



Enhancing Veteran Success in Higher Education

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As we conclude close to a decade of involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, colleges and universities are experiencing a steady increase in the enrollment of student veterans. As a result, many institutions have developed specific programs and services designed to enhance veteran success in higher education. However, recent data from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) show that only a small percentage of veterans use all of their federal education benefits; the federal government does not track veteran retention or completion rates. Some institutions of higher education have created comprehensive evaluation plans to determine the measurable outcomes of their programs, but currently most measures of success for veteran-specific programs and services are anecdotal and qualitative.

Although additional research is necessary before certain practices can be deemed “best” practices, one thing is clear: the recently enacted post-9/11 GI Bill is an incredibly attractive benefit for service members, veterans and their families, and we should anticipate that these populations will only continue to increase on our campuses over the next several years.

IMPORTANCE OF THE GI BILL

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill) was the most significant increase in education benefits for service members and veterans since the original GI Bill of 1944—the benefit that is frequently credited with establishing the foundation of today’s middle class. The original GI Bill was responsible for educating millions of scientists, doctors, engineers, businessmen, authors, actors, and teachers, while providing vocational training for millions more. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is designed to provide a similar higher education incentive for more than two million service members who have served since September 11, 2001.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is designed to cover tuition and fees for in-state public undergraduate higher education for eligible veterans. For private institutions, graduate education, and out-of-state tuition,

institutions may enter into an agreement with the VA whereby the VA will match institutional contributions to cover additional costs. The Post-9/11 GI Bill also provides a monthly housing stipend and an annual book stipend. Legislation passed in late 2010 expanded eligibility for the benefit to an additional 85,000 members of the National Guard and reserves and enhanced the applicability of the benefit to vocational training.

In its first year of implementation, more than half a million veterans applied for certificates of eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and more than 300,000 veterans and family members used the benefit to attend classes (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley 2010). As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan draw down and ramp up respectively, institutions will continue to encounter the potential for a significant increase of veterans on campus for many years. Veterans can bring with them a wealth of knowledge about living abroad, as well as deep personal experience with innovation, accountability, and responsibility. The influx of veterans into our institutions provides new opportunities for the enrichment of classroom discussions and the enhancement of campus diversity.

Many institutions—ready and willing to help these students successfully transition back into civilian life—are enthusiastic and welcoming, but aren’t always sure how to meet veterans’ needs, which are distinct from those of other students. What effective programmatic elements have institutions of higher education put in place to meet these needs? How can higher education best serve this deserving population of young, returning veterans?

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF VETERANS

Veterans are, by definition, nontraditional students. They are typically older and many are technically considered transfer students because they often bring with them credit earned through college courses they completed while in the military, or American Council on Education credit recommendations. While some veterans view college as an obligatory box to be checked to enhance prospects for gainful employment after military service, other veterans embrace the opportunity to immerse themselves in the traditional college experience.



Some additional statistics can help shed light on the characteristics of recent military veterans:

- In 2007–08, active-duty and veteran students represented 4 percent of all undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education (Radford 2009).
- Forty-three percent of students with military experience attended public two-year institutions, 21 percent attended public four-year institutions, 12 percent enrolled in private nonprofit institutions, and 12 percent enrolled in private for-profit institutions (Radford 2009).
- Veterans tend to be older and are more likely to be non-white than traditional college students (Radford 2009).
- Women currently make up nearly 15 percent of the military and are a rapidly growing segment of the veteran population (Business and Professional Women Foundation 2007); 27 percent of students with military experience are women (Radford 2009).
- Of the 2.2 million troops who have deployed in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 800,000 have deployed multiple times (Department of Defense 2009). A recent RAND Corporation report states that between 14 and 19 percent of those who have deployed have developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and/or depression (Tanielian and Jaycox 2008).

In a recent effort to illuminate the landscape of existing programs and services for veterans at institutions of higher education, the American Council on Education teamed up with four other higher education associations to administer a national survey. More than seven hundred colleges and universities responded, detailing veteran-specific programs and services (or lack thereof) at their institutions. A sample of responses follows (Cook and Kim 2009):

- More than half of respondent institutions (57 percent) currently provide

programs and services specifically designed for service members and veterans, and nearly 60 percent of respondents indicated that such programs and services for military service members and veterans are part of their institution's long-term strategic plan.

- Public four-year (74 percent) and public two-year (66 percent) institutions are more likely to have programs specifically designed for military veterans than private nonprofit colleges and universities (36 percent).
- Fewer than half of all schools with military and/or veterans programs offer opportunities for faculty and administrators to acquire information about the unique needs of military student populations, existing campus resources, and promising practices to create a positive campus environment.

SPECIFIC NEEDS OF RETURNING VETERANS

Through roundtables, conferences, focus groups, and interviews, student veterans have voiced unique needs compared to traditional undergraduates. Because veterans are a diverse population with an incredibly wide range of experiences, it is impossible to take a one-size-fits-all approach to serving them. Thus, one of the most important steps that campus leadership can take is to gauge the specific needs of veterans at their institution before devoting resources to new initiatives. Both student veterans and campus administrators have spoken to the success of efforts that have been crafted with direct input from the enrolled student veteran population and have emphasized this is the best approach to designing supportive programs.

However, it can be very difficult to solicit input when there is no method to track or contact student veterans. Many institutions have revised admissions forms to include a mechanism to track incoming students with military experience and have followed up

with these individuals as they make their way to classes. This system not only allows institutions to track veterans' success as they progress through academic programs, but also enables the institution to measure the effectiveness of resources and to quickly and easily reach out to veterans on campus.

Despite the differences among individual veterans, several themes have emerged. The following recommendations have been implemented by many institutions to help ensure veterans are successful in higher education, and have received a great deal of positive feedback from students:

- Establish specific points of contact within campus offices.
- Create a campus working group that spans departments.
- Collaborate with community organizations to provide comprehensive services.
- Ensure veterans receive a thorough introduction to the university through an orientation.
- Improve campus climate by establishing a student veterans group, educating faculty and staff about veteran-specific issues, and if possible, creating a veteran-specific resource center or designated space.
- Investigate the possibility of creating veteran-specific learning communities on campus.
- Streamline disability and veterans services.

Establishing specific points of contact: Mitigating the culture shock

One of the biggest frustrations voiced by veterans is the daunting and unfamiliar bureaucracy of higher education. While the military is also an enormously complex bureaucracy, information about how to navigate it is ingrained in troops through specific training from the beginning of their military careers. Many veterans have spoken to the sense of alienation they feel upon beginning class and often allude to feeling confused and overwhelmed during



their first terms because they aren't sure where to turn for assistance.

This can be most easily mitigated by having specific points of contact within college or university offices, such as the registrar, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, career center, student health, counseling, housing, and disability services. Ideally, these liaisons become well-versed in both on- and off-campus resources within their areas of expertise and can greatly reduce frustration for the veteran.

One institution that has instituted designated veteran liaisons in campus offices is the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Prominently placed on UCLA's veterans Web page, the "Veterans Resource Team" tab provides contact information for each team member, including photo, title, and location. The simple step of having a single point of contact within each office allows veterans to make just one phone call or schedule just one meeting, and also recognizes that veterans may have slightly different or more complex needs than traditional undergraduates.

Creating a campus working group: Streamlining communication

Again, the frustrations of many veterans can be alleviated by cross-campus communication and teamwork. If an institution lacks the resources to develop a robust initiative, a big influence can be made by creating a working group to evaluate the current climate at the institution and identify short- and long-term improvements. Ideally, the working group would consist of both high-level campus officials and currently enrolled student veterans and would meet on a regular basis.

Fairleigh Dickinson University, a private institution in New Jersey, created an interdepartmental veterans education task force committee to analyze and evaluate the university's policies, practices, and procedures. Created at the president's directive and strongly supported by his office,

the team consisted of administration and faculty across departments and was divided into four subcommittees: academic policies and procedures, psychological services, campus and community reintegration, and administrative processes and systems. The committee found the institution was strong in some areas but needed improvement in others.

As a result, the task force came up with thirty-two short- and long-term recommendations and drafted a report to the president. After the creation of the report, the task force shifted to a permanent advisory committee. The advisory committee meets monthly and has representation from high-level campus officials, such as the dean of students, director of psychological services, and director of the veterans office, in addition to student representatives.

Taking a community-based approach: When resources are stretched thin

In today's economic climate, it can be difficult for institutions to develop new programs and services for a particular student population. However, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in a proliferation of veteran-centered resources, services, and programs offered by both government and private-sector providers, many of which are based within local communities. Some veterans will be arriving on campus with service-connected disabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression, and hearing and vision loss. Many campuses have successfully partnered with local VA facilities, veterans service organizations, and nonprofits to bring their expertise and services directly to campus.

A unique example of a public college/private sector partnership can be found in Massachusetts. Mount Wachusett Community College, a rural campus with about 4,000 students, leased ten acres of land to the nonprofit organization, Veteran Homestead, Inc., for the purpose

of constructing a rehabilitation center for severely injured veterans. Located adjacent to campus buildings, the center provides state-of-the-art equipment for recovery from amputations, traumatic brain injury, and burns while allowing families to live together in duplexes. In return for the leased land, the rehabilitation center provides internship opportunities for students in the nursing and allied health programs.

Ensuring veterans receive an introduction to the institution

Many veterans do not transition out of the military in time to attend traditional orientation sessions, which often take place several weeks before a term begins. They may miss the basic introduction to the campus and resources that other incoming students receive, and this can result in feelings of disorientation from the outset. Veterans also require specific information on benefits and other resources, which is not typically included in the orientation for incoming students. In order to meet this need, some institutions have created short break-out sessions for veterans, in addition to the regular transfer and freshman orientation program.

The George Washington University found that having a separate, short orientation program held on a midweek evening early in the semester worked best for student veterans. This targeted program gave veterans easy access to benefits information, allowed them to meet campus administration and one another, and gave them insight into helpful campus resources in an intimate, face-to-face setting.

Veteran-specific learning communities: Built-in support

Some returning veterans cite frustration with younger classmates and find close relationships with other student veterans to be extremely helpful. Several institutions have designed veteran-specific classes to foster these relationships and enhance veteran success. These courses range from



noncredit introductory courses to full-credit general education classes. While a sense of community and identity for student veterans has many positive effects on student performance, isolation from the broader campus population is not the intent of these cohort classes.

John Schupp, a former professor at Cleveland State University, created the SERV (Supportive Education for the Retuning Veteran) Program after realizing that many veterans were not successfully transitioning into and through higher education. The SERV Program is a cohort-based learning community model where general education courses (such as English, psychology, and sociology) are offered as “veterans-only” courses. Veterans can opt into the classes, which stress the smooth transition out of the veterans-only classes into “regular” classes as a defining measure of success. Veteran-only SERV classes are currently offered at the University of Arizona, Kent State University, Youngstown State University, and the University of Akron.

Improving campus climate: Helping smooth the transition

Despite having an enrollment of fewer than one hundred student veterans, the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Services for Transfer and Re-Entry Students (STARS) Office recognized that student veterans were dealing with unique issues. Beginning with seed money from a fundraising event, UCSC created a sustainable peer mentorship program. The program is facilitated by a student veteran coordinator and a handful of peer mentors, all of whom go through a selection process and receive extensive training on general campus, community, and veteran-specific resources.

The STARS Office director oversees the program, and each incoming student veteran has access to the peer mentors. Since its inception, the mentorship program has increased its reach beyond accepted students to potential student veterans, and also edu-

cates students, administration, and faculty on the experiences of student veterans. The program has an office for student veterans, which fosters a supportive peer environment and allows for convenient access to services such as academic advising, social events, general transition assistance, and benefits counseling. A significant aspect of the program includes working relationships with campus and community resources: the team of both student and professional staff members works in collaboration with academic and student service partners, government agencies, local veterans groups, and regional community college contacts.

Veterans with disabilities: Navigating language barriers

In a recent online brainstorming event centered on veterans in higher education, participants discussed the disconnect that exists for many veterans grappling with service-connected injuries or disabilities and the related terminology. For example, several veterans explained that while they identified with the term “wounded,” they did not identify with the term “disabled.” This may be because their disability was acquired later in life or because their injuries are invisible or undiagnosed.

Incoming student veterans also may not be familiar with disability terminology in a higher education setting. For example, the phrase “having a disability” can be confusing for a veteran who may indeed have a disability, but who has not gone through the VA’s disability rating process. As a result, while a veteran may have documentation proving eligibility for accommodations or assistive devices, the terminology may be confusing and he or she may not seek assistance. It is also beneficial for college administrators to understand that not all injuries are incurred in combat, and this may be a point of self-consciousness or even shame for some.

Operation College Promise, a veterans’ education initiative created by the New Jersey

Association of State Colleges and Universities, has partnered with the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in an effort to enhance understanding of veterans with disabilities. WRIISC provides presentations and webinars on post-traumatic stress disorder and other combat-related injuries to faculty, staff, and other interested parties in the community.

CONCLUSION

Legislative enhancements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill passed in December 2010 will expand benefits to service members and veterans previously excluded. As these veterans arrive on our campuses, they will continue to look to administration, faculty, and other student veterans for support. Fortunately, an abundance of government and private nonprofit resources are designed to help facilitate the transition out of military service into civilian life, and higher education institutions can best serve this unique student population by supplementing existing campus programs and services with veteran-specific resources. ■

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