

From Boots to Books: Applying Schlossberg's Model to Transitioning American Veterans

Shawn W. Ryan, *California School of Professional Psychology*

Aaron H. Carlstrom, *Kansas State University*

Kenneth F. Hughey, *Kansas State University*

Brandonn S. Harris, *Kansas State University*

This introduction to the strengths, needs, and challenges of veterans as they transition from the military to higher education is presented within the framework of Schlossberg's transition model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Academic advisors must understand the way that veteran transitions to college are both similar to and different from those of the general student population so they can explore relevant topics and help connect student-veterans to appropriate supports and services that facilitate their personal and academic success. Advisors are given questions to employ in soliciting information about the ways they and their institutions can better serve student-veterans.

KEY WORDS: adjustment to college, adult students, military service personnel, nontraditional students, Schlossberg transition model, student-veterans

They [personnel at the local campus office] mainly focused on the financials, in my opinion. I wish there could be something to assist in the transition. I definitely could have used it. – Student-Veteran (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008)

Student-Veterans and Higher Education

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the number of service members in the U.S. military increased significantly. Many of their commitments are ending and therefore hundreds of thousands of veterans (375,000 in 2008) are reentering the civilian world each year (McBain, 2008). Furthermore, 90% of service members entered the military without a bachelor's degree (McBain, 2008), and with the recent passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill), which drastically increased educational benefits to veterans, many of these former active-duty service members will likely look to higher education as their next endeavor (Weeder & Wax, 2009). All branches of the armed services also offer at least

\$4,000 per year for service members to attend college while serving on active duty (Military.com, n.d.), which is in addition to benefits received from the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Because troop levels will likely continue to increase to meet the challenges posed by potential global conflicts, postsecondary institutions should plan for increased numbers of student-veterans on campus (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Although veteran enrollment at 2-year public colleges exceeds enrollment at other types of higher education institutions, all advisors must know how to facilitate the success of student-veterans because they pursue higher education in a variety of settings. For example, during the 2007-2008 academic year, 2-year public colleges enrolled 43% of all student-veterans going to postsecondary institutions, public 4-year schools matriculated 21%, private not-for-profit 4-year institutions educated 14%, and private-for-profit colleges offered services to 13% (Radford & Wun, 2009).

Although many veterans pursue higher education after active service, most do not earn a degree. McBain (2008) cited data provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that reported that even though 71% of veterans use at least a portion of their GI Bill benefits, only 6% of them deplete all of their benefits. These data may reflect the low levels of readiness of most colleges and universities to help student-veterans succeed in higher education. In a recent survey of over 700 institutions, Cook and Kim (2009) found that a) only 22% provided transitional orientation specifically for veterans, b) only 4% offered veteran specific orientation, c) nearly 50% of colleges did not employ an individual trained to assist veterans with transitional issues, d) 57% did not provide training for staff and faculty about veteran transitional assistance, and e) less than 37% of colleges and universities had trained staff to assist veterans with disabilities. These findings show consistency with a unified message voiced by student-veterans asking for better faculty and staff understanding of veterans, who comprise a unique student population with needs and experiences that differ from those of the general student population (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Therefore, colleges and universities must properly prepare to help student-veterans transition into and matriculate through higher education. An essential element of this preparation, advisor understanding of student-veterans, proves critical because advisors will likely have increased contact with the student-veteran population compared to other institutional representatives.

Therefore, I introduce academic advisors to a) the strengths, needs, and challenges associated with student-veterans to explore during advising sessions and b) the potential supports and services to which advisors can help connect student-veterans within the framework of the 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition model (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). I hope this article will help advisors maximize student-veterans' strengths, minimize their risk factors, connect them with resources that facilitate academic success, and help them overcome barriers to achieving their academic goals. In addition, by organizing aspects of the student-veteran movement from the military to higher education within the framework of the Schlossberg et al. (1995) general theory of adult transition, I highlight both the unique features of the student-veteran transition as well as aspects of general life transitions. Advisors aware of the ways that student-veterans' transitions to higher education are both distinct from and similar to that of the general student population are better prepared to facilitate the success of student-veterans.

The Schlossberg Transition Model

Because Schlossberg's model addresses general life transitions, academic advisors can use it as a framework for their work with all students. Schlossberg et al. (1995) explained that a transition is "any event, or non event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27), and four factors influence the quality of transitions: *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*. These four areas are referred to as the "4 Ss," and strengths and weaknesses in each area either facilitate or hinder a successful transition.

Academic advisors can ask the following questions about students' transition to higher education to gain information about seven important factors that influenced the quality of the transition: a) Does the person have a sense of control over the transition? b) Is the transition viewed positively or negatively? c) What triggered the transition? d) Is the timing of the transition considered good or bad? e) Is the transition viewed as temporary or permanent? f) Does the person like his or her new role?

g) Has the person made similar transitions? and h) Is the person experiencing other life stressors in addition to the transition? Schlossberg et al. (1995) highlighted two areas of the self aspect that affect transitions: a) demographic characteristics (e.g., first-generation and nontraditional student status, physical and mental health) and b) psychological resources (e.g., academic skills and motivation). They suggested that support manifests in various forms, such as institutions or communities and involves individuals (friends, family members, and significant others). They described *strategies* as the ability to effectively respond to challenges, which include those faced by academic advisors to help students learn new techniques for success.

The overarching goals of advising from the Schlossberg theory perspective, facilitating students' personal and academic successes, are achieved by helping students a) gain a greater sense of control and hopefulness about making academic transitions (situation); b) develop academic motivation, identity, and skills (self); c) build, identify, maintain, and utilize support networks (support); and (d) develop and employ effective coping skills (strategies). These four areas are dynamic; effecting a change in one S factor (e.g., developing study skills, which is a strategy) can contribute to improvement in another S factor (e.g., develops a greater sense of academic self-confidence, which reflects the self aspect of the theory). The 4 Ss can be useful in academic advising with student-veterans because some of the issues and challenges they experience in higher education are similar to those of the general student population (e.g., the importance of social support and academic readiness for academic success). However, the 4 Ss need to be clarified and modified when advisors work with student-veterans because of significant and meaningful differences between their transition to higher education and that of the general student population.

In this article, I review some of these important differences from the perspective of the Schlossberg et al. (1995) model with the goal of providing clarification so advisors can modify their work with student-veterans. The more accurately academic advisors can assess student-veterans' strengths, needs, and challenges in each of the 4 Ss, the more likely they can individualize their recommendations to promote personal and academic success.

Strengths, Needs, and Challenges

Reason for Transition to Higher Education

Advisors should inquire if student-veterans left the military and entered college because of

personal choice and effective planning, or if an external event, person, or institution led to their discharge from the military (e.g., being medically or dishonorably discharged) such that entering higher education reflects a second choice to military participation. Such a circumstance indicates two situation factors in play: a trigger event and timing of the event (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Student-veterans who negatively perceive the situation surrounding their entry to higher education likely need greater support than those who planned and looked forward to entering higher education; the latter more likely feel a greater sense of control and hopefulness associated with making a successful transition. Advisors must conduct conversations with student-veterans about reasons for being discharged from military service with respect and care.

Role Change and Culture of Higher Education

Student-veterans' role in the military and its culture stand in sharp contrast to their role in higher education and its milieu, and the differences affect issues associated with Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) situation, self, and strategy factors. The new expectations associated with higher education reflect a situation factor that can influence a student-veteran's sense of control and hopefulness. On one hand, some student-veterans enjoy the change to a college culture because they eschew the restrictions (e.g., proper military attire, appearance) and responsibilities (e.g., dire consequences of decisions made and actions taken in combat) of the military. On the other hand, veterans who felt they meshed well with the military environment and were highly respected by their peers may find the role change more difficult. In accordance with this point, Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated,

A given role change can be more or less difficult (and have greater or lesser impact) depending on whether the new role is a loss or a gain, positive or negative, or has explicit norms and expectations for the new incumbent (p. 56).

A veteran's perception of the new role and its congruence with desired life goals will contribute to the level of difficulty experienced during a transition. For example, a student-veteran who perceives the gain of education as a means to an improved life will likely view the transition positively, but the one who feels that college responsibilities are less important than those undertaken in the military will likely judge the transition negatively.

Some of the values and coping skills effective in the military may be valued differently in the higher education culture. For example, the military trains service members to behave as parts of an organization that functions best when individual differences are deemphasized. However, institutions of higher education specifically encourage students to celebrate their individuality and discover the qualities that distinguish them from their peers. When leaving the familiar, structured world of the military, the service person must face redefinition as a civilian (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Acts of discipline, respect for authority and the chain of command, minimized individual expression, and unquestioned deference to individuals of higher rank are just some of the practices held in high regard in the military culture. However, they are often discouraged and, at times, are the sources of protest in higher education.

Student-veterans' experiences from the military to college roles concern issues of self. Women may face more struggles than their male counterparts when they reenter the civilian world. As they comprise 14% of the active duty population (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009), women sometimes experience difficulties adapting to a situation with more women than men, such as higher education. Women serving in the military "feel pressures to act either more feminine, more masculine, or both and some suppress their femininity or engage in more typically male behaviors such as swearing or drinking alcohol" (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40). Advisors should recognize that women veterans may experience the transition to college differently than their male counterparts.

The nontraditional status of student-veterans is another self issue connected with the experience of role change. As nontraditional students (a demographic self factor), student-veterans may need to relearn study skills (a psychological resources self factor) and become reacquainted with the classroom, an environment some students-veterans have not entered for a number of years. Many veterans that enter college for the first time, and those that have resumed after a delay, find themselves unprepared for the academic load (DiRamio et al., 2008). Advisors can help student-veterans slowly (re)adapt to college by suggesting that they initially shoulder a part-time class load, take refresher courses, and connect to study skills resources.

Skills Developed from Transition into the Military

The number of previous, similar transitions is

an important factor connected with Schlossberg strategies and self (i.e., psychological resources) factors. Often people who have endured a similar type of change effectively make a subsequent transition of a comparable nature (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Although not totally congruent, one can see parallels in adjusting to the military and to college. Both require that the person enter a new environment, learn new rules and role expectations, acquire self-discipline, and respond to challenges under pressure.

People in new environments often question their ability to achieve. When student-veterans express concerns to an advisor regarding their ability to succeed in college they might simply need reassurance of their abilities. Reminding student-veterans that they have already successfully made a similar life transition when they joined the military may provide them comfort and help build confidence with the transition to higher education. Advisors can point out that the service member had already conjured up the courage to face the unknown and adapt to life's changes. They can also ask questions such as "When was a time you successfully transitioned into a new phase of life?" to initiate a discussion and stimulate awareness of the student-veteran's capability to make successful transitions.

Higher Education Is a Temporary Transition

Whether a transition is perceived as temporary or permanent influences people's sense of control and hopefulness associated with it. As Schlossberg et al. (1995) stated, "A transition...may be more easily borne if the individual is assured that it is of limited duration" (p. 56). Therefore, a temporary change in lifestyle will be regarded differently than one perceived as permanent.

A student-veteran, and his or her accompanying family, may be more tolerant of changes associated with a college lifestyle (e.g., loss of income and benefits, stressors associated with moving) because the conditions and circumstances have a predictable end date: graduation. Advisors can help students-veterans recognize the temporary nature of the higher education experience.

Working with Diversity

The ability to work effectively with people who are culturally different from oneself is a highly valued student-learning outcome in postsecondary education. It also reflects a strength (in both the self and strategies factors) of many student-veterans. The Institute of Education Sciences at the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed veterans

during the 2007-2008 school year and categorized the percentage of student-veterans in the following racial/ethnic groups: 60% White, 18% Black, 13% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 6% listed other (Radford & Wun, 2009).

Because of the diverse population of individuals serving in the U.S. military, veterans are not simply exposed to diverse individuals, but work side by side on a daily basis, even under life endangering situations, with individuals different from themselves. Therefore, the level of integration with others, including interactions with the international population if deployed, may contribute to a high level of understanding and tolerance of individuals with whom service members are culturally different.

Social and Family Support

The level of support received influences the transition to higher education for nontraditional students, such as student-veterans. For example, Dill and Henley (1998) found that nontraditional-aged college students who received sound support from a parent or partner coped better with stressful academic experiences by enjoying success in different life roles. In addition to family members, other sources of support include friends, fellow veterans, classmates, and faculty members.

However, relationships can also serve as stressors (a situation factor). For many student-veterans, having extended family members in close proximity during college is not possible because they attend college near their former duty installation, which is often geographically distant from their extended family. Although not all veterans will be far from their immediate family, by simply asking student-veterans if they have traveled home recently advisors can make them feel understood.

Although a number of student-veterans may not live near their family of origin and extended family, others will bring a family of their own to college. The Institute of Education Sciences at the National Center for Education Statistics reported that nearly one half of all of student-veterans (48%) are married (Radford & Wun, 2009). Although the transition to college can be difficult for non-traditional students with dependents, spouses can offer necessary support. Therefore, advisors should inquire about the ways that immediate family offers support and creates stress.

In addition to being geographically distant from much of their family, student-veterans also lose much of the military support networks. Student-veterans attending college far from their old mili-

tary installation will lose their comrades in arms with whom they could connect and who understood their experiences and adventures. Some lose the connection with those who helped them survive combat, and nonveteran friends will unlikely provide the same sense of camaraderie as military peers. In addition, loss of the nonmilitary friends as a result of a residential move increases transitional difficulties (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Furthermore, the majority of undergraduate students likely will not understand student-veterans' previous and current experiences and related stressors (e.g., frequent deployments, combat, military culture), so many student-veterans may struggle to feel socially integrated at college. For example, a student-veteran countering repeated difficult questions such as "Have you ever killed anyone?" will soon understand that the college environment departs drastically from that of the military, thus contributing to a feeling of disconnection from other students.

Lingering Call to Duty

The call to active duty is an additional stressor (situation factor) that can influence student-veterans' collegiate experience, as they must be ready to return to the military at any time. Advisors should be aware that veterans who are honorably discharged often have 4 additional years to serve on inactive reserve. While the service person need not return to a military installation to perform duties, they must report their whereabouts to the Department of Defense so that they can be called back to active duty if necessary. Advisors need to know the process and policy of a military withdrawal and reinstatement (e.g., as it relates to tuition refunds) to properly advise the student-veteran on resources available when activated or to quell existing concerns.

Physical Disabilities

Because veterans deploy to hostile regions, the likelihood of experiencing combat and wounds increases. As of February 2010, over 16,000 service members serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom did not return to duty within 72 hours after being injured (U.S. Department of Defense, 2010). In fact, many student-veterans arrive on campus with physical disabilities (a self factor) obtained through war. As advocates, advisors must know the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities. Kennedy and Ishler (2008) recommended that advisors understand "what constitutes reasonable accom-

modations and be prepared to help these students when accommodation issues arise, both in and out of the classroom" (p. 130). Advisors must know the on-campus resources available to assist students.

Mental Health Issues and Treatments

Not all wounds will be clearly visible to advisors. An increasing number of veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan enter classrooms with invisible injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health problems (self factors). The National Institutes of Health (2009) describes PTSD as feeling stressed and afraid after living through a traumatic event. It can cause flashbacks of the event, nightmares, loneliness, sadness, and anger outbursts. Other mental health issues include substance abuse, mood problems, and aggression.

Furthermore, as the nature of warfare has changed, so too have the experiences women face while serving. Although the armed forces prohibit women from direct ground combat, unlike wars of the past, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan blurred the frontlines of battle, and women have faced repeated encounters in combat operations (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Because more than one in four veterans is a woman, advisors need to appreciate their unique combat experiences (Radford & Wun, 2009) and the consequences; for example, female veterans are more likely to suffer from PTSD than their male colleagues (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Although the exact number of veterans suffering from PTSD or other mental health concerns may be unknown, as many as 18% of all veterans who participated in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom may have experienced or are experiencing psychological problems such as PTSD (Burnam, Meredith, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2009). In addition, a 2007 survey administered to nearly 300 Marines after the return from deployment found that 27% reported significant depression, 24% reported alcohol abuse, and 43% reported problems with anger and aggression (U.S. Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, 2007). Two important messages in these findings serve academic advisors: a) Mental health issues pose serious concerns for a significant number of veterans, so advisors must know the signs of difficulties and the procedures for making appropriate referrals, and b) the majority of veterans do not report mental health problems. Also, advisors should not assume that the majority of student-veterans experience mental health

problems or experienced combat.

Many student-veterans will not pursue counseling and other support services even though over 57% of higher education institutions, regardless of the percentage of veterans enrolled, provide services to address PTSD (Cook & Kim, 2009) and more than one half of the colleges surveyed provide services to assist veterans with special needs. Burnam et al. (2009) reported the results of a RAND study that illustrated veterans' reluctance to seek mental health treatment because of the following concerns: a) perceived weakness, b) negative career repercussions (especially if the student-veteran is considering rejoining the military or is currently serving in the Reserves or National Guard), c) side effects of prescribed medication, and (d) skepticism regarding the effectiveness of treatment. Therefore, not only must academic advisors effectively and sensitively connect student-veterans to available resources, they must be prepared to talk with them about their possible concerns for seeking treatment.

Services and Supports

Veterans' Groups and Student-Veteran Mentors

Student-veteran groups and mentors can benefit student-veterans both through the social support (support factor) and the opportunities to learn the effective coping skills (strategies factor) they provide. In recent interviews of veterans at one college campus, a large number indicated a desire to connect with other veterans on their respective campus as an effective coping strategy (DiRamio et al., 2008). "In some cases, collective coping, that is, helping people share in a problem that they cannot undo individually is essential" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 72). By providing a supportive environment (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009), a student-veteran group could be an ideal organization to facilitate the process of helping student-veterans integrate to the institution. However, only 32% of institutions with services for veterans and military personnel offer clubs or other organizations for these students (Cook & Kim, 2009). Advisors should check on the availability of campus and local community veteran organizations as well as national organizations that support student-veterans, such as Vets 4 Vets (www.vets4vets.us) and Student Veterans of America (www.studentveterans.org).

For student-veterans who want to connect with others who have undergone a similar transition, participation in a student-veteran organization could be ideal for connecting with a mentor. A

mentor, who is also a student-veteran and has experienced the transition from military to higher education, could assist others with the challenges of detaching oneself from the military, adapting to the college environment, and connecting with available resources (DiRamio et al., 2008), and advisors should utilize any mentoring resources available on behalf of their students. However, many student-veterans lack the opportunity to meet a mentor, and for them, the advising relationship may be of particular importance. Advisors trained to work with the veteran population and who understand and appreciate their special needs (e.g., procedure to withdrawal, transfer credit from military transcripts, familiarity with the GI Bill and its stipulations, appropriate referrals to helpful agencies) may prove vital to student-veteran success (DiRamio et al., 2008).

While advocating that military members help each other, advisors need to know that not all veterans desire to remain associated with the military lifestyle. Some student-veterans lack interest in being linked with a student-veteran organization or seeking out veterans during their transition to higher education. Some student-veterans prefer to be integrated into mainstream campus life as much as possible and not be identified as someone who has served (Cook & Kim, 2009). Gender differences may characterize this preference, as women veterans tend to avoid defining themselves as veterans after completing their service (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Therefore, although a student-veteran organization and mentor can be beneficial, they will not meet the needs of all student-veterans.

Student-Veteran Orientation Sessions and Panels

Student-veteran orientation sessions and panels also facilitate the development of effective coping skills (strategies factor) and a welcoming campus environment (support factor). Orientation sessions specific for student-veterans offer information about available resources and help student-veterans connect with each other and feel included in their new community. Some institutions, such as South Carolina State University, provide information about financial resources and education benefits, and include groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Disabled Veterans of America at its veteran orientation (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009).

Through veteran discussion panels, student-veteran groups help faculty and staff meet the needs of student-veterans. To increase public awareness about the student-veteran population on campus,

some institutions offer panels where student-veterans discuss their experiences and answer questions (Lokken et al., 2009). This strategy can help to educate faculty, staff, and the general student population about student-veterans and thus helps to create an environment that is more understanding of and comfortable for student-veterans.

Advisor Review of Campus Resources

The availability of campus resources that assist student-veterans can generate a sense of control and hopefulness for achieving their personal and academic goals (situation factor), developing the motivation and academic skills necessary to succeed (self factor), navigating their path through higher education (strategies factor), and feeling connected to the institution (support factor). The following questions will help academic advisors gain awareness of the resources available to veterans on their individual campus and also discover if additional resources are necessary.

Does the institution offer

- priority registration for veterans?
- a simplified application process for readmission?
- flexible enrollment deadlines?
- a course schedule adapted for transitioning active-duty service members?
- academic counseling services targeted to veterans?
- a web page for returning/newly admitted veterans?
- a veterans' office?
- Veterans Upward Bound, which allows veterans to take college preparation courses without using the GI Bill as long as both parents do not have a 4-year degree and are living at or below the poverty level?
- scholarship opportunities available to veterans?
- a committee comprised of veterans charged to voice concerns for the population?

In addition to helping student-veterans during advising sessions and helping connect them to appropriate resources, these questions can help advisors advocate for, and help student-veterans learn to advocate for, needed services lacking at their institution.

In light of demands for services, institutions may make few or many changes to meet the needs of student-veterans. "A college or university may find that very little additional support is required beyond the services already in place, but they may

also find that faculty or staff need to develop some additional procedures to be of help to students" (McBain, 2008, p. 7). Effectively instituted strategies that help veterans make the transition to higher education are no less than veterans need, expect, and deserve.

Advising Relationship

Through the advising relationship, student-veterans can receive guidance (strategies factor) and be heard (support factor). Advisors should not overlook the power of attentive listening because simply paying attention to a veteran's story can go a long way to making her or him feel a sense of belonging. Recognition does not always come in the form of ovations in front of a crowded room. Many veterans will enjoy the appreciation received when an advisor takes the time to hear their personal stories. This interaction can be a great coping mechanism for veterans, and advisors may find that it helps them put life into perspective.

Although not necessarily experts on military affairs, advisors who interact with student-veterans on a frequent basis should have a solid foundation of knowledge regarding the specific aspects of their transition from the military to college. An advisor who has served, is in the National Guard or Reserve, or has a deep knowledge of military culture and can speak the language may prove a valuable asset to the team. Commonalities and shared experiences from an advisor-veteran could contribute to the growth process of the student and a healthy advisor-student relationship, but prior military service is not a requirement for good advising, and in fact, those who want to integrate more fully into their new culture may prefer to be paired with a nonveteran advisor. Therefore, asking student-veterans their preference during the application process could be beneficial.

Summary

Military veterans of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to enter higher education in ever increasing numbers. Unfortunately, colleges and universities across the country often find themselves lacking the understanding and services necessary to support their unique needs and experiences. By learning the strengths, needs, and challenges of student-veterans as they transition from the military and matriculate through higher education, advisors armed with information from the Schlossberg et al. (1995) framework will facilitate greater advocacy for student-veterans. When academic advisors, faculty members, and

staff know the issues of and resources for veterans, then colleges and universities can facilitate student-veterans' achievement of personal and academic aspirations. Only through a foundation of understanding can higher education adequately assist this increasing student population.

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Authors' Notes

Shawn Ryan is currently an admissions counselor for the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University in Sacramento, CA. He holds a Master of College Student Development degree from Kansas State University and is an Air Force veteran who has served in advising and teaching roles as a civilian in the United States and abroad. He can be reached by E-mail sryan@alliant.edu.

Aaron H. Carlstrom, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. He serves on the faculty for the graduate programs in academic advising offered by Kansas State University. Dr. Carlstrom earned his PhD in counseling psychology from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. His research interests focus on the career development of students in middle school through college. He has been a member of NACADA since 2009.

Kenneth F. Hughey, PhD, is professor and Chair of the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs at Kansas State University

in Manhattan, Kansas. He serves as the program director for the graduate programs in academic advising offered by Kansas State University. He has been an active member in NACADA since 2004. He was co-editor of The Handbook of Career Advising.

Brandonn S. Harris, PhD, is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. He teaches courses in the areas of intercollegiate athletics, the college-student athlete, research methods, and statistics, while also supervising internships in intercollegiate athletics. As a researcher, he conducts

and publishes work in the areas of youth sport, coach and athlete burnout, and professional practice issues in sport psychology. He is a Certified Consultant with the Association for Applied Sport Psychology and is also listed on the United States Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry. Dr. Harris is also a National Certified Counselor. Dr. Harris obtained his bachelor's degree in exercise science with a sport psychology specialization from Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. He holds master's degrees in sport and exercise psychology and community counseling from West Virginia University. His PhD in sport and exercise psychology was also completed at West Virginia University.