

Bounding Veterans Studies
A Review of the Field

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the amount of research and teaching concerning veterans has proliferated to a point where some believe there is an academic discipline of *Veterans Studies*. Assuming this is correct, what is Veterans Studies? Is it a social science, a humanities subject, a business discipline, or a subset of education research? Alternatively, is Veterans Studies, like veterans themselves, intrinsically multifaceted? Finally, what existing academic disciplines could be instructive for current academics in defining the limits of Veteran Studies? This paper examines the current state of Veterans Studies through a literature review. Following this review, it briefly explores the history and structure of various “_____ Studies” fields to determine if these established disciplines could be instructive for Veterans Studies practitioners.

Keywords: trauma studies, higher education, academic disciplines

Bounding Veterans Studies A Review of the Field

Introduction

Less than five years ago, scholars at Eastern Kentucky University established the first known academic program in “Veterans Studies.” Travis L. Martin, the early champion of the idea, defined the Veterans Studies Program as “an academic minor/certificate program that prepares students to identify and understand the often unique experiences and challenges faced by veterans of military service.”¹ In a later interview, he further described the field of Veterans Studies as “exploring the cultural, institutional, and relational dimensions of the military/veteran culture through the study of war literature, history and psycho/social experiences.”² Since that time, at least two more Veterans Studies programs have been established, and this author has participated in scores of conversations with scholars and teachers around the country who are considering establishing such programs.

Assuming that the proliferation of research and the growth of academic programs is indicative that Veterans Studies is worthy of serious academic effort, we as a discipline should establish an agreed-upon definition. What is Veterans Studies? Is it a social science, a humanities subject, a business discipline, or a subset of education research? Alternatively, is Veterans Studies, like veterans themselves, intrinsically multi-faceted? Finally, what existing academic disciplines could be instructive for current academics in defining the scope of Veteran Studies?

Although this paper will propose a definition of Veterans Studies, it is not intended to end the conversation. On the contrary, it should be considered the start of the discussion about the size and range of topics in the discipline. This paper will explore several aspects of academic research to determine how each field is related to veterans. In the end, it will confirm that Martin’s original definition was a great starting point, and it will recommend that definition be altered so it is faithful to the wide range of academic approaches while

remaining coherent and helpful for those outside of the field or those scholars considering joining our ranks.

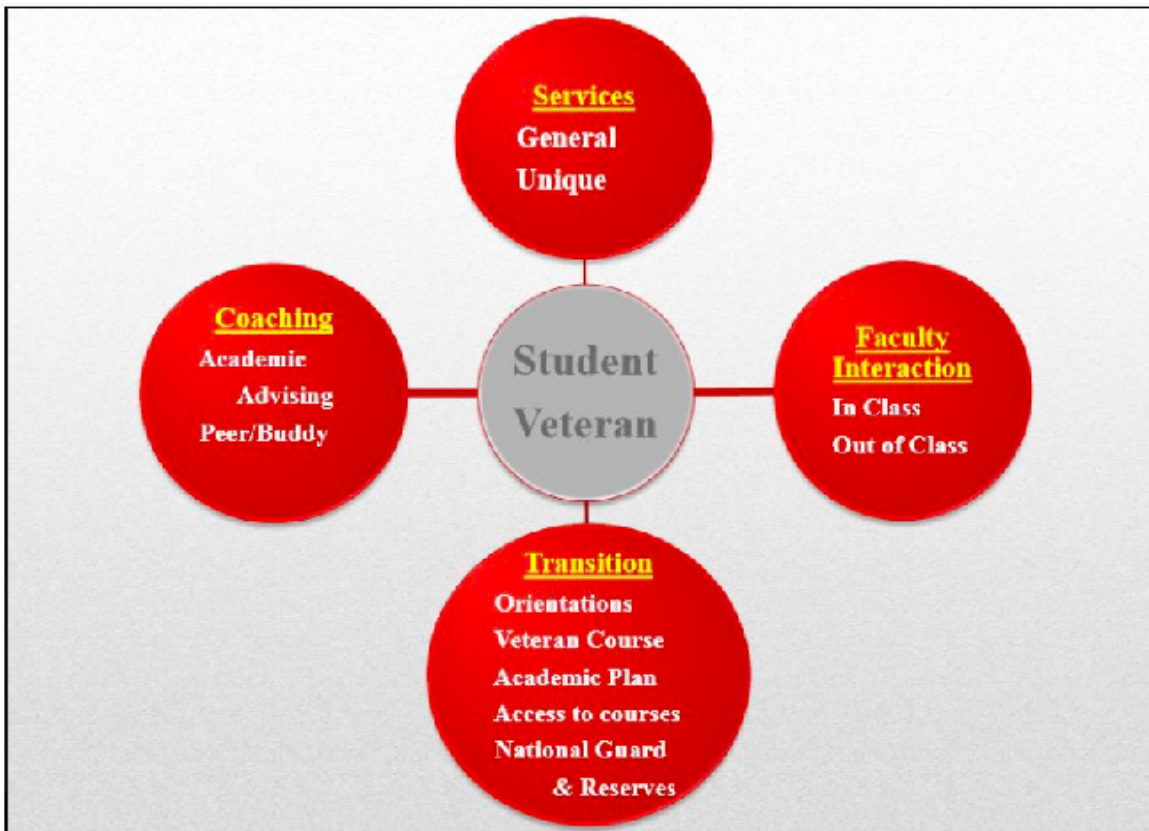
Veterans in Transition

One of the more active areas of veteran research is the area of veterans in transition. Because our colleges are often competing for limited tuition dollars and the GI Bill pays “sticker price,” the field of veteran transitions (often termed veteran success) on university campuses has opened fruitful discussion. This conversation includes articles, books, monographs, and entire conferences focusing on the goal of improving veteran success in higher education.

One of the most important voices in the field of veteran success on campus is LTC Dr. David Vacchi, USA, Retired. As the chair of the Veterans Knowledge Community for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), Vacchi has been prolific in his presentations, and he has found himself at the center of a growing cohort of student affairs professionals who focus their attention solely on student veterans. His focus has been to decrease the hyperbole around the challenges of a student veteran experience and increase the quality of research and data collection. Such efforts allow colleges and universities to act effectively, not knee-jerk, to remove the correct barriers to success for student veterans.

Vacchi’s article on *Considering Student Veterans on the Twenty-First-Century College Campus* highlights some of his best ideas. In it, he emphasizes military socialization as the single common experience that all veterans share. Understanding this reality helps institutions plan more effectively for the veteran transitions that are occurring on their campuses.³ Also, in several presentations, Vacchi has attempted to improve existing learning models applied to veterans. In his 2014 presentation *Considering A New Framework for Understanding Student Veterans: Research and Implications*, Vacchi presented a new learning model specifically designed to work with veteran adult learners.

He discards the accepted Tinto and Schlossberg models in favor of modified versions of older frameworks by Weidman (1989) and Bean and Metzger (1985). The Vacchi model focuses on the veteran student as an individual adult- learner undergoing a transition of identity as much as a transition of educational experience.⁴



Vacchi's model identifies a person-centric framework for supporting student veterans

There are others writing and researching in this field. Of note, Robert Ackerman and David DiRamio have been publishing for nearly a decade. Their most comprehensive work is a special report produced by the Association for the Study of Higher Education entitled *Veterans in Higher Education: When Johnny and Jane Come Marching to Campus*.⁵

Among the most interesting researchers working on veterans in transition is Dr. Glenn Phillips. Phillips's monograph, *Peering through the Fog*, proposes using *critical theories* to help understand veterans as they navigate the non-veteran world. His "Veteran

Critical Theory” uses tenets of five different critical theories (feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, disability theory, and border theory) and evaluates how they interact with the current literature on student veterans.⁶ It is an important and insightful addition to the field.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the growing list of college transition “self-help” books and resources. Student veteran versions include Nicholas Osborne’s *Life During College: The Veteran’s Guide to Success*; David Cass’s *The Strategic Student Veteran*; Kenneth Bracewell’s self-published *A Veteran’s Road to College Success*; and more. There are many college and university-centric incarnations of the self-help genre. The most recent and most comprehensive work is Hamrick and Rumann’s *Called to Serve: A Handbook on Student Veterans and Higher Education*.

Trauma Studies

Maybe one of the clearest examples of a field that is well developed and has great overlaps with the study of veterans is trauma studies. Clearly, the combat experiences of our veterans and the growing acceptance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in both clinical and non-clinical settings has helped to advance trauma studies and improved the discourse around veterans. There is no way that this short paper can do justice to the wide variety and sheer volume of literature on the topic. The following paragraphs are designed to simply highlight some of the most important, most widely read, or most cited authors and organizations.

No discussion of the primary researchers into PTSD is complete without a mention of the National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD). The NCPTSD was established in 1989 inside the Department of Veterans Affairs with the mission of advancing “the clinical care and social welfare of America’s Veterans and others who have experienced trauma, or who suffer from PTSD, through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders.”⁷ Not only does it fund and publicize

important research, it strives to make the results of that research accessible to the lay population. The website of the NCPTSD is a repository of white papers, pamphlets, videos and more. The NCPTSD should not be overlooked as one of the best sources for the study of trauma in our veteran population.

A university-related organization that is doing similar work but on a smaller scale is the National Center for Veterans Studies (NCVS) at the University of Utah. Led by Dr. Craig Bryan, a clinical psychologist and assistant professor, NCVS research and programs have focused on studying the psychological effects on our veterans of service and the various treatment protocols that could help those who suffer psychological injuries.⁸ With the acknowledgement that any attempt to create a short list of important research on veterans and trauma is a fool's errand, in the interest of brevity I am going to do just that. Three of the most important authors I read for this literature review were Erin Finley, Katherine Boone, and Jonathan Shay.

Finley's 2011 book, *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan*, is a humanistic take on the challenges facing our veterans. An anthropologist by training, Finley interviews scores of veterans and produces a narrative that highlights PTSD as a human experience, not a medical condition. That experience, she argues, can best be understood through the cultural contexts from which it emerges.⁹

Kathrine Boone has written widely on the subject, but her most accessible work is her 2011 article for *Wilson Quarterly*, *The Paradox of PTSD*. In this article, Boone argues that the predilection to diagnose PTSD as the primary mental injury to our veterans may actually be doing them a disservice. The mechanistic nature of a PTSD diagnosis (from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM), and the human tendency to process traumas with stress, hyper-alertness, depression, or a myriad of other techniques, lead to the paradox, "If you react normally to trauma, you have a disorder; if you react abnormally, you don't."¹⁰

Finally, no conversation about veterans and trauma can be complete without mention the important work by Jonathan Shay. Shay is a psychiatrist who has been treating Vietnam veterans for over twenty years. His greatest contribution to the field has been the concept of “moral Injury.” This idea has evolved over time, but a generally accepted definition of moral injury is this: “moral injury occurs when there has been a betrayal of what is morally correct, by someone who holds legitimate authority, in a high-stakes situation.”¹¹ Shay furthers his arguments with two different books that examine the psychological devastation of war by comparing the soldiers of Homer’s *Iliad* with experiences and psychological suffering of Vietnam veterans. Shay’s writings should not be missed.¹²

The Humanities

Humanities can be defined as the academic discipline that seeks to learn how people process and document the human experience. Clearly wars and militaries are a substantial part of the human experience, so veterans (or those who have served in militaries) find a comfortable home in the humanities. The humanities covers a wide variety of disciplines including Anthropology, History, Literature, Languages, Philosophy, Ethics, Art, and more. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus my study on new ideas or projects in literature and history.

One of the most important new academic projects attempting to process and document the veteran experience is the Military Experience and the Arts (MEA) project. This project, originally organized by Travis L. Martin at Eastern Kentucky University, seeks to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork.¹³ It is clear that the underlying purpose of this entire program is to create space for people (military, veteran, family, friend, and even the nonmilitary connected) to process their experiences and share their insight with others. MEA publishes several journals, maintains a substantial online web presence, and hosts regular symposia.

MEA accomplishes its goal well, and they are not alone. The English Department at the United States Air Force Academy has published the journal *War, Literature and the Arts* for over twenty-five years.¹⁴ In addition, newer national programs include the *Standing Together* project of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the *Combat Paper Project*, *The Telling Project*, *The Veterans Writing Project*, and scores more.¹⁵ Maybe because the sub-discipline of Military History often includes description and experiences of the servicemen and women who made history, veterans as a specific study in the discipline of history is a new (or more accurately, newly rediscovered) field. One of the scholars leading this new conversation is Dr. Steven Ortiz. His edited work *Veteran Policies, Veteran Politics* lays out a new understanding of the way veterans have shaped American history. The first sentence of this book clearly lays out his argument: “American political and social history cannot be understood apart from the role, place and significance of veterans and policies created for them.”¹⁶

Although Ortiz appears to be the leading scholar on American veteran policies of the early twentieth century, there are many others who have studied and written about veterans, including about the GI Bill and the generation that benefited from it. Notable among these works are Hume’s *Over Here*, Altschuler’s *The GI Bill*, and Gambone’s *The Greatest Generation Comes Home*.

This discussion is purposefully short. A more thorough literature review of veterans in the humanities would be exceedingly long and still inevitably incomplete. It is clear though, even after a short review, that the study of veteran experiences has a home in the discipline of humanities.

Entrepreneurship and Business

Helping veterans in transition has not been restricted to education or social transitions. There is a robust set of research and programs about veterans in the workforce and veteran entrepreneurship. Many, if not most, of these programs and publications are led

or financed by the Office of Veteran Business Development, in the U.S. Small Business Administration. This office lists its mission as being “to maximize the availability, applicability and usability of all administration small business programs for Veterans, Service-Disabled Veterans, Reserve Component Members, and their Dependents or Survivors.”¹⁷ There is a clear, policy-driven advocacy component to their initiatives.

Among the influential papers written (or funded) by the SBA and its researchers was the white paper *Factors Affecting Entrepreneurship among Veterans*. This report outlined the veteran-entrepreneur connection. It determined that “veterans are more likely than otherwise similar individuals to be self-employed” and that there are “significant positive effects for military service on the probability of self-employment . . . as high as 88 percent.”¹⁸ This study has been cited regularly to justify additional research and additional expenditure in the field of veterans and small business development.

Among the new leaders in this field is Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). IVMF has been developing and propagating business “boot camps” for nearly four years. Their four major programs in this field are (1) Operation Boots to Business, (2) The Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities, (3) Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship, and (4) Operation Endure & Grow. Each of these programs was created for a subset of the military of veteran population, and each is supported by external grant resources as well as by the U.S. Small Business Administration.¹⁹

Unfortunately, we cannot label all research into veterans and business as scholarly; there is a strong component of marketing, brand positioning, and “corporate-responsibility” in talking about and creating programs, as well as in actually hiring veterans. Corporations that have stepped to the forefront of these conversations include JPMorgan Chase (the primary sponsor of IVMF), Starbucks, Home Depot, and many smaller franchise operations.²⁰

Review of “_____Studies”

American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Urban Studies, Gender Studies Comparative Studies, and many more. What are these “_____ Studies” disciplines, and can Veterans Studies use their experiences to shape its own development?

Rather than seek out the multitude of academic departments and programs on our college campuses, this paper will briefly review three “_____ Studies” associations for clues about the development, structure, and definition of their chosen fields. Those associations are (1) The National Association for Ethnic Studies, (2) The National Women’s Studies Association, and (3) The American Studies Association.

Similar to the inception of Veterans Studies, Ethnic Studies grew from demands of the community and the academy to address the concerns of minority students on college campuses. The National Association for Ethnic Studies defines its practitioners as scholars who “examine the interlocking forces of domination that are rooted in socially constructed categories of gender, sexuality, class, and race and are committed to challenging paradigms that systematically marginalize the experiences of diverse national and international populations.”²¹ Also similar to the current state of Veterans Studies, Ethnic Studies programs tend to incorporate research and scholarship from across disciplines. Ethnic Studies departments include programs designed to study specific races (e.g., Black Studies), cultures (e.g., Asian Studies), geographies (e.g. Rural Studies), and more.

Like Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies (and more recently Gender Studies) was born from a need not met in the academy that has evolved into its own discipline. The National Women’s Studies Association identifies Women Studies as having roots in the women’s rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In its current form, the discipline is described as an “interrogation of identity, power, and privilege go[ing] far beyond the category ‘woman.’ Drawing on the feminist scholarship of U.S. and Third World women of color, women’s studies has made the conceptual claims and theoretical practices of *intersectionality*. . . and *transnationalism* . . . foundations of the discipline.”²²

Among the _____ Studies disciplines, American Studies might be the most helpful for Veterans Studies. The American Studies Association defines the discipline as follows: “American Studies identifies and interprets themes, patterns, trends, behaviors, traditions, and ideas that characterize the United States as a nation, an experience, a rhetoric, and peoples—past, present, and future; at home and abroad; and in thought and action.”²³ The ASA is also clear in identifying the roots of American studies and the idea that it began as a multidisciplinary or even nondisciplinary idea. The ASA describes a “matrix” concept wherein American studies is a “location for progressive research, a form of area studies, allowing in its flexible domain multiple ways of viewing the same subject—the United States or the Americas—and forging integrated approaches that could be called inter- or transdisciplinary.”²⁴ Over time, the discipline has evolved. In its current form, most would consider American Studies to be an established discipline, distinct from other units in the academy. It has its own “theories, methods, practices and pedagogies that set it apart from other units with disciplinary claims in the university curriculum.”²⁵ Maybe most importantly, it has established programs and degrees and a cadre of professional scholars trained and certified by American Studies departments.

This evolution did not happen quickly. It took time to establish accepted theories and practices. It took time to develop high-quality scholars, and it took time to build the structures on campuses to support these endeavors. It may be instructive for Veterans Studies practitioners to start codifying our own methods, practices, and pedagogies as well.

Conclusions and Recommendations

So, what is Veterans Studies? Even after this review of overlapping areas of scholarship, the question remains difficult to answer, and that is okay. Veterans Studies overlaps with many fields, and it attempts to address issues from a variety of perspectives and contexts. Veterans Studies is obviously multidisciplinary. Moreover, this aspect of the discipline is

a strength, not a weakness. Veterans Studies scholars operate under a big tent. As is true of veterans themselves, scholars work out of a large variety of perspectives, experiences, contexts, research protocols, and academic training. Broad perspectives are core to the academic identity of Veterans Studies. It is inherently multidisciplinary.

The established academic disciplines can be helpful in further developing our concept of Veterans Studies. The social sciences are important conduits to the study of veterans. The social sciences can help us better understand veteran experiences, evaluate programs, challenge conventional wisdoms, and establish effective policies. By including the social scientist's ability to use data and quantitative rigor in research, we provide an additional level of legitimacy to our field. Additionally, veteran experiences clearly fall into the humanities also. Any research into veteran experiences that focuses solely on surveys, data, regressions, and correlations are incomplete. Veterans are people, and people are different. Veterans' stories are powerful. Telling those stories, through history, literature, art, or music clearly enhances our understanding of veterans and their experiences; as such, those stories advance our discipline. In many ways, it is the qualitative that makes Veterans Studies rich, not the quantitative.

This literature review also found several areas where caution should be taken, even under the "big tent." Programs that are based on public policy agendas (which could change with a change of administration) can be problematic. For example, the Small Business Administration's advancement of veterans in entrepreneurship is a program of research based on a public policy that has predetermined conclusions. The academic underpinnings of these arguments are suspect because the outcome is already known. While I agree with the policy, I am skeptical that this type of research adds legitimacy to the field of Veterans Studies. The experiences of _____ Studies programs can be instructive, but scholarship based solely on advocacy is an area where it is important to tread lightly.

Travis Martin and his fellow scholars at Eastern Kentucky University were prescient in their description of Veterans Studies back in 2010. With only a few small clarifications or simplifications, I believe that we can create a definition for Veterans Studies that will serve the discipline and its growth for the next decade. That proposed definition is below: Veterans Studies is an emerging, inherently multidisciplinary academic field devoted to developing a clearer understanding of veterans and the veteran experience in the past, the present, and the future.

Areas for Future Research

This literature review, like all of them, is incomplete. Among the many areas where research could be expanded or enhanced, the following three areas seem most ripe for additional study. First, the field of Veterans Studies as we practice it currently is an American incarnation. While that focus is understandable, it is clearly myopic. Since Homer and maybe before, cultures have been attempting to understand and describe their veterans and veteran experiences. It would be a worthy exercise to describe, catalog, compare, and contrast veteran studies across countries and cultures. Second, although this review did discuss trauma studies, it did so from an academic, psychological perspective. It did not review any literature directly from the clinical medical fields. A review of medical literature related to veterans would be an important addition to our discipline. Finally, this paper only partially covered the structure or framework that disciplines use to advance themselves. Are academic departments important? What about majors, minors, degrees, certificates, and faculty appointment titles? It would be helpful for a scholar to research how academic disciplines are established and advanced from a structural (or administrative) perspective.

About the Author

Jim Craig is an associate teaching professor and the chair of the Department of Military and Veterans Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Prior to his academic career, Jim served for over twenty years in the U.S. Army, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. His operational army assignments included command positions in Light, Airborne, and Stryker Infantry units. In combat, he served as the chief operations officer of a 4500-person infantry brigade in Baghdad Province, Iraq. He has a Bachelor of Science (BS) in Mechanical Engineering from the United States Military Academy (West Point), a Master of Military Arts and Sciences (MMAS) focused in History from the Army’s Command and General Staff College, and a Master in Public Administration (MPA) focused in Security Studies from Harvard University.

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