FROM COMBAT TO CAMPUS
Understanding the Needs of Student Veterans

UW–Milwaukee is home to more student service members and veterans than any other campus in the UW system. Thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, many of the men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan now choose college as their next step. About 1,200 student service members and veterans are currently receiving education benefits at UW–Milwaukee, and statistics suggest there may be up to a thousand more student veterans on campus, who are harder to identify because they aren’t receiving benefits. These numbers are expected to rise.

Yet researchers and college administrators say they are only beginning to understand the needs of these students, and to work to help them succeed. “There’s insufficient research about supports for student service members and veterans on college campuses,” says Stacie Hitt, Ph.D., director of Operation Diploma, an initiative of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. The body of qualitative and descriptive data is growing, as are reports of existing programs for these students. “But we don’t know if those programs are working, and if they are working, why,” Dr. Hitt says. “That’s a huge gap.”

CABHR director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D., wants his team of researchers to help fill the gap at UW–Milwaukee as the university decides how to serve these students. He says CABHR scientists can share expertise in mental health and addiction, including high-risk college drinking (a particular vulnerability for student vets). CABHR can also evaluate campus programs to determine which ones work.

Getting to Know Student Vets

Many campuses lack basic data about student service members, Dr. Hitt says. “Many schools don’t even track veterans,” she says, making statistics like graduation rates difficult to calculate.

Dr. Hitt is currently working with colleagues at Purdue on a longitudinal survey comparing the college experience of civilian students to that of student service members and ROTC students. Participants answer questions on topics including academic progress, campus involvement, and alcohol-related attitudes and behaviors. Previous studies show that service members are more likely to use and abuse alcohol than civilians, and college life presents many opportunities for high-risk drinking, explains co-investigator Adam Barry, Ph.D., assistant professor of health and kinesiology at Purdue. Dr. Barry says their initial findings suggest that compared to civilian student drinking, “student service member/veteran drinking was linked to a number of negative health outcomes, some of which were mental health conditions.”

Heidi Plach, clinical instructor of occupational therapy at UW–Milwaukee, found evidence of problem drinking among student veterans in a study she conducted in 2007 for her master’s thesis. Plach interviewed 30 vets in their first year back from war and found that 53 percent of veterans were positive for problem drinking, 93 percent engaged in hazardous drinking, and 43 percent were probably dependent on alcohol.

Interestingly, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be less common than assumed; federal statistics suggest that only 17 percent of veterans on campus have actual PTSD diagnoses. But “because of media coverage, PTSD is almost the first thing campus administrators or faculty members think of when they hear the word ‘veteran,’” Dr. Hitt says.

Still, Plach’s interviews with student veterans revealed significant hurdles. Of the vets in her sample who were enrolled in college, all reported difficulties with school, including trouble concentrating and the need to relearn skills such as math and study habits. Many also described problems connecting with younger classmates without military experience.

One Campus’s Solution

While student vets may be vulnerable to problems such as PTSD and alcohol abuse, faculty at one Maryland college say they’ve been especially successful at reaching veterans by choosing not to focus on the wounds soldiers may bring home. Montgomery College’s

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Last winter, during one of my routine visits to the campus fitness center, I overheard an intense conversation among young men who looked no different than the hundreds of other students who typically frequent UW–Milwaukee’s athletic facility. These students were discussing their recent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. They expressed their relief at returning, and their concern that they would soon be called back to these overseas war zones. When one student talked about his relatively “safe” position away from the risk of combat, another enviously asked how he was able to obtain it. When the student explained that this was classified information, the conversation trailed off into uncomfortable silence.

Not the typical student banter that I usually ignore, the conversation gnawed at me for weeks as I tried to fathom what campus life must be like through the eyes of these young men and women. They have experienced and survived untold risks. They have lived in strange and rugged conditions halfway across the globe. Many have directly encountered death. Now they work out, go home to sleep in dorms or off-campus houses, and return the next morning to attend classes just like thousands of other UW–Milwaukee undergraduates.

How are the more than 1,200 returning veterans adjusting to life on our campus? How are the thousands of veterans across the country coping with their return to higher education? Judging by the reaction of the experts we interviewed for this issue of CABHR News, we simply don’t know.

We start with a few facts. First, commonly held stereotypes about veterans and post-traumatic stress may not hold water. Statistics from the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs (VA) suggest that only 17 percent of veterans on campus meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis. Second, many of our veterans bring unique strengths to their education, including a sense of discipline reinforced by rigorous military training and an awareness of foreign and diverse cultures fostered by their experience in overseas military units. Third, on-campus programs that build on these strengths and give expression to the unique aspects military experience have, anecdotally at least, experienced success.

These facts do not diminish the reality that our veterans are dealing with stresses that the rest of us can only imagine. Catherine Coppolillo, a psychologist at Milwaukee’s Zablocki VA Medical Center points out that many of our local veterans are deployed several times. As a result, it may be “hard for them to ‘buckle down’ when they don’t know when they will be pulled back again,” Dr. Coppolillo says. “They have the sense that they could be forced to leave at any time, even during the last few weeks of the semester.” They face the daily uncertainty of knowing that they may be forced to reenter combat situations at a moment’s notice.

As local battalions return to Wisconsin, VA clinics are seeing an influx of people seeking supportive counseling. Self-help organizations such as DryHootch (dryhootch.org) are a welcome response to dramatically rising veteran counseling needs. As higher education is increasingly central to veterans’ lives, faculty and staff here and at universities across the country need to understand the pivotal role we play in the veteran readjustment process. To prepare us to work effectively with returning veterans, we need more training on the issues raised in this newsletter. Campuses also need to implement more effective, evidence-based programming. Here at UW–Milwaukee, CABHR’s team of experts in addiction and mental health are poised to play a major role in the development and evaluation of these interventions. Dimitri Topitzes’ collaboration with Leslie Whitaker and Wesley Van Linda is an important beginning. This is the kind of collaborative research that can make a difference not only here in Milwaukee but nationwide as well. If you have any thoughts on this topic, please email me at fendrich@uwm.edu.

WHAT IS CABHR?
Based in the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, CABHR is a research center led by core academic scientists with broad interests in the addictions and behavioral health. CABHR conducts cutting-edge epidemiological, intervention, and clinical research. Its scientists currently hold $2 million in research grants.
Otto-Salaj Gives Carey Lecture
CABHR scientist Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D., gave this year’s Helen C. Carey Memorial Lecture at the Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division in Wauwatosa in September. Her talk was titled “Serving Women Survivors of Co-Occurring Epidemics: Mental Illness, Substance Use, Sexual Risk and Trauma.”

The Carey Lecture is presented annually by the UW–Milwaukee Helen Bader School of Social Welfare (HBSSW) and Milwaukee County, in memory of Helen C. Carey, who served as director of Psychiatric Social Services for Milwaukee County and was an instructor at HBSSW.

Stoffel Edits New OT Textbook
CABHR scientist Ginny Stoffel, Ph.D., co-edited Occupational Therapy in Mental Health: A Vision for Participation, a new textbook, with Catana Brown, Ph.D., of Touro University Nevada. The book is published by F.A. Davis Company. Dr. Stoffel contributed several chapters on topics including recovery and psychosocial clubhouses.

Report Outlines Drinking Culture in Wisconsin
CABHR scientist Lisa Berger, Ph.D., served on a subcommittee of the State Council on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse, which recently released a list of recommendations for state and local authorities to help them change the culture of high-risk drinking in Wisconsin. The committee’s recommendations included changing Wisconsin law to allow for sobriety checkpoints, and the enactment of sober server laws, which prevent people who serve alcohol from drinking at work. For more on the committee’s recommendations, see www.law.wisc.edu/rcid/news/ace_final.pdf

CABHR Welcomes New Staff
Daniel Fuhrmann, Ph.D., recently joined CABHR as an associate scientist and statistician. In this role, he assists with data management, statistical analysis, grant preparation, report writing, and publication and presentation preparation. Dr. Furhmann graduated from UW–Milwaukee in May with a doctorate in economics. Jing Jia, a doctoral student in economics, will assist Dr. Fuhrmann with data management.

CABHR also welcomes Stephanie Collins and Ellen Enríquez, who will both serve as assistant researchers in the Stories to Tell project led by CABHR scientist Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D.

And Maribel Sanchez, a student in the Urban Studies master’s degree program, will provide data management and program support to CABHR scientist Susan Rose, Ph.D., and other members of the Keeping Families Together research team.

Rose and LeBel Receive CDC Grant
CABHR scientists Susan J. Rose, Ph.D., and Thomas P. LeBel, Ph.D., received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a project that builds on two other CABHR projects: the ongoing Keeping Families Together project and the completed Women in Jails project. This grant is part of a federal earmark awarded to the UW–Milwaukee School of Public Health and the Milwaukee Health Department.

This intervention study seeks to assist incarcerated, substance-abusing pregnant women and mothers of minor children in preventing re-occurring use, connecting them to community resources, reunifying them with their children after release, and improving the health outcomes of expectant mothers and their newly born infants.

CABHR Launches Mentorship Program
CABHR has created a scientific mentorship program to foster ongoing relationships between junior investigators and successful, established senior investigators with broad interests in the addictions and behavioral health. Mentors will provide technical assistance with grant writing, manuscript preparation, and related scientific activities. To learn more about the program, visit www.cabhr.uwm.edu or contact Mary Heller at mheller@uwm.edu.

Young Parenthood Study Earns Federal Grant
In September, CABHR scientist Paul Florsheim, Ph.D., received a five-year Adolescent Family Life Care Demonstration Project Grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service’s Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs to conduct the Milwaukee Young Parenthood Study (MYPS). Sheri Johnson, Ph.D., of the Medical College of Wisconsin is program evaluator for the project.

The primary goal of MYPS is to refine, adapt, and test the efficacy of the Young Parenthood Program, which Dr. Florsheim designed and tested at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City before coming to UW–Milwaukee in 2008. MYPS aims to help pregnant adolescents and their partners develop the interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive co-parenting practice. Dr. Florsheim is working with Aurora Sinai Medical Center, St. Joseph’s Hospital, the Sixteenth Street Clinic, and Columbia St. Mary’s Hospital to recruit MYPS participants. Drs. Florsheim and Johnson are currently hiring to fill key positions on MYPS. For more on the open positions, contact Eric Gresnick at gresnick@uwm.edu

CABHR Scientists Publish Findings
The following journals recently accepted articles by CABHR scientists: Actualité Juridique Pénale • The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing • Behavior Modification • Clinical Psychology Review • Cognitive and Behavioral Practice • Deviant Behavior • European Journal of Criminology • Japanese Journal of Sociological Criminology • Journal of American College Health • Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy • Journal of Family Social Work • Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health • Journal of Offender Rehabilitation • Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology • Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment • Journal of Urban Health • Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health • Nursing Education Perspectives • Social Science Computer Review • Social Work • Sociology Compass.

For more on these articles, visit www.cabhrresearch.uwm.edu
MEET CABHR SCIENTISTS

Jonathan Kanter, Ph.D.
CABHR Scientist
Associate Professor of Psychology
UW–Milwaukee

Dr. Kanter currently is focusing on developing efficient and effective behavioral treatments for depression that can be used across cultures. He and professor of educational psychology Azara Rivera-Santiago, Ph.D., are currently in the second year of a National Institutes of Mental Health-funded study of a psychotherapy treatment adapted for Latino patients with depression.

“We’re trying to make the treatment culturally meaningful and culturally sensitive,” Dr. Kanter explains. For example, the conventional goal of psychotherapy is to help the individual patient feel better. But because Latino cultures tend to be community-oriented, Latinos may be more motivated by the goal of engaging more fully with family and friends. Drs. Kanter and Rivera-Santiago are currently testing the adapted therapy in a randomized trial at the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center in Milwaukee.

Dr. Kanter believes such adaptations might help people around the world. The World Health Organization recently named depression the third costliest condition in its “global burden of disease” rankings, suggesting a pressing need for effective depression treatments. Dr. Kanter is interested in developing psychotherapy tools that work for depression across the globe, including rural Third World countries. Given the costs and limitations of medication for depression, Dr. Kanter says he sees brief, easy-to-understand, and easy-to-train psychotherapy as an essential solution.

For now, his efforts focus on Milwaukee. In addition to the Sixteenth Street study, Dr. Kanter hopes to launch pilot work developing group-based psychotherapy approaches for depressed people in Milwaukee’s African American community. “The group approach is important because one of the real problems in the African American community is access to well-trained mental health professionals who are culturally sensitive,” Dr. Kanter says.

His lab has also been working to create an online home for its materials training clinicians in effective psychotherapy for depression, which further contributes to his global vision. “If you can train online,” he says, “you can train people all over the world with massively reduced costs.”

For profiles of other CABHR scientists, visit www4.uwm.edu/cabhr/facstaff.cfm

FROM COMBAT TO CAMPUS

Combat2College program (also called C2C) was launched two years ago, a collaboration of college counseling faculty, the local VA Medical Center, and Joseph Bleiberg, Ph.D., a specialist in traumatic brain injury, a common combat injury. C2C coordinator Rose Sachs explains that military training emphasizes self-reliance, which can stop veterans from seeking help.

“We decided not to focus on disability because they won’t come,” Sachs says. Instead, the college aims to create an atmosphere that welcomes all veterans, thanks them for their service, and offers supports such as academic advising, social activities, a veterans-only fitness program (staffed by certified athletic trainers who are also vets), and guidance with financial aid.

“If we take away the stigma, the folks with disability eventually come to us,” Sachs says.

Staff and faculty members refer students to services such as mental health counseling if necessary. But their main goal is helping students build on strengths gained through military training, including discipline and leadership skills. The result, Dr. Bleiberg says, is “a very subtle therapeutic community” to help veterans through this transition.

Faculty and staff education has been key to making C2C work. C2C staff will visit department meetings to address faculty, and the C2C website offers faculty training materials. But Sachs believes she achieved more with a campus lecture series, including a production of “Into the Fire,” a powerful theatrical documentation from the viewpoint of veterans.

Dr. Bleiberg and Sachs are currently writing about their program for *Psychiatric Quarterly*, and hope eventually to secure funding to evaluate the program.

Making UWM Veteran-Friendly

UW–Milwaukee recently established a Veterans Working Group to develop strategies to help these men and women reach their “academic, professional, and personal goals,” says Patricia Arredondo, Ed.D., associate vice chancellor for academic affairs, who co-chairs the group with Laurie Petersen of the Student Accessibility Center. The Military Education Benefits Office (MEBO) has served as an important connection between the university and student vets in the past, but Dr. Arredondo acknowledges that more is needed. For example, working group members hope to establish a veteran’s resource center, “modeled on some of our first-year and ethnic centers here on campus,” says James Schmidt, MEBO program specialist. It would include student service functions, serve as a news and resource clearinghouse, and provide a student lounge that vets can call their own.

New courses will help veterans build their academic and coping skills. For example, the English department will offer the two-credit “Veterans Reentry Writing Workshop” next spring semester. Instructor Leslie Whitaker, who teaches business- and nonfiction writing, will lead the course with Wesley Van Linda, a Vietnam-era veteran and experienced meditation and stress reduction teacher. The first hour of each class will be devoted to stress-reduction practices, and the second hour to writing instruction. “By combining writing with relaxation, we hope to start students out in a more relaxed, focused place,” Whitaker says, relieving some of the anxiety often linked to writing assignments. Students will keep journals, and write first-person accounts and reflective essays. The course will emphasize revision, a skill that will help students throughout their academic careers, Whitaker says.

“This offers a safe place for writing instruction, a chance for students to express themselves, and a chance to learn stress management,” Whitaker says. “I’m hoping students will see that these practices can help them move forward with their lives in healthy, productive ways,” Van Linda adds. C

CABHR affiliated scientist Dimitri Topitzes, Ph.D., will examine how this combination of writing and stress reduction affects student vets. Previous studies have looked at the benefits of stress-relief practices like meditation for vets, but the writing and stress reduction combo appears to be new. Topitzes wants to see how the course influences students’ overall wellbeing, stress levels, and ultimately, their graduation rates. He plans to gather pilot data this spring, and then apply for funding for a more rigorous study of the course.

The Need for Data

As UW–Milwaukee learns how to help student service members and vets, CABHR director Michael Fendrich hopes to glean “generalizable knowledge” from the process. “I hope we can create the kind of information that other campuses can learn from,” he says.

Dr. Hitt of Operation Diploma stresses the urgent need for evidence-based campus programs. VA statistics show only 27 percent of eligible veterans have used their tuition benefits so far, she says. “Schools have only seen the tip of the iceberg.”