

From Combat to Classroom: A Qualitative Exploration of Veteran Student Transitions at

CMAS

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Introduction

This semester, as part of BBL 7023 Qualitative Research Methods for Culture, Literacy, and Language, I have participated in a collaborative qualitative research project examining the lived experiences of veteran students at the Center for Military-Affiliated Students (CMAS) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). This initiative is based on the acknowledgment that veteran students often bear the invisible wounds of war—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Moral Injury, and other cognitive impairments—that significantly affect how they transition from military life to higher education (Vacchi, 2012, p. 19). My fieldwork, rooted in structured observations conducted between March and April 2025, aimed to capture the everyday moments, conversations, and community interactions within the CMAS environment.

More than a study of services and supports, this research aims to better understand the social and emotional dimensions of transitioning from combat zones or highly structured military settings to a civilian university campus. As someone with military experience, I brought an academic perspective and a personal commitment to understanding how CMAS serves as a potential bridge between military and academic identities.

Each site visit provided new insights, revealing the subtle yet impactful ways that community and belonging influence student success, particularly for veteran and military-affiliated students.

Research Questions (Refined)

As the project evolved, so did my research questions. Initially broader in scope, these questions became more focused as I immersed myself in the rhythm and culture of CMAS. Through my direct observations and subsequent analysis, I refined the guiding questions to the following:

1. What are the primary support needs of veteran students experiencing PTSD and moral injury at CMAS?
2. How does CMAS promote a sense of community and belonging among veteran students?
3. What obstacles prevent the effective use of support services at CMAS?

These refined questions enabled me to focus on the most pressing challenges and strengths of the CMAS environment regarding veteran student success.

Methods

I used structured participant observation as my primary methodological approach, conducting five field visits to CMAS. During each visit, I documented verbal and non-verbal interactions among staff, student workers, veterans, and military-affiliated students. I observed the flow of activity at different times and days, ranging from busy midday hours to quieter afternoon moments. My field notes focused on body language, the tone and content of conversations, spatial arrangements, and subtle cues of inclusion or exclusion within the space (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, pp. 21–41).

The CMAS site is located in the John Peace Library, a central campus location, and functions as a hybrid space—a resource center, a social hub, and at times, a safe haven. The front desk is staffed by student workers affiliated with the military, many of whom are veterans themselves or dependents of service members. Their shared background enables them to serve as gatekeepers and informal peer mentors. Visitors receive informal greetings, and there are no strict protocols for engagement. Instead, the space thrives on openness and mutual recognition. Key participants included William Lansdon, the site supervisor and CMAS's Senior Program Manager; several student workers (SW); and a rotating group of veterans and military-affiliated students who visited for support, study, or socialization. Although I did not conduct interviews

for this project phase, the observational data were rich in detail and provided valuable insights into the space's unspoken norms and dynamics.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of field notes: (1) The Role of Peer Support, (2) Informality as Accessibility, and (3) Visibility and Identity Navigation.

1. The Role of Peer Support

Throughout all visits, one of the most powerful and consistent themes was the reliance on peer support networks. Veterans and military-affiliated students at CMAS did not just come for services—they went for each other. For instance, on March 19, 2025, I observed several female veterans gathered at the front desk, engaging in animated discussions about ROTC, benefits navigation, and family responsibilities. What stood out was the genuine exchange of lived experiences—how to navigate systems, whom to talk to, and which strategies had been effective. This form of peer mentoring addresses the gaps between institutional support and individual needs. These relationships provide emotional solidarity and practical wisdom that staff, regardless of their empathy, may not fully offer. According to Oswald et al. (2019, p. 48), student satisfaction increases significantly when veteran services are coordinated and include peer support structures. In this way, CMAS was not merely a resource center; it was a community of practice where students could connect with others who understood their experiences.

2. Informality as Accessibility

The second major theme focused on the informality of interactions at CMAS. Unlike many administrative or academic offices, where protocols and appointments dominate, CMAS fostered a culture of casual connection. On April 4, 2025, I visited during a slow Friday

afternoon. Despite the lull, staff members remained attentive, warmly greeting each visitor and checking in without an agenda. The openness of the space encouraged spontaneous visits without the need for a specific reason.

This informality significantly reduced the psychological barriers often faced by veterans who may be experiencing anxiety, hypervigilance, or distrust of bureaucratic systems. Walk-ins were not only welcomed—they were anticipated. There was no requirement to disclose trauma, and no need to embody “student-ness” in a specific manner. The space implicitly conveyed, “Come as you are.” Carter et al. (2023, pp. 198-199) suggest that expecting veterans to unlearn military structures in favor of traditional academic norms can be counterproductive, and spaces like CMAS that allow veterans to bring their full identities promote more effective engagement.

3. Visibility and Identity Navigation

A more nuanced but equally significant theme involves the interplay between visibility and identity. CMAS is designed to be open and welcoming, featuring large windows, large sliding doors, and a general transparency that conveys inclusion. CMAS also provides a separate study space just for veteran students located on the 3rd floor of the JPL, and on the 4th floor, there is a space exclusively for those to hang out. However, this same visibility can become a source of tension for veterans managing PTSD or dealing with identity shifts. During my April 10 visit, I noticed subtle behavioral cues—hesitation before entering, deliberate choices of seating locations, and quiet scans of the room before engaging.

For some, the openness of the space reinforced safety and community. However, it risked exposure for others, especially those still reconciling their military and civilian identities or navigating moral injury. How one dresses, where one sits, and whether one engages are not just choices—they are strategies for managing social and psychological risk. These behaviors can be

further influenced by gender, race, or other identity markers that shape one's sense of safety in a public or semi-public environment. As DiRamio et al. (2008, p. 88) found, veterans often struggle with visibility and reintegration, especially when their identities are misunderstood or reduced to stereotypes. CMAS walks a fine line between visibility as inclusion and visibility as vulnerability, a balance that requires continual adjustment.

Conclusion

The data collected through this qualitative inquiry affirm that veteran and military-affiliated students face distinctive social, emotional, and structural challenges during their academic transition. Yet, it is also clear that places like CMAS can offer more than services—they can offer sanctuary. The findings highlight how peer support, informal access, and sensitivity to visibility are not just add-ons but fundamental design features that foster veteran student success.

As institutions across the country consider how best to support military-affiliated students, this research highlights the importance of creating spaces that honor lived experience, encourage informal connection, and stay alert to the complex balance between openness and safety. Future research might examine how intersectional identities—especially regarding gender and race—further shape these transitions. Additionally, CMAS could benefit from implementing trauma-informed design principles that accommodate sensory needs, privacy options, and adaptive programming based on real-time feedback.

In short, this research highlights a significant truth: for many veteran students, success in higher education relies not only on academic resources but also on community, care, and the capacity to be present without explaining why they (we) belong.

References

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