

Writing War: Veterans in the College Writing Classroom

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Abstract

As writing classrooms may be the primary locations where students' military experiences are shared, writing instructors bear special ethical responsibility when teaching veterans. To date, however, much of the support for veteran writers has come from outside traditional classrooms. To be more effective in addressing the needs of not just veterans, but an American culture that has lived under the shadow of war for more than a decade, writing teachers need to more fully engage with the rising field of Veteran's Studies.

Keywords: veterans, college, writing, trauma, war, ethical responsibility, faculty training, bibliotherapy

As writing classrooms may be the primary locations where students' military experiences are shared, writing instructors bear special ethical responsibility when teaching veterans. To date, however, much of the support for veteran writers has come from outside traditional classrooms. To be more effective in addressing the needs of not just veterans, but an American culture that has lived under the shadow of war for more than a decade, writing teachers need to more fully engage with the rising field of Veteran's Studies.

With the support of a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Research Initiative Grant, we investigated the demographics of Post-9/11 military veterans who are entering college writing courses—courses that are overwhelmingly required for incoming students and are typically small enough for students to interact one-on-one with their instructors frequently. We also investigated how college writing program administrators (WPAs) are addressing this influx of veterans (when they are at all), what support writing centers and writing tutors are offering entry-level veteran writers (if at all), what alternative sites of writing are available to veterans, and how writing programs might collaborate with existing veterans' programs (on- or off-campus).

In May 2011, we sent out an initial survey via professional list-servs and direct email to WPAs, writing center directors, writing professors, and writing tutors. We received 497 responses.

From August 2011 to April 2012, we conducted more than 100 semi-structured interviews with WPAs, writing teachers, graduate and undergraduate veteran students, veteran services providers, academic advisors, psychological counselors, senior institutional administrators, and others. In addition to hearing comments similar to those collected on the survey (e.g., veteran students tend to be mature, serious students who seek frank guidance as they develop as writers; not all veterans self-identify to professors; veterans may initially be reluctant to seek additional help; veteran students may have some difficulty relating to classmates, but often serve as role models or attain leadership roles in class; veteran students tend to be "mission-oriented" in their approach to assignments, etc.), we quickly discovered several patterns worth noting:

A) Institutional contexts vary greatly and have a significant effect on the levels of awareness, amount of training, and kinds of support offered for faculty and for veteran students—thus it will be difficult to develop "best practices" per se, as each institution will have to consider its institutional context as it develops strategies for responding ethically to its student veteran population.

B) In general, most writing faculty have some awareness of the presence of veteran students in their classes or on their campuses but have not received any formal training on veteran students, military culture, or military writing conventions.

C) Two-year and online colleges and universities appear to be providing most of the first-year writing courses for veterans. This fact likely is a result of several forces, including the desire of student veterans to more cheaply and quickly fulfill general education requirements at two-year institutions, the ease with which general education requirements transfer to four-year degree-granting institutions, the ability to take certain courses while still in the military, and the flexibility of scheduling that two-year and online colleges provide to veterans, who often return to school while also having families or work obligations that limit their capacity to enroll in classes at traditional four-year institutions.

D) Despite the fact that most veterans seem to be taking first year writing courses at two-year and online colleges, those institutions have fewer resources to provide training to faculty or resources for a student veteran population.

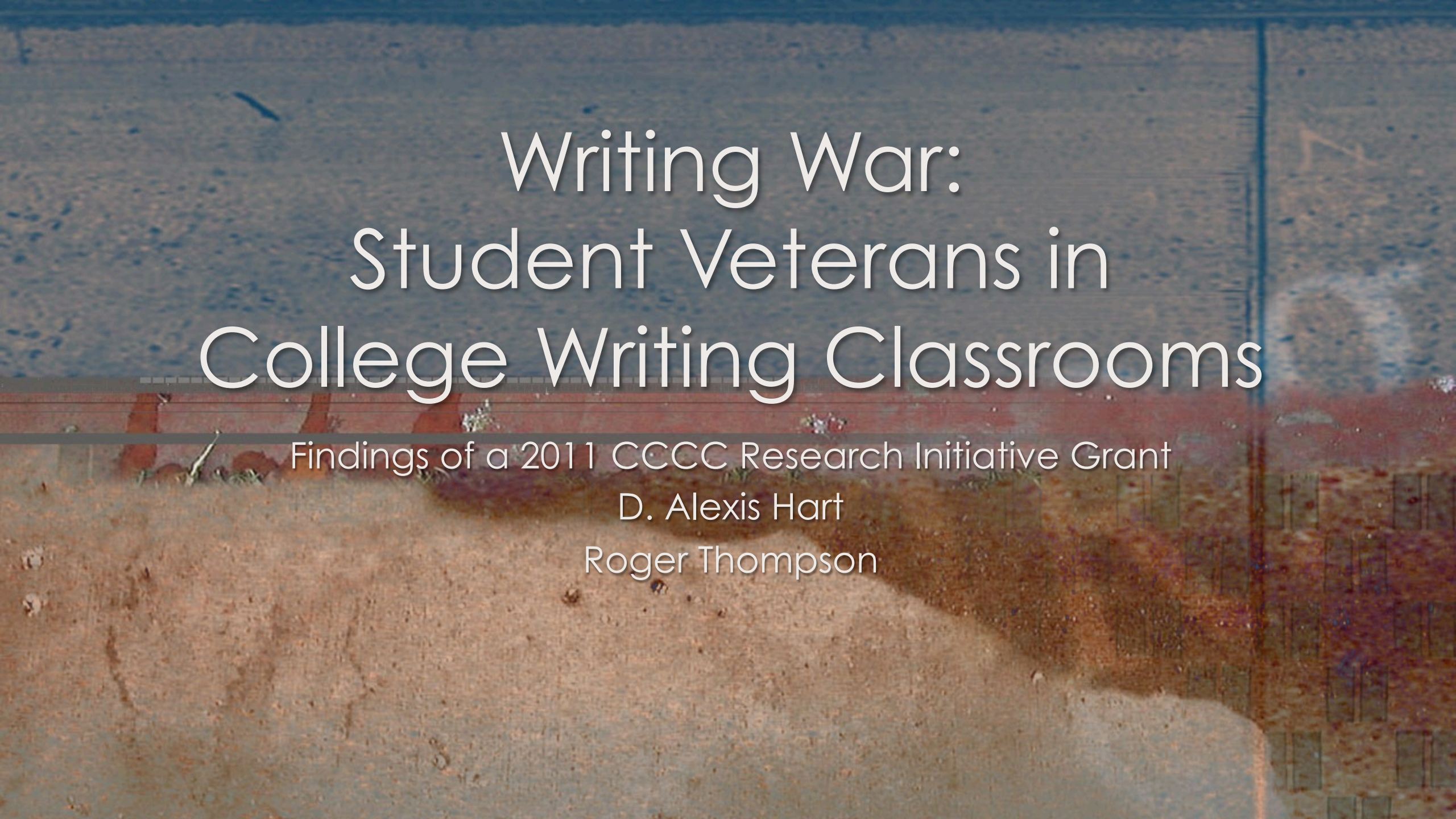
We believe that in order to be more effective in addressing the needs of not just veterans, but an American culture that has lived under the shadow of war for more than a decade, college writing professionals need to more fully engage with the rising field of Veteran's Studies, and we see our participation in this conference as an important step in beginning that professional engagement and collaboration.

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An aerial photograph of a desert landscape. A light-colored, winding road or path cuts through the terrain, which is a mix of sandy and rocky ground with sparse, low-lying vegetation. The colors range from light tan to dark brown and blue-grey. The overall scene is arid and open.

Writing War: Student Veterans in College Writing Classrooms

Findings of a 2011 CCCC Research Initiative Grant

D. Alexis Hart

Roger Thompson

“Yes, I want to dance around the edges of the terrible reality looming in my classroom. My students' experiences in war haunt them. They may look like the other students, but they are very different, as their stories remind all of us.”

--Nancy Thompson, “War Stories in the Classroom” *CHE* 2006

“One day you’re carrying a rifle over your shoulder, and the next day you’re sipping a Slurpee.... I just hated school,” [Taylor] said. After he started working with a writing specialist he found through the university, his grades began to improve, and so did his attitude. “I had anxiety issues, a lot of pent-up aggression from my experience in Afghanistan that I learned to apply to my writing.”

--“For Veterans Back From War, Writing Proves to Be a Balm” *NYT* 2009

“Some vets do not want to write about [war], for obvious reasons. In terms of assignments, however, the primary objective should be allowing vets opportunities to explore their military experiences and to facilitate that process if and when veterans so choose.

Certainly, veterans, combatant or noncombatant, should not be dissuaded from experiencing writing as a process of reshaping service-related experiences into malleable compositions. That is not as easy as it sounds, but it is what we can do to get vets started. To make that start, composition instructors must first recognize that we have much to learn from veterans, just as we have much more to do for them.”

--Galen Leonhardy, *TETYC* 2009

"Do we assign reading or writing on the topic of war? We shouldn't assume that all veterans will have emotional problems or want to talk or write about their experiences. But, what if individuals decide to describe traumatic events? As teachers of writing, we know we are often their first point of contact. In what manner do we respond on paper, or in person? I have always espoused that we are not trained therapists; however, **we do have an ethical obligation to react responsibly.**"

--Marilyn Valentino, CCC 2010

Key Findings: Student Veterans

- Veterans typically complete their first-year writing courses online or at two-year colleges
- Veteran enrollment in upper-level writing courses is relatively small
- Veteran students tend to be characterized as mature, serious students who seek frank, direct guidance as they develop as writers
- Disclosure of status vs. invisibility

Key Findings: Writing Faculty

- Faculty awareness
- Faculty training
- The personal essay assignment

Suggestions for Faculty

- Syllabus Statements
- Classroom Assignments/Activities—universal design
- End Deficit-Model Training
- Foster Interactions with Veterans Resource Centers and Student Veteran Organizations
- Be Aware of the “Veterans’ Industry”
- Consider Starting or Participating in a Veterans’ Writing Group—on- or off-campus

Veterans' Designated Classes

- Veterans Only
- Veteran Focused
- Veteran Friendly

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