From ‘Broken Heroes’ to Public Servants: Transforming Persistent Myths about Post-9/11 Veterans

Rosalinda Maury • Corrinne B Zoli • Danny Fay

January 4, 2019
Agenda

- Overview
- Who We Are
- Common Myths
- Discussion
OUR MISSION
To advance the post-service lives of America’s service members, veterans, and military families

WHO WE SERVE
• Individuals
• Organizations
• Communities

PRIORITIES
• Deliver impactful, best in class programs and services, informed by research, measurement, and evaluation
• Advance practice and policy through rigorous research, measurement and evaluation, and data solutions that empower action

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

FOCUS AREAS
✔ Career Preparation and Employment
✔ Entrepreneurship and Small Business Training
✔ Community-Based Support and Care Coordination

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

FOCUS AREAS
✔ Employment and Entrepreneurship
✔ Higher Education
✔ Gov’t. & Community-based Services
✔ Measurement, Evaluation, and Data Analytics
Corri Zoli, Ph.D.
Director of Research | Assistant Research Professor, Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism (INSCT)
College of Law/Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs
Syracuse University

Rosalinda V. Maury
Director of Applied Research and Analytics
Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)
Syracuse University

Daniel L. Fay, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Public Management
Reubin O'D. Askew School of Public Administration and Policy
Florida State University
Motivation for this Research Effort
Overview
KEY HIGHLIGHTS

• We provide a data-driven series of analyses to debunk persistent and inaccurate myths in the media and public debate about veterans.

• Our research reveals a far more accurate, complex, nuanced and interesting picture of veterans’ contribution to American culture, one that warrants retiring the “broken hero” myth and recognizing their ongoing commitment to public service.

• The intent is to inform others about these inaccurate myths, and begin to have robust discussion about veterans contributions and support mechanisms needed for continued success.
Framing/Motivations for Research

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Paradox:** Broad, public “support for troops” but too little understanding, especially of post-service life—beyond stereotypes
- Research on student veterans tends to focus on academic performance (e.g., graduation rates) and challenges adapting to campus life
- Gap in knowledge in service members’ experiences, needs, expectations, and aspirations in transitioning to campus life
- Clear need to identify leading institutional support systems, processes, and practices that best promote long-term student veteran success
Public Support for Military

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Trends in Confidence in the Church and the Military
Figures represent % Great deal/Quite a lot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The church</th>
<th>The military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Source: Pew Research Center, War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era (2011): 13.

Source, Gallop News Service, Confidence in Institutions: June 9-12, 2011
Need to debunk stubborn myths about today’s military veterans as the “broken hero” and ascribe to veterans, instead, more accurate representations that feature their historical and ongoing commitments to national and public service.

**SOME COMMON MYTHS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MYTH #1</th>
<th>Veterans and the military are a small subset of the population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MYTH #2</td>
<td>Veterans join the military because they could not get into college; they are uneducated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTH #3</td>
<td>The military is a homogeneous population; they are all the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTH #4</td>
<td>Veterans have a limited skillset and pursue careers similar to their military specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTH #5</td>
<td>Veterans are broken heroes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MYTH #1  Veterans and the military are a small subset of the population
Debunk Myth # 1

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

9% (or just roughly 1 in 10) of the total population

Period of Service

39% WWII, Korean War, and Vietnam eras
40% Gulf War I and Other Service Periods
20% Post-9/11 Veterans (4.1 million)

Data Source: BLS, Current Population Survey, 2017 annual averages, population 18 and over
MYTH #2  Veterans join the military because they could not get into college; they are uneducated
Debunk Myth # 2

**KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

**MILITARY SERVICE**

**MOTIVATION FOR SERVICE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Reasons for Joining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Serve Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Experiences/Adventure/Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Opportunities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

88% reported that joining the military was a good decision.

- A top motivation for joining the military is and has always been for education benefits.
- While in service the military is promoting and preparing service members for their education.

**Military Influences**

- 73% Military promoted their interest in education.
- 68% Military prepared them for education.
Debunk Myth # 2

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Education

- On average, post-9/11 veterans achieve higher educational attainment than earlier generations and the general U.S. population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Attainment</th>
<th>All Veterans</th>
<th>Gulf War Era II (post-9/11)</th>
<th>Total US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimated</td>
<td>Estimated</td>
<td>Estimated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20,387,000</td>
<td>4,116,000</td>
<td>246,006,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a high school diploma</td>
<td>891,000</td>
<td>64,000</td>
<td>26,441,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates, no college</td>
<td>6,006,000</td>
<td>915,000</td>
<td>71,283,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or associate degree</td>
<td>7,112,000</td>
<td>1,701,000</td>
<td>69,789,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduates (Bachelors or Higher)</td>
<td>6,378,000</td>
<td>1,436,000</td>
<td>78,493,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 66% of all veterans have some college or higher.
- 76% Post-9/11 Veterans have some college or higher.
- 60% of the general population have some college or higher.

Debunk Myth # 2

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Higher Education for Women Veterans

- Education attainment higher for female veterans
- 81% of female veterans have some college or higher

“I Initially entered the military to complete my education and ended up making a career of it,”

“I'm glad I did it, because the military provided me skills and education, and a sense of accomplishment and pride”
MYTH #3    The military is a homogeneous population; they are all the same
Debunk Myth # 3

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Gender
- Veterans are predominantly male
- Female post-9/11 veterans fastest (17% vs. 10% overall)

Race/Ethnicity
- On average, post-9/11 veterans have higher representation of African-Americans and Hispanic minorities.
Debunk Myth # 3

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- The U.S. military comprises high demographic diversity—more so than any other public institution, while it remains the largest public employer.

- The military provides training and opportunities to service members that exposes them to many cultures as well as skills.

73% SERVED OUTSIDE OF THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES operating across different cultures, nations, and regions.

TOP SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES STRENGTHENED BY MILITARY SERVICE:

- Work Ethic and Discipline: 87%
- Teamwork: 86%
- Leadership and Management Skills: 82%
- Mental Toughness: 81%
- Adaptation to Different Challenges: 78%
- Self-Discipline: 77%
- Professionalism: 78%
MYTH #4  Veterans have a limited skillset and pursue careers similar to their military specialization
Debunk Myth # 4

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

MILITARY SKILLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILLS DEVELOPED DURING SERVICE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WORK ETHIC/DISCIPLINE</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAMWORK</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENTAL TOUGHNESS</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADAPTATION TO DIFFERENT CHALLENGES</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81%

indicated that their military specialty (MOS, AFSC, Rating, or designator) accurately described the military jobs that they performed during service

43%

STEM RELATED MILITARY SPECIALIZATIONS/JOBS report that their military specialization, job, or training is science, technology, engineering, or mathematics related

MILITARY SERVICE

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

REPORTED THE MILITARY LEFT A LASTING IMPRESSION IN DEVELOPING SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES THAT WILL HELP SUCCEED IN EDUCATION

71%

82%

MILITARY INFLUENCES

66%

71%

PROMOTED THEIR INTEREST IN TRAINING, CERTIFICATION, OR LEARNING PROGRAMS
Currently there are 4.1 million post-9/11 veterans. This number is growing as service members transition.

Nearly 200,000 veterans transition out of the military each year—and most eventually pursue civilian careers.

- 60% Navigating VA Admin. or Benefits
- 55% Getting a Job
- 41% Getting Socialized to Civilian Culture
- 40% Financial Struggles
- 39% Skills Translation

Indicated that education should play a role in their post-service transition

55% of servicemembers said that they are likely to pursue a different career than their military specialization.
Debunk Myth # 4

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

THE GENERATION OF ORIGINAL GI BILL VETERANS ACCOMPLISHMENTS INCLUDES:

- 14 Nobel Prize Winners
- 24 Pulitzer Prize Winners
- 3 Supreme Court Justices
- 3 Presidents
- 12 Senators
- 238,000 Teachers
- 91,000 Scientists
- 450,000 Engineers
- 67,000 Doctors
- 22,000 Dentists
- Millions of lawyers, nurses, artists, actors, writers, pilots and entrepreneurs
- 17,000 Journalists
- 240,000 Accountants
MYTH #5  Veterans are broken heroes
Debunk Myth # 5
KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- That is, one of the most destructive myths about Post-9/11 service members is the “broken hero,” the soldier who “once did incredible things but is now forever damaged and in need of help,” as Chris Marvin (retired Army helicopter pilot) put it in a recent *New York Times* interview. In fact, that broken hero myth is now a “dominant image of veterans on television and in Hollywood today”—despite the fact that “99 percent of us are neither heroic nor broken,” Marvin added, “we are people—people the public has invested in who have a lot of potential.” In fact, Martin started *Got Your 6* to capitalize on that potential and to actively lobby the entertainment industry to change their images about veterans in public culture.
Debunk Myth # 5

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

• In spite of these challenges, many view their military experiences positively and feel a deep sense of pride in their service.

• The majority indicated that the military played a role in their success and 76% say their military experience helped them get ahead.

The majority of service member (79%) indicated that their service-connected disabilities has created obstacles in various areas of their lives.

88% reported that joining the military was a good decision.

79% indicated that the military played a role in their success.

Over 3.9 million disabled veterans are categorized by the VA as having a disability. Of those, 43% are of Gulf War and post-9/11 veterans.

58% reported a service-related disability.

32% reported they did not have a disability.

Of those that have service-connected disabilities, 79% indicated that it creates obstacles:

- In their personal life: 81%
- In holding a job: 40%
- In getting a job: 35%
- In completing their education: 28%
- In starting their education: 12%
Debunk Myth # 5

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Q: Identify your motivations for education or training programs? Select all that apply.

- When asked about their top motivations for pursuing education, in addition to job opportunities, self-improvement, advancement, and benefits use, 43% of our respondents said they wished to help people and society
Debunk Myth # 5

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

• When we asked service members what they wanted to major in at university, where they wished to work, or how they viewed post-service life, a consistent answer came up: public service.

• Qualitative answers to such questions echoed this public service and community-oriented theme, as respondents explained a desire to pursue certain majors, like Social Work, “to help underprivileged teens,” or “become a Veterans Advocate to help represent Veterans with Governmental agencies.” Still other respondents wished to use “my computer skills to help friends, family, and community,” and many mentioned attaining professional degrees—in medicine, accounting, and the law—to “see if I can't find a way of helping people” and “to do something that makes a difference.”
Discussion:

What Common Myths Are We Missing?

What Can We do to Move Past them?

What is Missed When Myths get Substituted for Actual Veterans’ Perspectives & Experience?
Some Initial Thoughts,

1. If we believe MYTH #5 of the broken hero, we miss the bigger picture: namely, we’re in a new era of global security challenges & asymmetric warfare—Post-9/11 cohorts have more direct, up close & personal experience with these transformative trends than virtually any other U.S. “expert” group. Judging from recent MENA conflicts, we need such security & strategic insights.

2. If we believe MYTH #4 about veterans limited skillsets, we miss how today’s global affairs have created seasoned, adaptive leaders at the lowest level in the traditional military hierarchy (e.g., the “strategic corporal”); such leadership talent, tested and shaped under duress, is sorely needed in our academic and public institutions.
3. If we believe MYTH #3 of the homogenous military, we miss how recent veterans’ military experiences are jammed packed with OCONUS & profound cross-cultural experiences—again, making Post-9/11 vets underappreciated authorities on diversity issues (inside & outside the armed forces); as such, a huge asset for college campuses & beyond.

4. If we believe MYTH #2 of the uneducated veteran, we miss how veterans, particularly on college campuses—and in careers beyond—represent a vital opportunity to leverage the “rare, valuable, & differentiating attributes of veteran talent” and to demonstrate how “the characteristics and competencies generally representative of military veterans” often “confer enhanced performance and organizational advantage” for those who recruit, hire, and develop veterans as a human capital resource.
5. Last and by no means least, if we believe **MYTH #1** of veterans as a marginalized rather than robust component of the U.S. population, we miss how **veterans exemplify** an ongoing, life-long commitment to **public service, civil engagement, and service leadership** in prioritizing the welfare of the community over individual interests.
For more information contact:

**Institute for Veterans and Military Families**

Rosalinda Vasquez Maury  
Director of Applied Research  
Phone: 315.443.0172  
Email: rvmaury@syr.edu  
Website: ivmf.syracuse.edu

**Florida State University**

Daniel L. Fay, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Public Management  
Reubin O'D. Askew School of Public Administration and Policy  
Phone: 850.644.7397  
Email: dfay@fsu.edu

**Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism (INSCT)**

Corri Zoli, Ph.D.  
Director of Research, Assistant Research Professor, Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism (INSCT)  
College of Law/Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs  
Phone: 315.443.4523  
Email: cbzoli@syr.edu  
Website: http://insct.syr.edu/
Thank You