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Female Veterans on Campuses Can Be Hard to Spot, and to Help

By Libby Sander

Denver

When Kami Fluetsch left the Navy after nearly eight years as a medical specialist, the last thing she wanted to talk about was her military service. Male supervisors had told her that women didn't belong in the military, and she was bitter. A new life beckoned.

But in the month or so between leaving the Navy, in 2010, and setting foot on campus here at the University of Colorado at Denver, Ms. Fluetsch realized that the transition to that new life would be harder than she thought. Linking up with a veterans group proved vital: During that first semester, she leaned hard on the staff at the university's veterans-services office, calling multiple times a week with questions.

Before long Ms. Fluetsch, a gregarious 27-year-old with a hearty laugh, did meet fellow veterans, in class and through a student-veteran group on campus. She found comfort in new friendships—but they were all with men. In her year and a half as a student here, she has met only one other female veteran. And it's not for scarcity: Almost a quarter of the university's expected 900 veterans this fall are women.



Out of Uniform

As veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan pursue college, *The Chronicle* examines what that means for higher education, the economy, and the students themselves.

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Photos



Benjamin Rasmussen for The Chronicle

The U. of Colorado at Denver enrolls nearly 200 female veterans, but Kami Fluetsch, who was in the Navy, has met only one of them on the campus.



Benjamin Rasmussen for The Chronicle

The Women's College of the U. of Denver wants to enroll more female veterans like Kristen Luevanos, who

served in the Army. At the college, officials say, women can talk about their service without being compared with men.



Courtesy of Kami Fluetsch

In 2006, Kami Fluetsch was deployed to Kuwait. "I served my country," she says, "but I don't need to wear it on my sleeve."

As colleges nationally add and improve services for the swelling population of student veterans—to date 760,000 veterans have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to enroll in college—such discrepancies are becoming conspicuous. On many campuses, officials find that only a sprinkling of women take part in programs and services designed to support veterans.

The low turnout appears to be at odds with the number of female veterans in college. Nearly one in five veterans who have used the new GI Bill at a two- or four-year college is a woman, according to an analysis of 250,000 veterans by the Department of Veterans Affairs. (The department doesn't break down all GI Bill users by sex.)

Women's apparent reluctance to take part, say campus officials, presents a dilemma for institutions still figuring out how best to help all veterans. But female veterans, colleges are learning, often face different challenges than men.

Female veterans under 35, for instance, are more likely than their civilian peers to have children and be single parents. And they may have scars different from those of their male counterparts, as the military continues to have high rates of sexual harassment and assault. The Department of Veterans Affairs reports that one in five female veterans experienced sexual trauma while in the military. Other studies suggest that female service members who were raped

have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than do men who served in combat.

With those concerns in mind, many colleges are seeking to connect female veterans with resources to assist them. Colleges are forming all-female support groups, hiring women to work in veterans offices, and trying to start conversations by showing films like *Lioness*, about the first women to fight in direct ground combat, in Iraq.

Here in Colorado, home to 38,000 female veterans, several universities are beginning to adjust programs for veterans to engage more women. And a fledgling organization for female veterans in the state has made higher education a top priority.

At the University of Colorado at Denver, Cameron Cook, a Marine Corps veteran who directs veterans services, says Ms. Fluetsch is one of just a few women who take part in his center's extensive array of services. Male veterans often stop by to chat about their struggles, and sometimes he puts them in touch with counselors. None of the women drop in to talk that way, he says.

It could be, says Ms. Fluetsch, that women don't define themselves by their service in the military. "I served my country, and I'm very proud of that," says the international-studies and public-health major. "But I don't need to wear it on my sleeve and say, 'Hey, I'm a veteran.'"

That's precisely the challenge for campus officials, who wonder, If female vets don't come forward, how do we help them?

'You're a Veteran'

Once male veterans have traded their uniforms for civilian clothes, many joke about how easily they can spot one another on a college campus. It can be the haircut, boots, or posture. But that doesn't tend to work for women, who blend in more easily.

"You're less likely to identify them as veterans and ask them if they know of this service or do they know about the resource center," says Danielle J. Adams, a student at Western Kentucky University who is the elected leader of Student Veterans of America. That lack of visibility can limit women's access to helpful sources of support.

Sometimes, though, the reluctance to label oneself a veteran comes from within.

Dana Niemela served eight years on active duty as an officer in the Navy, including a two-year deployment aboard the *USS LaSalle*. But after she left the service, it took five years before she called herself a veteran. Her reticence came from years of guilt over not having

served in Iraq or Afghanistan, she says.

"I had buddies who were being deployed to combat zones who were married and had families," she says. "I desperately wanted to understand why they were being sacrificed and put at such risk and I was not, when I felt like I had less to lose."

After Ms. Niemela resigned her commission, in 2005, she felt there wasn't any point in seeking benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. "You're resigning," the Navy had told her. And: "You're not a combat vet."

She knew she hadn't served long enough to be eligible for retirement benefits. Because she had earned her bachelor's degree on a Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship, the previous version of the GI Bill had been off-limits to her. So four years later, when the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect, she assumed she wasn't eligible for that, either.

"I felt like I had not given as much as somebody else, so I wasn't entitled to the same things," Ms. Niemela says. It was a retired Marine Corps master gunnery sergeant whose blunt words finally persuaded her to start using the benefits coming to her. "Get over it," she recalls him saying. "You're a veteran."

When she began to read the fine print about the new GI Bill, she discovered she was eligible for 100 percent of the benefits. That program now pays \$17,500 a year toward her graduate degree in social work at the University of Denver. She is enrolled part time while working for the U.S. Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program for the city and county of Denver.

Sometimes Ms. Niemela wonders: If not for the Marine officer who had set her straight, would she ever have come to terms with her veteran status? What about others who haven't been prodded? Women, after all, gained formal status as veterans only in the late 1970s, although they had served in the military officially since 1901, and unofficially since the Revolutionary War. (They now account for 8 percent of the veteran population.) Even today, advocates for female veterans must emphasize the message: "If you served," one Web site for female veterans says in large, bold type, "you're a veteran."

Now Ms. Niemela, who is 36, belongs to a Veterans of Foreign Wars post and makes it a point to be visible on the campus and in the community.

"Until other women come out and step up and show their face, I'm

it. So I'll be everywhere," she says. "I need people to know that there are women vets here."

Gender Politics

Showing up for veterans functions on campus, though, usually means hanging out with the guys. And after having been the minority in uniform—roughly 14 percent of all enlisted troops are female—some women still grapple with uneasy gender dynamics.

Ms. Adams, of Western Kentucky, says her time in the Army made her feel a constant need to prove herself. Some male supervisors repeatedly criticized her, suggesting that she wasn't as deserving of leadership positions as her male peers. Often the message was quite clear, she says: She didn't belong.

"It was extremely frustrating," says the 27-year-old political-science and sociology major, speaking in a quiet, measured tone.

Ms. Adams moved up the ranks anyway, leaving active duty as a sergeant after seven years, including a tour in Iraq. But it was hard to forget being passed over for promotions and plum assignments. She was so used to discrimination in the Army that when Student Veterans of America held its national conference last December, and she ran for an executive position, she was prepared to take on a lesser role.

To her surprise, the mostly male membership of the group, which has more than 500 chapters, elected her president of its National Leadership Council. Since then Ms. Adams has come to believe that the fraught gender dynamics in the military can fade in a college setting.

But some female veterans have had traumatic experiences that are difficult to forget. One student in Colorado, who asked not to be named, was sexually assaulted by a drill instructor when she was 18. Debilitating flashbacks lingered for years, interfering with her attempts to take college classes while on active duty. The memories finally prompted her to seek help, and she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

After two years of therapy, her flashbacks subsided. But the secondary effects of the assault, she has found, are nearly as bad. A decade later, if a male professor speaks sharply to her, she struggles not to break down in front of him. "It totally messes you up on so many levels," she says.

Colleges are starting to take note of such experiences, and to provide settings for female veterans who may not want to be around men.

This fall the University of Colorado at Boulder will start a support group solely for female veterans. Anne Miller, a nurse practitioner with the university's health center, is among those leading the effort. While working on a Navajo reservation years ago, she says, she saw how female veterans tended to disappear into the woodwork after returning home.

George W. (Barney) Ballinger, a retired Air Force colonel who oversees veterans' programs at Boulder, says he hasn't noticed any reticence among female vets, who represent about 16 percent of the 700 or so veterans on the campus. But he's eager to do more to help them.

Nationally, few colleges offer dedicated services for female veterans. A report released last week by the American Council on Education showed that only 8 percent of nearly 700 institutions participating in its study had support groups specifically for them.

Still, colleges are experimenting with ways to draw in more female veterans. At the University of Utah, the director of veterans services has an unofficial rule that the permanent staff in his center must include a female. At Portland State University, the women's center is leading outreach. And at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, a female therapist who specializes in working with veterans recently started visiting every other week.

Expectations and Realities

When Kathryn Wirkus founded Women Veterans of Colorado here, in 2010, she envisioned making women's needs more central to the growing advocacy for veterans in the state.

Finding camaraderie with fellow veterans who've gone through the ups and downs of being a female in uniform can be key to a successful transition to civilian life, says Ms. Wirkus, who retired in 2006 as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. "As a sister veteran, I can say, 'I understand. I've been there.'"

Her latest push is to connect female veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan not only with one another but also with higher education. One partnership she is cultivating is with the Women's College of the University of Denver: The goal is to guide female veterans from around the state to the 300-student division of the private university.

Lynn M. Gangone, dean of the Women's College, says reaching out to female veterans aligns with the college's mission of enrolling Coloradans underrepresented in higher education. Here women can talk about their military service without being compared with men,

she says, in an environment of professors and administrators accustomed to students with busy adult lives.

Ms. Gangone is building relationships at military installations, veterans organizations, and community colleges around Colorado to talk up the virtues of the Women's College. But progress has been slow. Five veterans were enrolled at the college last year under the Post-9/11 GI Bill; in all, the university had 267 veterans, about 30 percent of them women.

"I'll be honest," Ms. Gangone says of the enrollment numbers so far at the Women's College. "My expectations were higher."

The numbers may be modest, but Kristen Luevanos, an Army veteran, is among them—and pleased to be. She joined the Army nearly three decades ago, after graduating from high school in Oregon; her mother had told her she needed to find a job. College was never part of the plan.

Last year Ms. Luevanos's husband spotted a newspaper ad for the Women's College. At his encouragement, she attended an open house. She was skeptical. "I don't really like women," says the energetic 47-year-old, who left the service as a sergeant first class. "I was in the Army for 22 years. I'm more happy being around guys."

But the college surprised her: "I literally walked in the building and thought, 'I'm home.'"

Though Ms. Luevanos had built a career at Delta Air Lines and raised a family, seeing her mother and husband earn degrees later in life inspired her to do the same. Before long she was registered for classes and certified to use her Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. She's majoring in law and society.

At the beginning of each semester, when introductions are made, she talks about her time in the service.

"Hey, I'm Kristen. I have three lovely kids, a husband, a dog, I'm an Iraq veteran and I served 22 years in the U.S. Army," she says to her classmates. Her candor about being a veteran is by design.

"I want other people to say, 'I am, too,'" she says. "Then I can find them."

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fortysomethingprof 1 day ago

Like a lot of groups, you can't tell who's a veteran unless they self-identify. Same with ethnicity ... I've had several students I thought were in one group who self-identified with another.

Also ... grammar question (this is not a criticism, but I'm trying to learn something here): Should the title of this article have the comma where it does?

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11186245 1 day ago

This is an highly informative, helpful and nicely done article. I am forwarding it to my daughter, 32 years old and a veteran, now going to Meredith College on the GI Bill. John Lubans

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