



TOOLKIT
FOR **VETERAN**
FRIENDLY
INSTITUTIONS



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the archive of the Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions, which functioned from 2012 to 2016 as an online resource designed to help higher education institutions build effective programs for military-connected students.

This archive contains resources shared by Toolkit users during the site's operation, including a variety of best practices and models.

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For more information, please visit the ACE website at <http://www.acenet.edu/higher-education/Pages/Military-Students-and-Veterans.aspx> or email militaryed@acenet.edu.

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PROGRAMS, SERVICES, AND CAMPUS CULTURE

Defining “veteran friendly” involves a variety of factors such as support, admissions, funding, communication, and services. There is tremendous diversity in the framing of veteran friendly programs across academic institutions.

Colleges and universities seeking to create a “veteran friendly” environment need to consider a variety of factors such as support, admissions, funding, communication, and services. Core elements include:

Creating Successful Programs

- Top-Down Support
- Central Point of Contact
- Veteran-Specific Space
- Identifying Student Veterans
- Student Veteran Organization

Academic Support

- Veterans Orientation
- Staff and Faculty Training
- Opening Lines of Communication
- Academic Preparation and Tutoring
- Veteran-Specific Courses

Campus Culture

- Campus Life
- Engaging Student Veterans
- Housing

Creating Successful Programs

Creating a successful program for student veterans takes time, energy, and resources. Above all, it takes a commitment from the top down and from the bottom up. Effective strategies include top-down support, central point of contact, veteran-specific space, and tracking veterans.

In making the case to your leadership to support the creation or expansion of a veterans’ program, consider the following:

- A veterans’ program can be a natural complement to your corporate/business social responsibility efforts.
- Student veterans naturally bring a level of diversity and leadership to your institution.
- Evidence suggests that veterans who feel supported on campus tend to have increased grade point averages and higher retention and graduation rates.
- Veterans become dedicated alumni.

Top-Down Support

It is no secret that top-down support, particularly from the president’s office, makes things happen more efficiently and effectively. Demonstrating high-level support for veterans and creating policies aimed at helping them to connect and succeed will encourage participation and trust from staff, faculty, and the veterans themselves.

High-level administrators can start the process by forming a veteran task force. Ideally, such a task force meets once (or more) per term and includes representatives from the veteran's school certifying official, academic affairs, student life, admissions, bursar, counseling, financial aid, housing, and disability services.

It is critically important to include current student veterans on the task force. Don't just rely on published material or veterans' opinions from other institutions.

Central Point of Contact

Many veterans suggest a single point of contact on campus helps them navigate their college experience. Veterans value the trust that is built through hands-on, in-person assistance from a single source knowledgeable about all of the facets of their education.

This access point can also include a clear and comprehensive website that explains an institution's entire veteran initiative and how to access the services provided on and off campus. In combination, the support provides a personalized roadmap—a GPS—for veterans to navigate smoothly through higher education.

The school's Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) certifying official could be the best central point of contact you have. This gives your institution one point of contact for both student veterans and the VA to ensure consistent information travels between your school, the VA, and the student. From a veteran's perspective, this position has one of the most crucial jobs within higher education. These individuals process VA education benefits, a top priority for most veterans.

Creating a specific position for a certifying official, rather than relying on someone in another office, could be the beginning of creating a central contact point for veterans. Other activities, such as recruiting and outreach, might be additional duties to include in this position description.

While many schools tend to hire veterans to hold the position of certifying official or central point of contact for veterans, others have experienced success employing military family members in the job. At some colleges and universities, non-veterans hold the position. This approach can sometimes lead to concern from veteran students, but over time, as long as the person has the right knowledge and spirit, the point of contact will foster positive and trusting relationships with the student veterans they serve.

Veteran-Specific Space

Many colleges and universities have created a special place for veterans within the college environment. This might include the creation of a veterans' center, office or lounge that becomes a centralized location for the school certifying official, student veterans organizations, veterans recruiting and outreach activities, as well as other information or student services you choose to provide (e.g., tutoring, academic advising, career counseling, peer mentor programs, disability support services).

A veterans' lounge might provide a study area with computers and would offer student veterans one convenient location where they can spend time, interact with peers, find the answers to their questions, and feel comfortable. This space could also be the prime location for VA work-study students. Natural peer mentorship tends to develop in these locations, which is a win-win for both students and administrators.

Identifying Student Veterans

Getting student veterans to identify themselves can be tricky, yet it is difficult to serve this population's specific needs if you don't know which of your applicants or enrolled students are actually veterans. Some schools track this student population through transcript data, self-identification, benefit certification, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) information. Since all students must fill out an application for enrollment, including a question on all campus admissions forms (including graduate programs) can be a very practical way to track student veterans. However, be sure to give careful consideration to the phrasing of the question.

Not all veterans of the armed forces identify themselves as "veterans" (particularly women, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who may not have experienced combat). Asking, "Have you ever served in the United States Armed Forces?"

rather than, “Are you a veteran?” may have a large impact on the number and accuracy of responses you receive. In addition, many of today’s schools are also asking follow-up questions about branch of service, current Reserve or National Guard status, and military family members.

Be sure to let the student veterans know why you are collecting information on veteran status. Explaining that this will help keep the student in the loop with regard to veterans-only events, updates to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and other benefits will demonstrate your commitment to communication.

Consider offering incentives for student veterans to self-identify, such as early registration. This will make it easier for your institution to track veteran students, and it will help them get priority access to required classes that generally fill up quickly.

Use the information collected to make initial contact with entering veterans through email, text messages, and/or a phone call. Although there can be a lack of interest from student veterans regarding activities and events, particularly at institutions with high commuter populations, transition, and isolation can also be barriers to success for veteran students.

Identifying and tracking veterans and establishing an open line of communication are the first steps to addressing these barriers—and in building strong communities on campus. Surveying student veterans before, during, and/or at the end of a semester will offer you timely information as to what is working and what is not. Consider using a VA work-study student to communicate the importance of collecting information from veterans.

Student Veteran Organizations

Student organizations, in general, provide a vehicle for students with similar interests to organize. Veterans on campus are generally interested in connecting with other veterans, and student veteran organizations can help meet this need. They provide support to student veterans and offer advice on the transition from the military to campus and from campus to career.

One veteran stated that she jumped into school too quickly and subsequently dropped out. When she was ready to go back, her most important form of support was an active student veteran organization that offered peer mentors who were standing by and ready to help. Many veterans echoed the strength of peer support and the inclination to open up to “one of their own.”

Just like any other student organization, such groups are led and organized by student veterans themselves and follow the university’s guidelines for organizational development. Finding the right faculty or staff adviser is an important component, but supportive candidates are usually willing to step forward, especially staff or faculty who may be veterans themselves.

Tapping into the social media world, for instance, by creating a student veteran Facebook page or connecting with other students through Twitter, can also be ways to create a veterans’ community for those academic institutions without a centralized campus.

Academic Support

When students, administrators, and faculty team up, effective change is much more likely than if one of these elements acts on its own. This is especially true when it comes to academic services, where a student veteran’s success depends upon educated staff and faculty who understand their needs and provide necessary academic support.

Academic services for student veterans may include effective faculty-veteran communication, tutoring programs, policies, and flexibility related to class absences, accommodations for students with disabilities, and veteran-only courses.

Veterans Orientation

It is important to acknowledge that student veterans may not need the same school orientation program as other first year or transfer students. Some institutions set up veteran-specific orientations or breakout sessions during general orientations to demonstrate that the school or university understands the specific needs of veteran students.

Online orientations, which can help veterans who may be in another location during the summer, are also effective strategies. Some schools offer academic pre-advising for student veterans who may not have received the necessary guidance or re-

sources while transitioning out of the military. The goal of a veterans-only orientation is not to segregate veteran students, but to demonstrate the school's understanding that the transition to academic life can be different for veterans than for the traditional student population.

Staff and Faculty Training

Faculty training is one of the best ways to reduce confusion and stigma related to the student veteran population. Veteran students face many of the same challenges as adult or nontraditional students:

- They are older and more mature,
- Many are tending to the needs of a family, and
- Some are commuting long distances to complete their education.

Military students, however, also bring with them a structure, sense of discipline, and work ethic that typically far exceeds faculty expectations. Veterans bring a wealth of experience and skills to the academic environment. For example, today's service members have been trained to work with groups from different cultures. They are skilled in getting groups to focus on tasks and use each other's strength to accomplish goals. These experiences can add significant depth to classroom discussions.

Opening Lines of Communication

Veteran friendly institutions can help foster better communication between student veterans and their instructors by passing along the following tips to faculty:

- Encourage veteran students to contact you if they encounter circumstances that may affect their performance in a particular course. This can be accomplished by simply adding a statement to your course syllabus.
- Veteran students may request seating preferences (back of the room, for example). Do not misunderstand this request—just understand that they are often more comfortable facing a group.
- Understand that some veterans may be initially hesitant to actively participate in class discussions. Allow each to build his/her own level of trust with you and other students.
- Expect the same classroom responsibilities and performance, but accommodate absences related to VA appointments or Reserve-duty commitments.
- Take the time to explain course assignments and institutional policies to all students (and do not single out student veterans). Military students are used to following orders and directions. Learn about combat-related disabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) but do not assume that all student veterans deal with the symptoms of these injuries.
- Structure your course with the spirit of universal design and teach using multiple methods to account for students who have different experiences, learning preferences and capabilities.
- Most importantly, avoid expressing personal sentiments related to war or military personnel that could alienate or embarrass student veterans. All veterans deserve recognition and appreciation for their service.

While most student veterans are tech-savvy, word of mouth continues to be the way most will successfully receive and process information. While on active duty, service members do not typically need to check email or text messages to manage their schedules. They are told where to be and when—and they are expected to remember that information. It may take student veterans some time to adjust to a culture where so much information is conveyed without the spoken word.

It is important to recognize that the transition to education and an academic environment can be a difficult one. Any transition is a process and can take some time, but you can show your support by welcoming veterans home and expressing your appreciation for their service.

Most importantly, faculty should know about campus resources so they can better direct student veterans needing assistance. These could include anything from an academic accommodation, to help with VA benefits, to knowing the policies in place for those called up for active duty. Instructors should know the single point of contact for veterans' services on their campus. Knowledge is key to effective communication and mutual respect.

Academic Preparation and Tutoring

Many military students, upon entering college or other postsecondary institutions, find they may need tutoring and/or additional educational support outside the classroom. Many schools across the country are developing tutoring programs designed specifically for student veterans. Peer-to-peer mentoring has been highly successful with student veterans. Utilizing VA work-study students might be a very effective way to offer a tutoring program with little cost. Whether walk-in or by schedule, getting the word out to veteran students that academic resources are available to support them is an important step. Some schools offer priority registration for student veterans who sign up for weekly tutoring sessions.

While most institutions offer free tutoring services, students using educational benefits (including dependents) and those who need more intensive tutoring services may be eligible to receive additional assistance from the VA to defray tutoring expenses. Whatever you do, let student veterans know these resources exist, since tutoring can often be the missing link between dropping out and graduating.

Veteran-Specific Courses

To help ensure student veterans get off on the right foot when beginning the college experience, many schools offer courses and programs specifically designed for veterans. Coursework can range anywhere from a one credit "introduction to the college experience" (where issues such as transition, leveraging benefits, and disability issues are discussed) to general requirement classes such as government/history, English, and math.

Service members who attend college after leaving the military often report difficulty interacting with people who don't understand their experiences. Veteran-only classes help military students become acclimated to college. Helping student veterans feel like they "fit in" is an important consideration, and the camaraderie experienced by those who choose veteran-only classes will likely continue and translate into positive experiences throughout their college careers.

Campus Culture

Campus and community services can be especially effective at helping veterans navigate their way through higher education and ultimately enjoy a successful transition to civilian life.

Campus Life

Higher education is about more than the classroom. From orientation and housing to clubs and other co-curricular activities, various aspects of campus life can make or break a student's college or university experience. For student veterans who may be unaccustomed to traditional campus life, this can be especially true.

There are many policies and services that colleges and universities can offer to help student veterans acclimate, receive support, and feel at home.

Engaging Student Veterans

A study conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement found that veterans often describe their transition into college as a "culture shock." These students truly want to connect academically, socially, and with campus life but often do not have the tools to find that much needed sense of belonging. Getting the word out that student veterans are not only welcomed and appreciated, but also accommodated on campus is a great first step. Tips include the following:

- Publish information that summarizes the services offered to the veteran population;
- Create campus-wide involvement in Veterans Day activities in November;
- Inquire as to veteran status upon application so that resources can be disseminated early and often;
- Use the members of your veterans task force to be sure that you are addressing the needs of student veterans and allowing their voices to be heard;
- Encourage veterans to speak in classes about their experience;
- Host panels that encourage the campus community to learn about the veteran perspective on various topics; and
- Invite student veteran groups to get involved in large campus-wide initiatives that include other clubs.

Housing

The housing preferences of veteran students often differ from those of typical incoming students. So, consider how your institution can offer living options that will appeal to veterans and military families.

Because veterans are typically older than traditional incoming students, and often have unparalleled life experience when entering school, many veterans don't wish to live in a traditional dormitory environment. Some institutions allow veterans to live in graduate housing or offer family housing options. Others allocate dorm space specifically for veterans. As some veterans choose to live off campus, many universities will waive any on-campus living requirements for student veterans.

Some academic institutions offer veteran-specific housing, in addition to accommodating more general housing needs of student veterans. Be certain that staff in the Office of Resident Life have off-campus housing options available, including family-friendly options, and that they understand how the GI Bill housing allowance might affect decisions.

POLICIES

Clearly defined policies are the driving force of protocols, processes, and practices. In terms of supporting the military-connected student, consider how policy affects those who are active, veteran, National Guard, Reserve, or family members.

Providing clear and concise directions on your institution's application process, along with established school policies on issues related to the acceptance of student veterans can make the application, readmission, and transfer processes much less daunting for potential student veterans.

Policy topic areas for colleges and universities to consider include admissions, policy applications, and student services:

Admissions

- Recruitment
- Application process
- Entrance exams
- Transcript review

Policy Applications

- Website communications
- Early registration
- Residency policies
- Withdrawal and readmission

Student Services

- Diversity
- Disability services
- Health services
- Mental health services
- Career services

Admissions

The process of applying to an institution of higher education can often be daunting for military and veteran students who have been out of school for some time. Unlike their peers, who often have family members and high school guidance counselors helping them through the application process, military and veteran students are left to navigate it on their own. They may have a lot of questions and require extra guidance as they work towards submitting an application and gaining admittance to your institution. Providing clear and concise directions on your institution's application process along with established school policies on issues related to the acceptance of student veterans can make the application, readmission, and transfer processes much less daunting for potential student veterans.

Recruitment

Admissions policies for student veterans are meaningless unless veterans apply to your college or university. Therefore, recruitment is a critical part of building a successful veterans program. Encouraging veterans to join your campus community is a strong first step towards ensuring they feel welcomed at your institution. It demonstrates recognition of their service and shows that your institution values the skills and experiences veterans can bring to the educational environment.

Effective practices related to veteran recruitment vary. Some institutions have created a role for a veteran recruiter as part of their efforts to include a veteran population on campus. This recruiter, who is sometimes a VA work-study candidate, can also help veterans navigate financial aid benefits, application processes, and more.

Word of mouth is considered to be the best method for encouraging veterans to attend your institution. Other recruiting methods include traveling to county fairs, National Guard or Reserve units, base education offices, education and job fairs, and welcome-home events.

Application Process

Because of their service, many veterans are launching formal higher education pursuits from a different time and place in life, when compared to traditional college students. As a result, they may not have current college entrance exam scores, or their scores may simply not reflect their level of readiness for higher education, especially after receiving top-notch, rigorous, and formal military training. Therefore, it is important to consider the entire portfolio when reviewing veterans' information for admission or readmission. Many schools today are applying prior learning assessment and/or portfolios when reviewing veterans' applications.

Official [military transcripts](#) are a key element to the veteran's admissions package. Consider whether your institution can accept older college entrance exam scores from veterans or if their military service should positively affect admissions decisions, especially where other requirements may be lacking.

Additionally, you should determine whether veterans on your campus should be admitted as new students or transfer students. In many cases, veterans may have academic credits to transfer in from military transcripts and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests. These credits can affect admissions decisions, housing eligibility, or class status. Review your school's policies to help veterans get the most out of their education while providing accommodations for such circumstances.

The [Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit](#) is intended to serve as a guide for institutions developing or reviewing policies dealing with transfer, acceptance, and award of credit. Use the ACE [Military Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Forces](#) for any questions you might have with regard to the transfer and award of credits. If you cannot accept all of the student's military credits, clearly communicating the reasons, in writing, is most helpful to the student veteran.

Entrance Exams

For general admissions considerations, decide whether your school will waive entrance exam requirements or accept older college entrance exam scores from veterans, or if their service could weigh positively on admissions decisions, if and where other requirements may be lacking.

Transcript Review

Many military members anticipate applying military experience toward their education goals in the form of transfer credits. Although many institutions accept military credit recommendations, anecdotal evidence indicates that veterans are often dissatisfied with the type and amount of credit awarded.

Sometimes, credit transfer for all or most of an individual's military training is not a good policy for veterans' success since it results in them rushing toward the finish line of a diploma. Regardless, unrealistic transfer expectations, as well as poor advising and lack of communication about resources and processes, were identified by participating veterans as key challenges in this area.

When veterans have a clear understanding of their military transcripts and basic information about [transfer policies and issues](#) they can more successfully navigate their way through the process of transferring credit for military training and experience.

The transcript review process should be clearly stated in outreach materials, on your institution's website and in briefings delivered at college fairs. If it is difficult for service members to find complete information about your credit transfer policies, they may look elsewhere for their educational pursuits.

Many academic institutions appoint a dedicated academic adviser to work with military students. This individual, serving as an ombudsman, is able to devote the time necessary to help the student learn about the transcript transfer review process. Performed by either a full-time employee or a VA work-study intern, this position results in a dedicated adviser who can help build standardized institutional capacity while still providing personalized advising. Such a strategy can go a long way toward reducing confusion and allows service members to make educated and informed decisions about their academic endeavors.

Policy Applications

Website Communications

Creating an easy-to-find student veteran or military page on your institution's website is one way to be sure you are providing accurate and timely information to veterans, family members, and admissions personnel. This one-stop portal makes it easy for users to find the details they need and gives you a natural vehicle for posting campus updates and news.

Early Registration

Because many VA education benefits are time-bound, veterans can become frustrated if they cannot enroll in certain crowded courses they need to complete their degrees. Some institutions choose to grant veterans priority status for class registration. In other cases, state legislatures in different parts of the country are working to formally grant priority registration to veterans attending public colleges and universities.

Residency Policies

It is equally important to review your institution's residency requirements and consider how they should apply to veterans. Many schools have opted to guarantee in-state tuition costs for any service member, regardless of official residency, to ensure their benefits cover as much of their tuition as possible.

Withdrawal and Readmission

Members of the Reserve and National Guard serve in a highly important, yet distinctly different capacity than members on active duty. Considered citizen-soldiers by some, the dual role these service members hold can make it difficult for them to focus on or remain in higher education. Reservists or National Guard members may be called out of school (often for an extended period) to deploy or, in some cases, miss a day of class because of their weekend duties.

Many schools have created policies to support a service member's commitment by:

- allowing them to rejoin classes when they return without penalty or additional costs,
- eliminating the reapplication process regardless of length of time away from school, and
- deciding to credit unused portions of campus service expenses (e.g., dining hall costs) until such time as the service member returns to school following active duty.

It is important to understand the institutions' responsibilities regarding readmission requirements for service members as outlined by the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

For those whose training weekends conflict with tests or other assignments, simply creating a policy that allows these students to reschedule tests, without penalty, can be a great relief for students and provide clear guidance for faculty. By eliminating concerns that military service conflicts with course work, you can allow these students to remain in and return to school while fulfilling their military duties.

While students are certainly responsible for keeping their instructors informed of all military-related absences, faculty and staff should be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the relevant policies and regulations, as well as the contacts for veteran student support services, so that they can help the activated service member either leave or re-enter the classroom environment. This will help veteran students stay on track to attain their educational goals and help your institution retain students.

Institutions should also consider their withdrawal policies. If a student is withdrawing due to military mobilization (or hospitalization for combat injuries), clearly delineate the forms they need to complete and timelines for doing so.

Veterans are used to following orders and completing forms—when information is communicated effectively. Be sure to clearly convey the roles and responsibilities of the student in the admission/readmission, registration, and withdrawal processes pertaining to your institution.

Creating an easy-to-find student veteran or military page on your institution's website is one way to be sure you are providing this information to veterans, family members, and admissions personnel.

Student Services

Many veterans returning to or entering college for the first time will have no idea how a newly acquired injury (physical or psychological health-related) may impact their learning, especially if no learning difficulties had been present prior to their military experience. Additionally, a veteran may be discharged from the military without realizing that she or he may experience a significant learning or memory-related impairment, since a true diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and in some cases a mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), can occur after the service member has separated from military service. All of this is often compounded by the fact that most veterans will not identify themselves as a person with a disability. Most are probably unfamiliar with the term “reasonable accommodations” and don't know how to access them. Therefore, it is all the more important for faculty and staff to be aware of the potential need for accommodations.

For faculty: Do not presume to know the needs of military students, nor should you assume the needs and potential accommodations needed by one student veteran will be the same for others. Consider including a statement on every course syllabus inviting students to meet with you confidentially should a need for academic adjustments or accommodations be necessary or arise at any time during the course.

Accommodating the needs of veterans does not mean that you have to drastically change how you teach. However, being aware of the issues veterans face and accommodating their needs can ease their transition from military life to the civilian classroom, and improve the educational experience for all students.

For staff, including disability support service staff: Helping student veterans understand the fine distinctions between a VA disability rating and a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is an important task. Presenting information about their rights and responsibilities is crucial, if an accommodation is necessary.

Unfortunately, stigma does exist, especially with regard to mental health and cognitive abilities. One veteran stated, “Many vets see claiming disability services as a stigma that reflects negatively on their service. Pride of service sometimes conflicts with acknowledgment that some experiences may have affected their ability to concentrate/study.” Another indicated that her school changed the name of its disability office from Disability Services to Campus Access Services to reduce the stigma, not only for veterans, but also for other students with disabilities who might be reluctant to come forward and discuss their needs.

Diversity

Whereas academia may view the veteran population as a single entity, it is actually one of great diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, and physicality/disability. Although a great deal of attention has recently focused on service members and veterans who are transitioning to higher education, many policies primarily geared toward veterans can allow sub-populations of veterans to fall through the cracks. These sub-populations include, but are not limited to military or veteran families, women veterans, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals.

Institutions of higher education should be aware of how local deployments may affect not only veterans and service members, but also their families. Families are often the biggest support system for a veteran. Oftentimes, it is a family member who encourages a veteran to seek out a benefit, ask for help, or get treatment.

Many resources can be found through local student veteran organizations, but sometimes there is a gap between veteran organizations and family members. Institutions of higher education can keep military spouses and families on their radar by partnering with Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Programs and local National Guard and Reserve unit offices. Offering weekend or evening support and information classes for spouses of student veterans and spouses of those deployed can go a long way toward creating a cohesive and supportive higher education community.

Further, because of the transferability of the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and how spouses and dependents can utilize these benefits, the number of family members using education benefits will only increase in the foreseeable future, and they may deal regularly with extenuating circumstances during deployments, family adjustments, and recovery processes.

Childcare can also be a frequent factor in education decisions when one or both parents are attending classes and serving in the military. A veterans' program initiative can play an important role in not only helping military families navigate the college experience, but also indirectly providing valuable support to the veteran by supporting their network—their families. An example of effective family outreach is a picnic with child-centered activities.

Women veterans may deal with different issues than men when deploying and reintegrating and, therefore may have unique needs on campus. Often times, women of the Armed Forces do not consider themselves “veterans,” so resources designed for women veterans (such as those for mental health and sexual assault) that are posted in areas beyond a veterans' office on campus may be more likely to get their attention.

Disability Services

Most veterans with service-connected disabilities, or those wounded during their time in the service, do not readily identify with the term “disabled.” For a variety of reasons, it is generally difficult for veterans to acknowledge that a disability might be hindering their potential to perform to the best of their ability, in school or anywhere else.

Those who were injured in a noncombat environment may be reluctant to talk about their conditions because they perceive it as shameful. Further, veterans with acquired injuries may have a very limited understanding of academic accommodations and the reasonable accommodations process, and they may not understand their rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Other veterans may not yet have a disability rating from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and they incorrectly assume that this disqualifies them from services. (Disability ratings, in fact, are not qualifiers for campus disability services.)

For all of these reasons, bringing disability services, education, and awareness to the attention of student veterans is critically important. Also critical is communicating to veterans why they might want to take advantage of these services.

One successful practice is to include information on veterans services and disability services on the course syllabus. Veterans often have to wait months for a VA appointment, and they can't simply reschedule if it conflicts with class. Although the responsibility for informing faculty about these appointments lies with the student veteran, flexibility, and understanding on behalf of the professor goes a long way in reducing stress.

Some schools have identified a staff person with ties to the military to act in a connective role between the office of disability services and a veterans' program office. Interestingly, one institution changed the name of its disability services office to College Access Services after staff discovered veterans were not self-identifying or requesting services because the term “disability” carried a stigma.

Health Services

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health-care system is just one option open to veterans. Health care is a choice, after all, and while the Veterans Health Administration is the health-care service of choice for many veterans, others have never applied for this benefit. Also, some choose not to use the services provided by the VA at all.

Health center staff at your institution might want to consider including a question on intake forms which simply states, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the United States Armed Forces?” which will help staff flag students in need of veteran-specific health-care services.

The health center should be connected to the services at the local VA Medical Center, the local Vets Center, and other community health-care providers specializing in veterans’ health care. This is not for the purpose of referring a patient out of the university health-care system, but more for collaboration, training and, if necessary, referrals.

Consider the following suggestions to ensure your campus health center is “veteran friendly”:

- Display materials in your office about the campus and community health services available to veterans, including material from the VA.
- Invite veterans’ health-care providers to campus for a “meet and greet.” Inquire about staff training on military cultural competence for health-care providers.
- Communicate regularly with VA representatives to be sure center staff are up-to-date on potential emergency and non-emergency referrals to a local VA hospital.
- Download and use the military health-history pocket card, which details unique health risks, issues of concern, and general questions to help staff help a veteran feel at ease.

Mental Health Services

The mental health services offered by your institution and community, and the communication of these services, are of critical importance. The good news is that there has been more media attention paid to asking for help, and more and more troops (combat and non-combat) and their families are starting to recognize the need for behavioral health services as part of a broader transition. Still, getting them to take advantage of the services (which means admitting they might need help) is often an uphill battle.

For example, one veteran was unaware that he was eligible for a note taker because of his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which led him to constantly scan the room for threats during class. Having someone’s notes to refer to has made a huge impact on his studies, and he has since spread the word to other veterans on campus.

When offering mental health services, be sure that a variety of options, methods and services are considered and offered to students. Some veterans will find support groups very helpful, but others may feel overwhelmed. Some may enjoy a one-on-one environment, while others would find this type of intervention off-putting.

Civilian counseling personnel may have a significant cultural gap to close with veterans. Counseling personnel should be educated in military terminology, as well as both military and veteran culture (which are different). Some institutions provide professional development training for their already existing counselors, while still others rely on master of social work students. One (civilian) university mental health professional said that when a student assumed she was a veteran, she knew she had “passed the test.”

Stress, anxiety, and depression can greatly affect any student’s academic performance. For student veterans with combat experience and combat-related injuries (psychological, cognitive, or physical), post-traumatic stress, and/or traumatic brain injury may be issues that put this population at a greater risk of developing mental health issues and, thus, needing to seek out mental health services.

Partnering with resources from the VA, local vet centers, and community mental health providers will ensure you have the right options for most students.

Note: Mental health is not always a concern that accompanies post-traumatic stress. Standard social work-related issues often arise, as well, such as financial struggles, housing challenges, family issues, and more. Directing veterans with combat stress to assistance with these services is another exemplary practice.

Career Services

Higher education provides an excellent transition from military service to a civilian career. Service members and their families look to educational institutions for career direction and employment connections. There are steps colleges and universities can take to ensure their career services are both veteran-friendly and veteran-promoting.

Transitioning service members and veterans need education in benefits (availability and access), resume writing assistance, interviewing skills, and job search assistance. The Department of Defense/Department of Labor Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is intended to address these issues, but participating veterans cited many concerns with timing, methodology, and professionalism of instructors. Access to classes can be difficult for National Guard members and reservists, which can sometimes prevent the courses from being effective. Therefore, colleges and universities are in a prime position to fill in some of these gaps and provide career counseling and assistance.

Connecting with local resources currently serving veterans and employers in the community will be key to success. Keep in mind that to student veterans with no civilian work experience, some of the traditional career-search activities will be foreign to them. Resume writing, seeking out mentors, applying for internships, basic interviewing, and knowing how to “work” a job fair should all be presented to veterans through the lens of a civilian employer.

Most veterans will need some level of assistance learning how to translate their military experience into language that will be understood by human resource specialists. So, become familiar with military-to-civilian translators and know how to use them. Also, since most jobs are still acquired through word of mouth, teaching a veteran how to network should certainly not be underrated.

Bringing in local employers to help veterans practice presenting themselves and their abilities/skill sets in an interview, or offering networking/interviewing workshops, connects veterans with the community and exposes them to mentors and potential internships.

When developing relationships with business and industry, be sure to include statistics on your student veterans, while also promoting the reasons why veterans tend to make exceptional employees. You can also connect with your area’s One-Stop Career Center to ensure Department of Labor local veterans employment representatives (LVERs) and disabled veterans outreach program specialists (DVOPs) know of your work with student veterans. Keep them updated on the numbers of student veterans walking through your doors and graduating from your institution. Request to be on a list for recruitment notifications. Invite them in to provide resume writing, interviewing, and networking workshops on campus. The more informed you are, the more informed student veterans will be and, thus, the more successful they will become when it comes to landing the right job.

Further, finding a TAP near your school, provided to service members by the military as they are separating from active duty, could serve as a conduit for outreach and assistance. Encourage campus staff to volunteer as instructors at these programs and to ask TAP facilitators to assist in providing staff training on campuses. TAP benefits often extend beyond a service member’s last day in the military, so your institution may be in an excellent position to refer student veterans to a local program for assistance.

RESOURCES

ACE has a long history, dating to its founding in 1918, of serving both military-connected students and the diverse array of colleges and universities that welcome these students as they undertake postsecondary education. There has been tremendous growth in programs, resources, and collaborations across the country and many of these efforts are highlighted here.

Funding for Institutional Programs

Financial Aid for Students

Organizations Serving Military-Connected Students

Funding for Institutional Programs

Finding the funds to either begin or expand an effort is always a challenge. There are, however, a number of steps you can take to be sure you are positioning your institution to be at the ready when a funding opportunity presents itself. Track your student veterans' admissions, retention, grade point averages, graduation rates, etc. The statistics you keep will help you make a case for funding and support with internal and external partners.

Keep current on state and national public and private grants for veterans programming and subscribe to updates from government entities with funding opportunities. Be sure community members, local veteran service organizations, as well as business and industry, know you exist.

Business and industry will view you as a worthy partner when you demonstrate an understanding of the needs of their current and future work force. To the extent possible, get involved with local Chambers of Commerce, civic organizations, and small business development centers. You may find a direct correlation between your proactive networking/connections to the community and potential funding opportunities.

Financial Aid for Students

There are many education benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense including vocational rehabilitation, the Reserve Education Assistance Program, tuition assistance, and benefits for spouses or other dependents. Many states offer in-state tuition and additional financial aid to some eligible service members and veterans, and there are hundreds of private scholarships available.

It can be confusing for both school officials and veterans to navigate the many programs available; an expert in military and veteran financial aid can help everyone involved ensure benefits are properly applied for and administered. With the current rise in veterans' enrollment at institutions across the country, having someone on staff to act as a GI Bill/financial aid navigator could prove to be very beneficial.

GI Bill Benefits

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits can be difficult to understand. Therefore, work to ensure that staff at your institution who deal with these issues thoroughly understand the roles and responsibilities of the VA and Defense Department, as well as your institution's policies related to GI Bill benefits. Understanding and assisting with Post-9/11 GI Bill questions is more important now than ever before. For example, eligible veterans may qualify for housing stipends for online-only students, book stipends, support for on-the-job apprenticeship programs, and more.

Students will be comparing schools to find the one that best meets their needs. Having a dedicated representative on staff who can understand and translate these benefits for both students (potential and current) and faculty/staff will help to make your institution stand out.

No two veterans have the same careers, experiences, or military incentives. While the GI Bill is a widely recognized form of financial aid for veterans, it is important to realize there are many versions of this aid and to understand each of them. Be cognizant of the resources available to help you learn about eligibility, compare benefits, and find benefits calculators.

Not all veterans will be eligible for 100 percent of the GI Bill, but all can apply for other forms of financial aid, such as grants, loans, and/or work study programs. All students should fill out a FAFSA to make sure they receive the funding necessary to complete their degrees.

Yellow Ribbon Program

The Yellow Ribbon Program, established by the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, allows institutions of higher learning (such as colleges, universities and other degree-granting schools) in the United States to voluntarily enter into an agreement with the VA to fund tuition and fee expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition and fee rate in their state. The institution can contribute a specified dollar amount of those expenses, and the VA will match the contribution, in an amount not to exceed 50 percent of the difference.

VA Work-Study Program

Eligible veterans, either full- or 3/4-time students in a degree, vocational, or professional program, can take advantage of a VA work-study program, often referred to as “earn while you learn.” This program is designed to assist the veteran (and the institution) both financially and professionally. Work performed must be related to the VA and can include, but is not limited to:

- Processing VA paperwork at schools or VA offices;
- Performing outreach services on campus, under the supervision of a VA employee;
- Performing services at VA medical facilities, other VA offices or state employment offices;
- Working in veterans’ admissions, GI Bill matters, and/or as a peer navigator; or
- Making phone calls, sending emails, and welcoming new students to campus.

Most importantly, the work completed should be linked to the veteran’s interests and abilities and the type of work needed by the institution. The VA work-study program allows for creative, fulfilling, and meaningful experiences for the student veteran and a knowledgeable and committed employee for the institution.

Financial Management

Learning how to manage personal and family finances is a critical need for many young “new generation” veterans. Despite military training, they may have little or no experience with budgeting and financial planning. Provide information and resources through financial management workshops, as well as in other areas where veterans are congregating. Many institutions have included such workshops in a veterans’ breakout during orientation, or in veteran-specific courses offered in the student’s first year.

Organizations Serving Military-Connected Students

Professional Associations

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

<https://www.cael.org/military-connected-services-serving-the-military-and-student-veterans>

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)

<https://www.naspa.org/constituent-groups/kcs/veterans>

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

<http://www.aacrao.org/resources/resources-list-view/veterans-and-service-members-issues>

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)

<https://www.aacc.nche.edu>

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU)

<http://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2016/winter/vacchi>

State and Government Agencies

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES)

<http://www.dantes.doded.mil/#sthash.sykGjYzC.dpbs>

Department of Defense Voluntary Education (DoD VolEd)

<http://www.militaryonesource.mil/voluntary-education>

Veterans Affairs (VA)

<https://www.vets.gov/education>

Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit (MCMC)

<http://www.mhec.org/multi-state-collaborative-on-military-credit>

Military and Veteran Service Organizations

Student Veterans of America (SVA)

<http://studentveterans.org>

American Legion

<https://www.legion.org>

America's Warrior Project

<http://americaswarriorpartnership.org>

Wounded Warrior Project

<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org>

Veterans Education Success

<http://veteranseducationsuccess.org>