

What my project is

My project explores how veteran students transition into higher education, especially those dealing with PTSD and moral injury, and examines the institutional support systems in place to assist them. I conducted qualitative research using observations, field notes, and interviews at the Center for Military-Affiliated Students (CMAS) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). The goal was to understand not only what services exist but also how they are perceived and used by the veterans themselves.

How has my experience been at the site?

As a veteran myself, I entered this project with certain preconceived notions about the issues veterans face in higher education. I expected to encounter challenges related to trauma, isolation, and navigating academic systems not built with veterans in mind. What surprised me was how much of that was confirmed, not just in what was said, but in what was not said. The silences, the body language, and the fatigue behind the words all pointed to deeper emotional labor. My position as an insider helped establish trust, but I was careful to remain reflexive, ensuring I did not project my own experiences onto others. Through my field notes, I captured recurring themes of camaraderie, frustration with bureaucracy, and the power of simply having a space like CMAS. The interview process was especially moving—honest, raw, and full of nuance that might have been missed had I not also been a member of this community.

What my findings were

Three main themes emerged from my data:

1. **Precarious Belonging:** While CMAS provides a space of comfort and familiarity, veterans still wrestle with their identity in the larger university system. Belonging is not automatic; it is something they are constantly negotiating.
2. **The Mask of “Doing Fine”:** Many veterans present as resilient and composed, but beneath that are struggles with mental health, memory, and the pressure to perform without showing vulnerability—something I deeply related to from my own experience.
3. **Support Structures Are Essential—but Incomplete:** Peer support, CMAS staff, and tailored programs are vital. However, a recurring finding was the disconnect with faculty and the broader campus culture, which often lacks trauma-informed understanding. This insight directly ties into my parallel work on developing a faculty micro-credential to bridge that gap.

Overall, my experience at CMAS confirmed much of what I expected while also expanding my understanding of the complexity behind those expectations. It reaffirmed that the success of veteran students depends not only on the availability of services but also on a campus culture that is empathetic and informed.