on the mission, merits, employee benefits, and professional growth opportunities in post-secondary higher education.

11. The Department of Veterans Affairs Transition and Economic Development Office must expand the number of Economic Investment Initiatives across the country by including institutions of higher education as partners that can offer significant and meaningful employment opportunities to those who have “borne the battle.” Done wisely, and with the full support of Congress, this partnership can rival the current professional development and research relationship that exists between post-secondary medical schools and VA’s Veterans Health Administration.

This journey began with a simple question: how do we attract more veterans into higher education leadership roles? What followed was an exploration that found a gap in the literature and policies supporting pathways for veterans to enter higher education as a career and an inadequate understanding for how service in America’s armed forces develops the skills and proficiencies that translate into higher education leadership roles. By identifying the connections between military service and higher education leadership roles, this paper illustrates the profound discovery that America’s military veterans are the adaptive leaders higher education requires to confront systemic change and challenges to its mission. Their service to America has only begun; they are called to lead a generational change in higher education.

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