

# Mechanisms of Academic Stress Generation and Coping Strategies for Veterans Who Are College Students

Jinfeng Li

School of Computing, Neusoft Institute Guangdong, Foshan Guangdong China 528225

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.917PSY0073>

Received: 12 November 2025; Accepted: 20 November 2025; Published: 06 December 2025

## Summary

Under the dual pressures of the expansion of higher education and intensifying employment competition, college students have become a high-stress group, especially the special group of veteran college students. This study uses qualitative research methods to interview and analyze 16 veteran college students. The study found that the formation of academic competition among veteran college students is influenced by various external factors and also reflects a mix of rational and irrational individual decisions, while poor management of time, human, and cultural capital exacerbates academic stress. It is recommended that the government establish special support policies for veteran college students, such as academic subsidy funds and priority employment recommendation programs; universities should optimize their management models, establish psychological counseling mechanisms and academic mentoring systems, and provide flexible course selection and personalized training programs; at the same time, compulsory courses on career planning should be offered, and admission adaptability assessments should be conducted to help veteran college students plan their academic and career development paths scientifically.

**Keywords:** Veteran university students; academic pressure; thematic analysis; generative mechanism

## Funded Projects:

2024 Guangdong Province University Student Financial Aid Special Research Project 'Research on Innovative Models for Post-Management and Services of Awarded Students Empowered by New Productive Forces' (2024DRXJ-XG01); 2025 Guangdong Higher Education Society Project 'Research on Precision Employment Guidance Model for University Counselors Driven by Intelligent Recommendation Algorithms' (25GYB097)

## Research Background

Building a strong people's army and consolidating national defense are important supports for achieving the strategic goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. College students who are military veterans have the dual experience of military service and campus education, making them a valuable resource for national defense education in universities and an important force in building a modern socialist country. Due to the particularity of their experiences, veteran college students have received high attention from the state and society. When they return to campus from the military, they face a series of adaptation problems due to changes in the educational environment, cultural context, and social roles. <sup>[1]</sup>These are particularly reflected in difficulties adapting to the teaching methods and learning environment of universities, which in turn can lead to psychological difficulties, such as reduced self-efficacy and academic anxiety<sup>[2]</sup>. Relevant studies indicate that excessive academic pressure can negatively affect individual development in college students, continuously depleting their subjective well-being and leading to poor academic performance, dropout, or even serious mental health issues. Existing research mostly focuses on the surface-level structural aspects of academic adaptation difficulties for veteran students, emphasizing the impact of the social environment,

educational regulations, and competitive mechanisms on their academic adaptation<sup>[3,4]</sup>. However, there is less focus on the deeper generative dimension of academic pressure, and little attention is given to the underlying mechanisms behind the phenomenon<sup>[5,6]</sup>. This neglects the agency that students demonstrate while coping with pressure and the dynamic interaction between students and social structures. Moreover, there is a serious lack of analysis of students' internal psychological logic and their process of meaning-making. This may result in research findings being confined to explanations at the level of observable phenomena, making it difficult to propose targeted strategies and solutions at the level of problem mechanisms.

This study will approach from the perspective of veteran university students and use qualitative research methods to analyze the deep-rooted causes of learning stress within this group. It aims to explore the mechanisms behind the academic pressure experienced by veteran students, providing an empirical basis and reference recommendations for alleviating their academic difficulties. The study seeks to contribute to the improvement of academic support systems for veteran university students, while also providing theoretical support for optimizing national defense education in universities, and promoting the coordinated development of higher education and national defense.

## Research Design

### Theoretical Basis

This study is based on the theoretical framework of the "Rational Choice Theory" and integrates the perspective of "bounded rationality" to explore the generation mechanism of academic stress among veteran college students. The theory posits that an individual's social behavior is the result of choices made as a "rational person" after weighing the pros and cons of events and engaging in rational deliberation. Therefore, an individual's social actions are based on both macro-structural and micro-individual factors, which can reasonably explain the meaning of individual actions within a macro context and how individual actions constitute macro social phenomena<sup>[7]198</sup>. With the development of the theory, some scholars argue that environmental uncertainty, incomplete information, and cognitive limitations affect individual choices, and thus individuals do not possess "complete rationality"<sup>[8]</sup>. On this basis, the concept of "bounded rationality" was proposed, suggesting that individual behavior is "consciously rational, but this rationality is limited"<sup>[9]122</sup>, meaning that rationality is the mode of action adopted to achieve specific goals under certain conditions and constraints. Individual behavior is governed by rationality but also constrained by personal limitations<sup>[10]179</sup>. Bounded rationality refers to rationality under numerous subjective and objective restrictions, interferences, and constraints, meaning that human rationality is limited by external environment, individual cognition, and non-cognitive psychological factors<sup>[11]</sup>.

### Research Subjects

This study used purposive sampling, selecting 16 first-year students in the junior-to-undergraduate program as research subjects, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. This study was conducted with the informed consent of the participants and with the support of the college. The selection of the sample was based on two reasons: first, first-year students have just returned from military service to campus and are in the transitional phase of readapting to campus life, making them able to clearly compare the differences between military and campus experiences. Second, students in the junior-to-undergraduate program have already completed their junior college studies. Compared with first-year students who entered university through the regular college entrance examination, they have a deeper understanding and experience regarding academic competition, resource allocation, and career choices, and they also engage in multi-level considerations. To avoid homogeneity and invalid samples that might arise from the "snowball sampling method," differences in respondents' enlistment locations, military branches, political status, junior colleges, and ages were considered

when selecting interviewees. Basic information about the respondents is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** List of Interviewees

Serial Number	Name	Age	Political	Status	Place of military service	Discharge Date
1	HZR01	23	the masses	Navy	Guangdong	2023
2	LYP02	22	the masses	Navy	Fujian	2023
3	ZJQ03	25	the masses	Army	Fujian	2021
4	IOP04	25	League member	Air Force	Jiangxi	2023
5	LY05	21	League member	Army	Yunnan	2021
6	ZYZ06	22	League member	Army	Guangdong	2023
7	LYY07	21	the masses	Army	Sichuan	2022
8	CXZ08	23	League member	Garrison Army in Hong Kong	Guangdong	2022
9	YZF09	21	the masses	Navy	Guizhou	2021
10	FFY10	26	League member	Army	Shanxi	2023
11	CYH11	24	League member	Army	Shandong	2023
12	SDF12	20	the masses	Navy	Shanxi	2019
13	WER13	22	the masses	Air Force	Hebei	2023
14	SDF14	24	the masses	Army	Hubei	2021
15	QSE15	22	the masses	Army	Jiangxi	2023
16	PFD16	21	the masses	Navy	Guizhou	2022

## Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis refers to a method of transcribing, summarizing, and analyzing collected interview data to extract themes that help explain the research questions. It includes six steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report <sup>[12]56</sup>. This method allows an in-depth examination of participants' thinking patterns, emotional expressions, and specific actions <sup>[13]</sup>. In this study, the interview data were coded step by step to extract key themes. A total of 157 original statements reflecting the logic of academic stress formation and their corresponding initial concepts were selected.

Overlapping parts of the initial concepts were extracted, merged, and categorized, eventually resulting in 14 codes. These were further refined and summarized into 8 sub-themes and 3 main themes, as detailed in Table 2. Finally, the researchers conducted a new round of coding on two reserved interview transcripts and found no new codes or themes. The logical relationships between themes were consistent with the original analysis, indicating that the thematic analysis results had passed the saturation check.

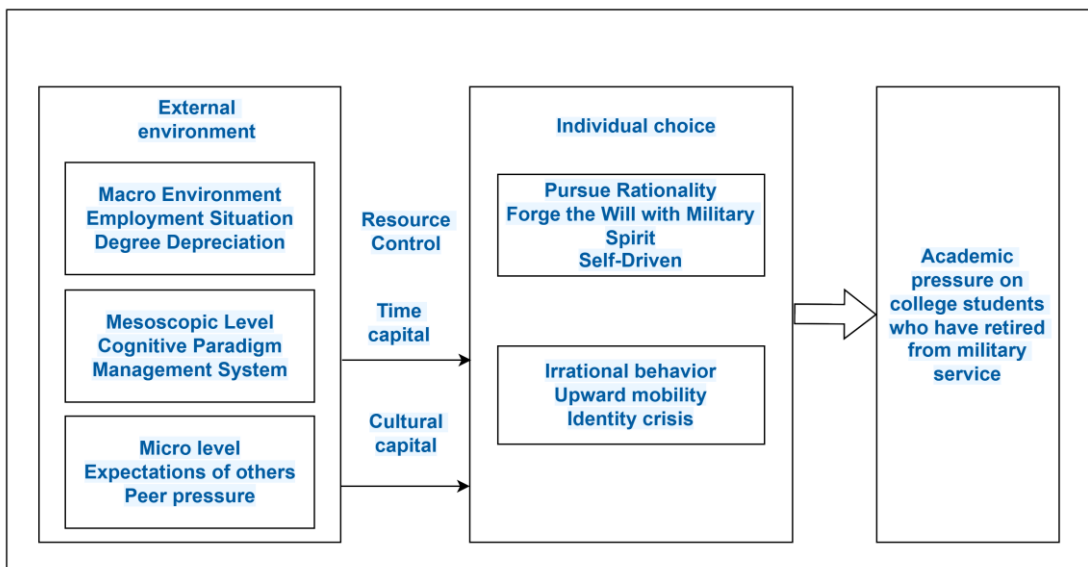
**Table 2** Theme Analysis Results

data extract	code	sub-theme
<p>Now that I've returned from military service, I chose to continue my studies because the job market is really tough right now, and I need to improve my educational qualifications. (HZR01)</p> <p>Although I was studying back then to improve my education, I can also feel that the value of academic credentials has dropped significantly. (LYP02)</p>	<p>The job market is challenging</p> <p>Devaluation of academic qualifications</p>	Macro social environment
<p>In the military, everything is arranged for you, I just need to obey. But back at school, without any instructions, I don't even know what to do. (IOP04) After coming back, I realized that some things that were appropriate in the military become problematic when applied at school. (LYY07)</p>	<p>Cognitive paradigm shift</p> <p>Differences in management systems</p>	Moderate campus environment
<p>Sometimes it feels like others think that just because you're a soldier, you should behave in a certain way. (WER13)</p> <p>The roommates in the dorm are all pretty competitive. Sometimes I want to go out and have fun, but when I see others studying, I don't feel like going out anymore. (FFY10)</p>	<p>Others' expectations</p> <p>Peer competition</p>	Microsocial Environment
<p>People who are the same age as me are already married and have kids, making me feel behind in every aspect. (SDF12) Because I spent a few years in the army, now I need to make the most of my time for fun and learning. (SDF14)</p>	<p>Time anxiety</p> <p>Chasing pressure</p>	Time capital
<p>I served in the military for a few years, and I've forgotten almost everything I learned before. (PFD16) During my time in the army, we had to turn in our phones, so the information we had access to was limited, mostly related to the military camp. (LYP02)</p>	<p>Knowledge gap</p> <p>Information cocoon</p>	Cultural capital
<p>They all say that leaving the military doesn't fade one's spirit, and I am still very influenced by the military mentality. (SDF14) In the military, it's all about 'doing,' and it's the same after coming back; anyway, it's all about your own effort. (FFY10)</p>	<p>The military spirit shapes the will</p> <p>Self-motivated</p>	Rational pursuit
<p>First, switch to a more popular major so it's easier to find a job later; this can be considered a preferential policy for veterans. (ZYZ06)</p> <p>Sometimes, you also end up questioning life, because there are some things you really don't know how to handle. (IOP04)</p>	<p>Upward mobility</p> <p>Identity crisis</p>	Irrational behavior

## The Mechanism Behind the Academic Competition Among Veterans Who Are College Students

Under the dual pressures of the continuous expansion of higher education and the intensifying competition in the labor market, college students have become a high-stress group. Faced with fierce employment competition and society's pursuit of outstanding academic achievements, college students are forced into a dilemma of 'involution,' with their academic pressure showing a significant upward trend<sup>[14]</sup>. The formation of academic pressure among veteran college students is a continuous pattern resulting from the interaction of multiple factors such as the external environment, resource control, and individual choices. It includes both proactive and passive, rational and irrational behaviors, ultimately forming a mechanism in which external structural discipline and individual choices are interwoven (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** The Generation Mechanism of Academic Involution Among Veterans Who Are College Graduates



**The external environment generates academic pressure: the additive effect of macro-level anxiety, meso-level discomfort, and micro-level comparisons**

**The severe employment situation and the devaluation of academic qualifications bring both survival and psychological anxiety.**

Looking at the world, it is a common phenomenon globally that young people face widespread employment difficulties due to a lack of work experience, and the 'credential inflation' brought about by the expansion of higher education further exacerbates the employment challenges for college graduates<sup>[15]</sup>. Currently, with the global economic growth slowing down, competition in the job market has become increasingly intense. According to reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), global youth unemployment rates continue to rise, particularly in emerging economies, where youth employment issues are especially prominent. This uncertainty in the macroeconomic environment has a profound impact on the employment prospects of university students. For veteran college students, they not only face the general employment pressure but also have to cope with the potential lack of workplace experience caused by their military service. The severity of this employment situation makes them anxious when planning for the future, worried that they are at a disadvantage in the fierce job competition and may struggle to find their ideal positions, which in turn affects their career development and quality of life. This survival anxiety stems not only from the uncertainty of the job market but is also closely related to changes in society's demand for highly educated talent.



Now that I've returned from military service, I've chosen to continue my studies because I think the current job market is very bad and I need to improve my education. (HZR01)

Before deciding to enlist, I knew that after completing military service, I would have advantages in either education or employment, so I decided to enlist. (CXZ08)

At the same time, the phenomenon of degree devaluation has further intensified the psychological anxiety of veterans who are university graduates. Higher education can enhance an individual's competitiveness in the labor market, thereby increasing their economic returns<sup>[16]</sup>. Therefore, education, as an investment, can ultimately form a positive cycle of 'investment—return—more investment—greater return.' However, with the widespread availability of higher education, the scarcity of a university degree in the job market has gradually decreased, and its weight as a competitive advantage has correspondingly weakened. In the current job market, the decline in the relative value of a degree means that veteran university graduates need to invest more time and effort in improving their overall competitiveness to make up for the lack of an educational advantage. This devaluation not only affects their expected returns on educational investment but may also lead to feelings of loss and helplessness, further intensifying their psychological burden.

Although I was studying back then with the goal of improving my academic qualifications, I can also feel how much academic degrees have depreciated now. (LYP02)

### **Adaptive Challenges Arising from Cognitive Paradigm Shifts and Differences in Management Systems**

After veterans who are college graduates return to higher education, the deep-seated contradictions in their cognitive paradigm shift are concentrated in the process of reconstructing their identity from soldier to ordinary student. The military mindset emphasizes absolute obedience and goal orientation. This conflicts cognitively with the university learning environment that promotes critical thinking and independent exploration. As soldiers, they are accustomed to receiving clear orders and executing them efficiently. As ordinary students, they must learn to actively question authority in academic discussions and independently construct knowledge frameworks in their research. The shift in cognitive paradigms is not only an adjustment in thinking patterns but also touches on the reorientation of value systems. Veterans easily gain recognition from teachers due to their strong discipline and outstanding execution skills; however, on the other hand, their 'command-style communication' and 'overly disciplined' behavioral traits are often misunderstood by regular students as being 'assertive' or 'showing off,' leading them to face implicit exclusion in dormitory relationships and club activities. Negative feedback from their surroundings can easily trigger this group to develop cognitive evaluations that their 'military traits are being negated.'

In the military, everyone is a tough guy, and you just speak your mind. But in the dormitory, you need to be a bit more careful. (CXZ08)

In the military, everything is arranged by someone else, and I just need to obey. But back at school, without instructions, I don't even know what to do. (IOP04)

Institutions not only include formal procedures, rules, and norms, but also provide moral templates and cognitive guidelines for individual actions<sup>[17]</sup>. The differences in management systems between universities and the military further exacerbate this campus adaptation dilemma. The military's vertical management system conflicts with the universities' flat governance model. Veterans face the following obstacles in adapting to institutional norms: first, the military's strict schedule requirements are completely different from the flexible personal time planning in universities, leading to cognitive dissonance in time management. This mainly manifests as aimless 'weekend anxiety' due to the lack of directed tasks; second, differences in the timeliness of reward and punishment mechanisms result in a sense of lack of value for veteran students. The

military emphasizes a results-oriented, immediate feedback approach and focuses on collective performance, whereas universities emphasize periodic development and adopt a delayed reward model aimed at individual long-term growth.

After coming back, I realized that some things that were okay to do in the military became problematic in school. (LYY07)

Sometimes my roommates are a bit sensitive, and they have also told me that I speak a bit too directly. In the military, we had a regular schedule, but after coming back, I found that some people play games until two or three in the morning, which feels like a waste of time. (HZR01)

### **Self-exhaustion arising from others' expectations and peer competition**

In the higher education environment, veteran college students face multiple expectations from family and society, which are a significant source of their psychological stress. Family expectations often focus on academics, hoping that they will cherish learning opportunities, work twice as hard to make up for the coursework they missed while serving, and complete their studies with excellent grades to enter the workforce. Social expectations, on the other hand, hope that they will continue to embody the spirit of a soldier, serve as role models both on campus and in society, and step up when society needs them. When veteran college students are unable to meet these external expectations due to their limitations, self-conflict may arise. Continuous self-conflict can not only lead to emotional exhaustion and academic burnout but may also weaken their sense of identity as both soldiers and college students, ultimately causing deep self-denial.

Sometimes it feels like people think that because you're a soldier, you should know how to handle everything. But actually, there are many things we don't know how to do. Like the last time there was a fire at the back of the school, some people asked why the veteran students weren't on the front line. We haven't learned how to fight fires either.

Within universities, peer competition is pervasive. College students engage in intense competition in academics, research, and club activities, and this phenomenon of 'involution' forces everyone to invest more time and effort to remain competitive. Veteran students not only have to adapt to a new learning environment but also balance their academic performance to ensure smooth graduation. Facing competition from their peers, they often need to dedicate multiple times the normal amount of effort to their studies. During periodic academic evaluations, veteran students are prone to attributing lagging grades to their own lack of ability, engaging in excessive self-monitoring and self-pushing, which can trigger anxiety, depression, and self-limiting behaviors.

The roommates in the dorm are all really hardworking. Sometimes when I want to go out and have fun, I see others studying and don't feel like having fun anymore; it makes me feel really guilty. (FFY10)

### **Resource Allocation Accelerates Academic Pressure: The Sunk Cost of Time and the Capital Dilemma of Cultural Symbols**

Resources are the basis for actors to make choices. According to rational choice theory, actors tend to control resources that can bring the greatest benefits in order to maximize their expected personal utility<sup>[18]213</sup>. When veteran college students face multiple external constraints and imbalanced resource distribution, they make choices based on the logic of rational choice. Guided by the goal of maximizing benefits and leveraging the time and cultural capital they can control, they carry out targeted resource investments.

## **The Anxiety of Misaligned Time Capital and the Pressure to Keep Up**

After returning to college, veteran students experience a 'temporal misalignment anxiety.' This 'misalignment anxiety' refers to the gaps between veteran students and regular college students in terms of time management habits and stages of academic engagement, resulting in discrepancies between expected outcomes and actual situations regarding the value and efficiency of time use. For veteran students, the time invested during military service is seen as a 'sunk cost.' This sunk cost not only causes them to fall behind their peers academically but also leads to a 'late start' in family life and career development.

People who are the same age as me have already married and had kids, and I feel like I'm falling behind in every aspect. (SDF12)

Now I'm several years older than my classmates. I was thinking about pursuing a master's degree, but then I feel like I'm too old, and I wouldn't even know how old I'd be by the time I finish. (ZJQ03)

Influenced by the proactive mindset of the military, veteran college students, upon initially realizing their backward situation, strive to catch up in various aspects. In terms of academic performance, they use their spare time, even sacrificing rest and leisure, to make up for missed courses. In extracurricular activities, they actively participate in various clubs, research projects, and more. Both in-class and out-of-class activities require time investment and increase the difficulty of time management, further intensifying their academic burden. In terms of social interaction, having long been in a military environment, they need to relearn social skills for normal civilian life and readjust to integrate into the social circles of college. Due to limited time and energy, this multifaceted effort to catch up often transforms into an overwhelming pressure to keep up.

Because I spent a few years in the military, now I need to make the most of my time to have fun and study (SDF14).

A lot of times on weekends, we have plans—either to study or to go out and explore nearby places to broaden our horizons. I really don't want to stay in the dorm playing games (QSE15).

## **Knowledge Gaps in Cultural Symbols and Information Echo Chambers**

Cultural symbols are an important medium for the transmission of knowledge and information, and individuals understand and construct knowledge systems through them. University students who have served in the military experience a disruption in their original knowledge systems, as they are removed from an academic learning environment during their service. This knowledge gap is not only reflected in the forgetting of professional knowledge but also in a sense of unfamiliarity with academic cultural symbols. During their time in the military, their main focus is on military training and discipline, leaving them with few opportunities to engage with professional knowledge. Upon returning to campus, they find that they have significantly forgotten what they once learned, struggle to keep up with the pace of classroom instruction, and have difficulty understanding new knowledge concepts and cultural symbols.

I served in the military for a few years, and I've almost forgotten everything I learned before. After coming back, I feel like I don't know how to study anymore (PFD16).

At the same time, the filter bubble effect further exacerbates their academic difficulties. A filter bubble refers to the state in which individuals gradually become trapped in information that only aligns with their own views and interests<sup>[19]</sup>, creating a closed loop of information and leading to a loss of diversity and comprehensiveness in the information they receive. During their time in the military, veteran college students mainly encountered information related to the military, paying less attention to professional or academic fields. After returning to



campus, they find it difficult to quickly integrate into the academic environment, facing obstacles in accessing and utilizing academic resources. This filter bubble effect not only limits their acquisition of new knowledge but may also result in feelings of isolation in knowledge exchange and research.

When I was in the military, we had to hand in our phones, so the information we could access was limited, mostly related to the military. Now that I'm back on campus, I need to relearn how to find knowledge related to my subjects. (LYP02)

### **Individual Choice Shapes Academic Pressure: The Dual Game of Rational and Irrational Behavior Tension**

At the level of individual actors, the mechanism by which academic pressure arises for retired university students is also heavily influenced by their own choices. This process involves both the logical thinking developed in the military and the impact of irrational perceptions from external groups.

#### **Rational Pursuit: The Logic of Individual Behavior Driven by Military Spirit and Self-Motivation**

The excellent traditions and ethos of the military shape the good moral character of college students who have served, making them courageous in taking responsibility, self-reliant, and strong. Deep down, they develop a rational approach to action centered on the military spirit, where they tend to internally attribute causes when dealing with events first. After returning to campus, they maintain the lifestyle habits and values of the military. When facing difficulties and problems in life, they are more likely to leverage their own strengths to find suitable solutions rather than seeking help or relying on others. In times of campus crises, they will also actively step forward. After dealing with crisis events, they consciously engage in military-style self-reflection and education, analyzing practices and summarizing experiences.

They say that leaving the military doesn't fade the spirit, and I am still very much influenced by the military mindset. The beliefs I had back then are still in my heart, supporting me to accomplish many things. (SDF14)

Some of the skills the military trained us in or the ways of thinking it instilled in us are still useful in many areas today. Especially the idea of solving problems on your own first. In the military, it was all about 'doing,' and it's the same after leaving—you just have to work hard yourself. (FFY10)

#### **Irrational Behavior: The Psychological Dilemma of Upward Mobility and Identity Crisis**

Social mobility theory posits that social mobility includes both horizontal and vertical movement, with upward vertical mobility representing an individual's rise in social class status<sup>[20]</sup>. Occupational status, in turn, determines the intensity of an individual's or group's drive within social mobility. Professional development is a process of accumulating specialized human capital, and an individual's autonomy in the labor market is influenced by the market value of their profession<sup>[21]</sup>. Veterans view the 'right to change professions' granted by demobilization policies as an opportunity for a career turning point, and guided by labor market demand, they choose a new in-demand profession. When they begin studying a new field, they find themselves lacking a foundational knowledge base, needing to quickly adjust to a learning state while confronting the high level of abstraction in new courses. Compared with classmates who have a solid professional foundation, the gap in learning efficiency causes them to experience negative emotions such as anxiety and depression, generating a sense of effortfulness in learning. This sense of effortfulness in learning leads to doubts about their own decisions, lowers self-efficacy, and makes them feel particularly confused when facing future career planning.

I'm thinking of switching to a more popular major so it will be easier to find a job later; it can also be considered a preferential policy for veterans. (ZYZ06)

Self-identity refers to an individual's subjective experience and perception of their own internal abilities, understanding of the world, and state of life development<sup>[22]</sup>. When individuals feel pressure regarding their self-positioning, social existence, and sense of identity, self-identity becomes significantly influenced and governed by society, which can lead to an identity crisis<sup>[23]</sup>. The identity crises faced by university students who have retired from military service can be categorized into three types: obstacles in career planning, academic difficulties, and a sense of group belonging. Some retired students, forced to leave the military due to failing assessments or injuries, have their original 'soldier' identity taken away. They face the need to replan their future and begin to question whether their initial choices were correct, attributing their failures to personal inadequacies and developing cognitive biases such as 'I am not good enough' or 'I am not suited for this path.' At the same time, some students aim to transfer to popular majors as a strategy for 'upward mobility,' hoping that by choosing a new major, they can achieve higher returns in their future careers. However, in actual learning, due to weak knowledge foundations or improper study methods, they encounter problems such as failing courses. These academic setbacks weaken their self-perception of 'I can do it,' leading to self-labeling like 'I am not suited for studying' or 'I am a poor student.' Additionally, after returning to university, retired students hope to continue experiencing the honor and social recognition associated with their military identity. In reality, the lack of a supportive pro-military atmosphere and protection mechanisms on campus makes them feel that their value is overlooked, finding it difficult to integrate into new groups and experiencing a sense of alienation such as 'I do not belong here' or 'I have been marginalized.' When these three dimensions of identity crises intersect, retired university students may exhibit various types of irrational behavior.

Sometimes I also doubt life because there are things I really don't know how to handle. (IOP04)

After coming out, I feel that the support for the military here isn't as strong as it is in the north, and I don't deliberately talk about this experience with others, for fear of being accused of exploiting the image of soldiers. (LYY07)

### **Strategies for Relieving Academic Stress Among Veterans Who Are College Students**

#### **Society should create a positive environment of expectations and establish a diverse set of value orientations**

The widespread promotion of the image of soldiers in society can transform into a form of 'excessive role expectation' for veterans who are university students. This unintentionally amplifies the social responsibilities borne by individuals, triggering self-imposed pressure and strict demands on academic achievement among these veteran students. Therefore, it is necessary to create a positive expectation environment that guides veteran students to rationally deal with social expectations and correctly explore their own development paths. First, cultivate a 'de-glorified' public opinion atmosphere: the media, universities, and military support organizations should downplay publicity to reduce society's excessive role expectations for veteran students. Second, guide the development of veteran students through diverse value orientations. Establish 'Role Adjustment Workshops' on campus, using peer narratives, career counseling, and psychological group activities to help veteran students transform singular social expectations into diverse and flexible goals. Integrate diverse indicators into the course evaluation system, reducing the sole emphasis on GPA and focusing on the learning process and the development of multiple abilities.

#### **Universities optimize management models and build a comprehensive education system**

Universities can adopt a 'step-by-step adaptation with dual-channel incentives' transitional management

approach for veteran students to help them smoothly transition into campus life. First, based on the adaptation process and individual differences of veteran students, their campus adaptation can be divided into different stages, with clear goals and tasks set for each stage, along with corresponding support and assistance. For

example, during the initial 'basic adaptation period' at the beginning of enrollment, the focus is on helping veteran students understand rules and regulations and teaching them learning methods and skills. Second, the 'dual-channel incentive' management model includes both material and spiritual incentives. Materially, universities can provide scholarships, grants, and other rewards to veteran students who perform well in academics, research, and social practice. At the same time, more internships and employment opportunities can be offered to help them smoothly transition from campus to the workplace. In terms of spiritual incentives, universities should strengthen recognition and publicity for veteran students, highlighting exemplary roles in national defense.

### **Guide the establishment of correct views on studying and employment, and help individuals escape the ineffective pressure of blind conformity**

Veteran college students' individual choices under academic pressure exhibit a dual logic of both 'rational development orientation' and 'irrational behavioral tendencies.' Therefore, for veteran college students, enhancing self-awareness and clarifying their personal development plans is a key path to overcoming academic pressure. First, veteran students should, based on their actual needs, choose courses, projects, and practical opportunities with a rational and cautious attitude, thereby exploring learning adaptation paths that align with their personal development. In addition, when faced with the 'excellence and outstanding performance' of others, they should maintain a rational attitude of 'not comparing, not competing,' focusing on their own goals and avoiding losing themselves in blind academic competition. Second, they should establish a correct view of competition, recognizing mutually stimulating and cooperative forms of competition among peers, achieving non-zero-sum games and win-win cooperation[12]45. By viewing the beneficial competition among peers rationally, they can achieve mutual growth and development with their classmates.

### **Research Insights and Reflections**

Compared with previous studies that explained the campus maladjustment of veteran students from institutional and structural perspectives, this study not only confirms the significant impact of the external environment but also further explores the key roles of resource control and individual choice in the generation of academic stress. Moreover, it constructs a mechanism model of academic stress generation as 'external environment - resource control - individual choice,' enriching the dimensions of understanding and explanatory pathways of academic stress among veteran students, and providing theoretical support and practical insights for addressing the academic stress challenges they face. However, this study still has certain limitations. The interview sample focused only on students who had just enrolled after military service. Although this approach helps in-depth exploration during the peak of campus maladjustment and academic stress, it also somewhat limits the generalizability of the research conclusions. Therefore, future studies will include university students at different stages after military service to further investigate the heterogeneous characteristics and influencing paths of academic stress within this group, thereby more comprehensively revealing the complexity and diversity of academic stress among veteran students.

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