

## **Personal Reflections on how Research on Military Veterans Informed My DEI Course**

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As an educator professor, I recognize the profound impact that inclusive teaching practices have on fostering a sense of belonging for all students. When I started teaching "Business Professionalism and Personal Character" in 2020, I did not fully recognize this. I took over as course coordinator when the previous coordinator retired, and it transitioned to "Design Thinking, Ethics, and Inclusion in Business." This transformation marked a paradigm shift for my teaching and research. I previously covered diversity in introductory management courses at Miami University and the University of Cincinnati, but I had not examined academic literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or ethics in business.

### **Background, Course Evolution, and Reflexivity**

As I assumed the course coordinator role, I discovered the importance of integrating DEI principles into my pedagogy. This included challenging widely held beliefs, examining social vs. business cases for diversity, and providing students with a critical lens to feel both included and challenged. Researching the course, I recognized an oversight in traditional DEI approaches – military veterans are often included in dedicated hiring programs and desired by universities for consistent sources of funding, but they are often overlooked in traditional university and corporate DEI programs. Indeed, one reviewed textbook did not include veterans as a protected group of workers, despite multiple protective laws (US DOL, n.d.). Indeed, recent research recognizes veterans as a culturally distinct group of workers (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021).

This realization prompted me to introduce modules that highlight the experiences and value of military veteran employees and students, using actual veterans' voices. While previous

instructors discussed veterans, most did so in context with disabilities. This is a categorization error that assumes all veterans have disabilities or mental health trauma, when actual numbers are lower than often recognized (Wilson, 2020). Often, veterans' perspectives are overlooked in DEI research and practice, leading to an underrepresentation of their unique experiences in academic discourse and practical solutions for integration into post-military organizations. Thus, I integrated academic journals written by military veterans, Ted talks from veterans and veteran-focused journalists (i.e. Sebastian Junger), and direct quotes from veterans. These sources then formed the basis for team self-reflection exercises for how students' perspectives shifted on military veterans after the lesson and resulted in increased engagement from students.

Additionally, research on military veterans often assumes prescriptive rather than descriptive approaches for integration, often assuming a universal veteran (i.e., not all veterans have the same experience or human capital). A colleague and I had previously examined military veterans' psychological contracts with "veteran/military friendly" organizations (Peat & Perrmann-Graham, 2019), but realizations from researching the course led to a more complete look at how military veterans are paradoxically stigmatized and socially aggrandized (i.e., put on pedestals unnecessarily) simultaneously in organizations (Peat & Perrmann-Graham, 2022).

### **Promoting Broader Inclusivity**

As we delved deeper, a new research stream emerged, focusing "military-connected individuals'" experiences. By examining intersectionality, we realized that the term "veteran" often excludes several groups *affected by* military service such as reservists, spouses, and survivor dependents (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). The impact of this seemingly subtle shift in language generates deeper connections among those affected by the military and eliminates exclusion from limited labels. I have since integrated these findings into my course, presented these at the Equity and Inclusion and Teaching and Learning Conferences, integrated them into a workshop that I provided to the equal employment office, and added them to a DEI textbook chapter. Thus, teaching a DEI course not only enriched my teaching but also enriched my understanding of the diverse challenges faced by military-connected individuals.

Going forward, I plan to collaborate with educators and researchers to develop inclusive teaching resources that highlight military-connected individuals' perspectives, ensuring their representation in course materials and discussions. I will also advocate for adoption of more inclusive language in academic settings by encouraging the use of "military-connected" instead of "veteran" to encompass a wider range of individuals affected by military service. Finally, I plan to continue to engage in workshops and seminars to raise awareness of these issues and encourage other educators to consider the experiences of diverse student populations.

### **My Teaching Journey**

Reflecting on my teaching methods and exploration of military veterans in organizations, I acknowledge that my understanding of inclusivity was limited, and some students might not have felt entirely comfortable/engaged. As I immersed myself in understanding others' experiences, particularly military-connected individuals who often felt excluded, I revised my vision for future inclusive teaching. I aspire to create fully inclusive classrooms where every student feels seen, appreciated, and empowered. My commitment to continuous improvement and growth drives me to adapt my teaching methods based on student feedback and my emerging research on inclusivity, especially for military-connected individuals. Thus, I have attended sessions at teaching conferences focused on building inclusive classrooms, and I have begun using more case studies that highlight the lived experiences of not only military-connected individuals, but other diverse groups too. I believe that embracing inclusivity and representation will both enhance my students' learning experiences and my research, and it may also have a broader impact on campus culture and beyond.

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