

# **Veteran Guidelines and Best Practices in the Classroom**

**The following guidelines and best practices have been found helpful when working with veterans of war. Not all veterans found in college/university classrooms will suffer from traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder, however many do. It is important to remember that war and combat, as well as many other traumatic experiences that occur in the military, represent experiences that most civilians would not be able to imagine unless they had first-hand experience. It is our intent to help instructors and faculty members understand that homecoming for a veteran involves recreating oneself, and reaching for goals that may have been delayed by military service.**

**American veterans have a long history of returning from war, overcoming personal and emotional hardships, and using their collection of unique experiences to become dedicated students, professionals, family members, and community leaders. It is our intent with these guidelines and best practices, to offer college and university staff and faculty important insights and suggestions that will help veterans come home, and achieve their academic goals and objectives. These guidelines and best practices are offered to assist in the journey toward *veteran cultural* competence. We also know that providing a list of ideas may not be sufficient for all veterans and situations. Therefore, we also offer training and the invitation for consultation regarding any situation that represents a threat to life, safety, or other challenges within the classroom or on campus. We want veterans to succeed, and we will help create service linkage and other support where ever possible to this end.**

**We ask that you first consider the following as part of the need for Personal Reflection about matters related to veterans.**

1. When you hear the word *veteran* or *military service member*, what images, thoughts, sensations, emotions, etc., come to mind? When you see someone in uniform what is your personal reaction or experience? What comes to mind when the reference is to a *female veteran*?
2. What's your attitude or belief toward the military? Why do you think people elect to join the armed services, guard or reserves?
3. What opinions do you hold of war or those who have served in a combat area? Do these opinions become projected indirectly or directly on the veteran or a person known to be serving in the military? Do you confuse the war with the warrior, and those who have served in combat? What worries or concerns might you have over someone who has served in combat being in your classroom?

4. How comfortable are you with people who have physical challenges and those who may demonstrate behavioral health issues from experiencing war trauma? How might your opinions or reactions represent biases toward someone who has an invisible wound such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, anger, startle response, severe sleep problems due to nightmares, or mild to moderate traumatic brain injury? What steps can you take to become more familiar and knowledgeable about these?
5. Who can you go to if you have questions about a veteran? Who is your college or university designated veteran representative who certifies educational benefits? Which campus personnel serve on your Veterans Coordinating Council or Veterans Resource Team? What resources exist in the academic community or the larger local community that are available to veterans and their families?

### **Classroom Practices**

**The following ideas have been formulated to help faculty think about veterans and their unique, sometimes very difficult, life experiences.**

**These considerations are not an exhaustive list, and will be supplemented as we identify issues we learn of that are troubling veterans or academic staff. We invite your input about these suggestions, and encourage you to offer your own discoveries and recommendations.**

**While the classroom can be very threatening to many war veterans, not all veterans are alike, and their individual reactions to war trauma may be quite varied, representing everything from being significantly troubled by their war time duty, to being very philosophical or reflective. Getting to know the veterans in your classroom will likely help them connect with the goals of the academic institution and your course. Making connections may also offer you, the professor/instructor, a wonderful opportunity to become acquainted with people who are searching for the deeper themes and purposes of life – struggling at times with issues at several developmental stages at once. Their search is often much more complex than that confronting other students of the same age. As a result, professors and instructors often find veteran students to be the most interesting and growth-capable among all of their students.**

1. Be careful about thanking a veteran for their military service, unless you have a relationship with him/her – that is you can predict how they will react to your comment. One does not always know if the veteran has had a positive or negative experience while in the military or what their current experience is now that they are home and have had time to think about their service. Being out of the military often takes away the support system that helps to justify actions in combat. This can mean they are now reconsidering their actions, and often this can mean they are not sure of their own opinions in this regard.

2. Unless the course content dictates talking about military service or the war, it is best to refrain from expressing such opinions in class. Whether you are for or against the war, democrat, republican or independent doesn't matter. This might be a good time to check your own political leanings at the door. A veteran took an oath to serve the commander in chief and our nation for a period of time no matter the circumstances. Sharing personal opinions can become a distraction to their learning and to your relationship with them, and in some cases this is a source of intense reactions and anger. Empathy about the experiences of a wartime veteran is very valuable in these situations.
3. Veterans come from all walks of life and experiences. Avoid suddenly placing the veteran in an uncomfortable position in the classroom by asking him or her to share experiences or disclose opinions, unless a prior relationship has been developed, or prior permission has been given. Being taken by surprise by circumstances like this can lead to a fight or flight type response for some veterans. Either way, it can be very disturbing.
4. Veterans are serious about college because they are very dedicated as a group to supporting their families, holding jobs, and because they are required to submit documentation to the Veterans Administration that they are attending and obtain passing grades in their classes. Hearing the complaints of other students over due dates, the need for more time to prepare for an exam or homework, or about the difficulty of a course may frustrate them. The lack of commitment by other students toward learning will also be a source of conflict and frustration. They expect others to be 100% part of the mission.
5. Survival in the military depends upon discipline, obedience, and conformity. In return, the active duty military member is granted services whenever needed. In higher education the student is expected to think independently, process abstract material, think in terms of more grey than black and white. Needed services and assistance are typically a challenge to navigate, leaving the veteran frustrated. Also, campuses do not offer a hierarchy or unit commander to whom the student might go to resolve a problem. This very different system structure and culture can be very difficult for veterans. Professors and other authority figures may have projected upon them authority and responsibility. As a result, it is not uncommon for veterans to seek guidance and support from such authority figures. You can help them navigate the system by listening to their frustration and guide them toward advisors or others who will help. Many academic settings now have veteran clubs or appointed liaison who can assist.
6. Veterans may find small group discussion and group decision-making processes difficult. Survival in the military depended upon decisions being made quickly, by a superior, or by the individual when circumstance demanded. Quick and decisive responses and actions were the norm in the military, especially in combat. Time taken to process information through group process and discussion may be a challenge, since in the military *thinking* could get oneself or others

killed. The academic setting will be foreign in this respect for many veterans as they learn the business of give-and-take, deliberate discussions, and thorough considerations of many variables and opinions. For a while some veterans may see these processes as a waste of time, but will usually learn the value of this form of teamwork if they can see the results of this collaborative effort.

7. Reintegration and homecoming may be a frustrating, confusing, and is often a lengthy experience for the veteran. Sometimes it is a matter of explaining the differences between military and higher education culture that will put the veteran at ease. Knowing that there is someone within the system that they can talk with when things become confusing provides a powerful solution to those times when stress and fear are intense and also act to create feelings of panic and the need to escape.
8. Unresolved emotions from military service often continue for years in the lives of some veterans. Course content such as personal writing assignments, videos, and certain discussion topics may lead some veterans to experience painful memories and create emotional discomfort. It is not uncommon for writing or classroom discussions to act as a point of revelation about some of these life problems. Faculty should be ready to take time to talk with students whose homework or classroom behavior may reveal troubling emotions.

If you observe what may seem to be problems that are distracting to the veteran, find a way to talk with him or her when not in front of the other class members. Attempt to understand what it is that is causing distress, or the extent of its impact in his or her life. Let the veteran know that they are not in trouble, but that you hope to help them gain as much from the class as possible, and that if you can help in some way you hope to do so. It is not appropriate for the instructor to take the role of the counselor, but to refer such matters to a knowledgeable provider.

In other cases, it might be very obvious that the veteran is struggling with a variety of concerns, and it would be totally appropriate to attempt to determine the extent of their distress. We have found that asking about sleep problems, depression, anxiety, ideas about self-harm, can lead the veteran to finding the help needed. Learn about the services on campus or in the community, and let the veteran know there are places and people who are dedicated to helping make things easier for them. If this approach is uncomfortable, seek immediate consultation with designated campus staff that attends to student services, counseling, and crisis. Often the Dean of Student Affairs, Student Services, or Counseling Services, will be available to help you and the veteran.

9. During Vietnam and other wars, one of the most insensitive questions asked of returning veterans was, "Did you kill anyone?" This question should never be asked and if another student asks it in your classroom, you need to be ready to say that this is not something we bring up in this context. In other words, *you*, the instructor or professor, will not want to put any war veteran in that position

and be ready to stop such questions. It could be very emotionally damaging to the veteran, result in a panic attack, or departure from school altogether. Empathy on your part is essential, and a consideration of the impact such questions would have on the veteran student.

10. Some veterans have standing and long awaited appointments with the Veterans Administration - often months in advance. Changing these appointments may mean having to wait many more months, denial of benefit examinations or treatment. While most veterans do not wish to miss class, sometimes it is inevitable to do so. Flexibility in this area is appreciated. The VA Medical Center in Seattle and other veteran service providers have begun to offer limited after hours appointments for veterans who work or attend school. This however remains very limited. Also, it is important to remember that the mere act of going to the VA hospital for appointments may be very stressful, involve working on war trauma issues, or treatment for wounds and injuries which themselves often represent stored memories of war trauma. In other words, your willingness to be understanding of these issues will likely create a veteran – professor/instructor relationship that will be much stronger and success oriented.
11. Consider random (self-selected) rather than assigned classroom seating. Many veterans who have served in a war zone prefer to sit in the back of the classroom with their back against the wall. This seating choice allows the veteran- student the best method of attending and learning to class content. The reason for this is that most war veterans require a higher level of environmental control, and seeing everyone in the room from the back, permits there to be no surprises. Respecting this adaptive pattern is important.
12. If any veteran seems to be severely depressed, suicidal, or appears to be having other significant problems, it is important to seek consultation. This can be done by contacting the individuals on this webpage, or calling the VA Medical Center in your area. A brief discussion with a professional in the field of war trauma treatment can be extremely helpful. There are seven federal Vet Centers in Washington State, and 34 Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs - PTSD Program Counselors throughout the state.  
[http://www.dva.wa.gov/ptsd\\_counseling.html](http://www.dva.wa.gov/ptsd_counseling.html)

**Please remember: The key variables for a veteran's success on a college campus include relationships, social support, and having alternatives on campus when problems arise. College employees who are aware of the challenges experienced by veterans as they reintegrate to civilian life and the higher education arena, will play a major role in their personal homecoming and academic success. Employees who show empathy for a veteran's situation, are customer friendly, helpful, and represent the best academic leaders in our state. It is the goal of the WDVA - Higher Education Outreach Program to provide you with the necessary information to be an agent**

**of change for our student veterans. Let us know how we might be able to help to fine tune your personal and campus wide efforts.**

You are welcome to call the WDVA PTSD Program Director, Tom Schumacher, M.S., LMHC, NCC, CTS: 360-725-2226 [tom@dva.wa.gov](mailto:tom@dva.wa.gov) This number and email address are not sources of emergency services, but calling this number will lead to a dialogue and consultation about the needs of veterans on your campus. Emergencies should always be handled in the normal manner as directed by policy on your campus, or suggestions that may be offered by the veteran in crisis.

The primary provider of direct training within this program is Peter Schmidt, Psy. D., LMHC, WDVA Contractor within the PTSD/War Trauma Program, Higher Education Outreach and Consultation Project: 425-773-6292, [pgschmidt7@gmail.com](mailto:pgschmidt7@gmail.com) or 425-640-1463, [peter.schmidt@edcc.edu](mailto:peter.schmidt@edcc.edu).

The goals of this program are to raise awareness about the student-veteran experience in higher education, their past and how it impacts their present and future. This program exists to assist campus employees to begin their personal journey toward a better understanding of the veteran cultural within academia, and to jointly find paths for all veterans to find their way home from war. It is also our goal for you as a faculty member or instructor to help us with your experiences and ideas.