

**Research Site Proposal**

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### **Project Background and Rationale**

As a veteran student and doctoral researcher at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), I have gained firsthand insight into the challenges military-affiliated students face during their transition into higher education. Many veterans and active-duty service members enter college after years of military service, often carrying with them experiences such as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), Moral Injury, or other cognitive issues. These conditions can significantly affect their academic performance, mental well-being, and social integration.

The Center for Military-Affiliated Students (CMAS) at UTSA is a vital resource that offers numerous support services to facilitate this transition. However, despite these offerings, many veteran students and service members continue to face challenges in adjusting to academic life, balancing responsibilities, and managing mental health issues.

The objective of this research is to examine how veteran students with PTSD, Moral Injury, and other cognitive injuries navigate their transition into higher education, as well as to identify which support services most effectively facilitate their academic success. Unlike the military, which fosters a sense of belonging and camaraderie, the experience at UTSA may differ significantly. By focusing on CMAS as the research site, I intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the available resources and assess the current sense of community among veterans while also identifying areas for improvement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more effective support systems tailored to the unique needs of veteran students, ultimately enhancing retention and graduation rates.

### **Brief Literature Review**

Transitioning from military service to higher education is a well-documented challenge for veterans. Research has shown that veteran students often experience difficulties related to

mental health, social integration, and academic performance (Barry et al., 2014, p. 37; Elliott et al., 2011, p. 289). Specific conditions such as PTSD and Moral Injury contribute to heightened stress levels, difficulties in concentration, and obstacles in adjusting to civilian life (Currier et al., 2015, p. 230).

Universities with CMAS-like support centers have been recognized as essential in offering resources such as academic advising, counseling, and peer mentorship (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 75). However, research shows that while these services are available, many veterans either remain unaware of them or do not utilize them effectively (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 13). Additionally, the generic approach taken by many university services often fails to meet the specific needs of veteran students who require tailored interventions.

Further evidence suggests that PTSD and combat-related trauma can amplify feelings of alienation among veteran students (Elliott et al., 2011, p. 288). Many veterans face challenges adapting to college life due to the significant differences between military and academic settings, often encountering a lack of peer support and understanding from faculty (DiRamio et al., 2008, pp. 88 - 89). Additionally, research highlights that moral injury—the psychological distress resulting from violations of core beliefs—can lead to increased depression and social withdrawal, further hindering academic success (Currier et al., 2015, p. 235).

A crucial aspect of the veteran transition experience is their sense of belonging and identity within the university setting. Research by Morris et al. (2022) emphasizes that resource centers and peer networks can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and enhance veterans' academic performance (pp. 22–23). Understanding how CMAS fosters this sense of belonging will be central to this research.

Despite these findings, there are still gaps in the literature concerning the impact of specific institutional support services on veterans with PTSD and Moral Injury. Current studies tend to concentrate on broader veteran transitions without delving into how mental health challenges affect their academic experiences. This study aims to enhance the field by exploring the direct experiences of veteran students at UTSA and assessing the role of CMAS in fostering their success.

### **Proposed Project and Goals**

The project aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of veteran students at UTSA as they transition into higher education. By focusing on CMAS, this research will assess the effectiveness of current support structures and identify potential areas for improvement.

Throughout my research at CMAS, I intend to address the following questions:

- What are the primary challenges encountered by veteran students dealing with PTSD, Moral Injury, and other cognitive injuries during their transition to higher education at UTSA?
- Which support services at CMAS are most effective in tackling these challenges?
- What barriers prevent veteran students from accessing the available support services?
- How can CMAS improve its services to better serve veteran students?
- What roles do peer support and community building play in the success of veteran students?
- How does CMAS foster a sense of belonging among veteran students, and what factors support or hinder this sense of community?

By examining these questions, I aim to provide practical recommendations for improving the effectiveness of CMAS and similar support services at other educational institutions.

### **Proposed Site**

The Center for Military Affiliated Students (CMAS) at UTSA will serve as the primary site for this research. CMAS is a well-established support hub for veteran students, providing academic, financial, and mental health resources tailored to military-affiliated students in a centralized location.

I have obtained verbal permission from Dr. Michael Logan, Director of CMAS, to conduct five site visits and qualitative surveys at CMAS. During a recent Coffee with Vets session, Dr. Logan consented to my conducting both individual and group sessions with veteran students and staff. He also indicated that CMAS would be fully available to support my study, allowing me to engage freely with students and staff to gather data.

I will employ qualitative methods at the site, including participant observation, informal conversations, and structured interviews. My primary objective will be to observe how veteran students interact with CMAS, the resources they utilize, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these services. Additionally, I will closely monitor student engagement levels, the challenges they encounter, and any emerging themes related to PTSD, Moral Injury, and cognitive injuries in their experiences. Furthermore, I will evaluate how CMAS fosters a sense of belonging among veteran students by examining how they feel integrated into the campus community and supported by their peers and institutional resources.

I will take on both an observer and participant role while attending CMAS workshops and meetings, engaging directly with students and staff. At first, I will position myself as a passive observer, but I anticipate becoming more actively involved as I conduct interviews and facilitate discussions. Maintaining confidentiality will be a top priority, and I will arrange private interview spaces to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

To ensure reciprocity, I plan to share the complete results of my research with the CMAS leadership team. If CMAS expresses interest in my findings, I will prepare a formal report outlining the research outcomes and presenting actionable recommendations. This report will provide insights that could significantly enhance their services and operational strategies. Additionally, I intend for the findings to serve as a strong advocacy tool for securing further institutional support, ultimately benefiting CMAS and its communities.

### **Site Accessibility and Entry**

I have established connections at CMAS through my role as a doctoral researcher and as a military-affiliated student at UTSA. With Dr. Logan's approval, I will conduct research at CMAS that aligns with its operational structure and does not disrupt its services.

I intend to visit CMAS five times throughout the semester, dedicating at least one hour for observation during each visit. I will explain my presence as part of an academic research project focused on enhancing the support services available to veteran students. To ensure transparency, I will communicate my research objectives to staff and students, ensuring they understand the study's purpose and scope.

To further enhance participant engagement, I will offer small incentives, such as help completing forms, informal mentorships, or running small errands, to show appreciation for their time. My ultimate goal is to provide meaningful insights that contribute to improving the experiences of veteran students at UTSA.

### References

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