Student veterans and higher education

In the summer of 2008 Congress approved the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act as a benefit to more than two million service members engaged in over a decade of fighting in the Middle East and in military operations around the globe. The “Post-9/11 GI Bill” provides eligible veterans with generous financial support for postsecondary education including a housing allowance and stipend for books and fees. Robust financial aid opportunities along with the recent drawdown of operations in Iraq and high rates of unemployment in the civilian sector suggest that student veteran populations will rise steadily in the future. Since taking effect in 2009, more than 817,000 veterans have pursued an educational program under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The transition from a highly structured military environment to a college or university can be overwhelming for veterans, who may confront a variety of barriers during their transition in areas related to academic preparedness and confidence, Veterans Affairs administrative procedures, denial of academic credit for military training as well as combat-related mental and physical disabilities. Additionally, as nontraditional students, veterans are set apart from their campus peers through their age, life experience, and by the strict military culture that they leave behind. The unique features that are associated with this population necessitate that higher learning settings streamline services to successfully support veterans in their transition, persistence, and integration into the larger student body. To meet this aim, the following best practices have been identified in the literature and implemented at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
Campus Support

Establish a single point of contact / central office. This office should be knowledgeable about available services, programs, and resources. This office should have solid relationships established with key campus units including, Admissions, the Office of Student Financial Aid, Dean of Students, Disability Resources & Educational Services, and the Counseling Center. Additionally, this office should have close contacts with the Department of Veterans (state and federal) as well as local community-based veterans’ organizations.

Create a Veterans Advisory Committee. To develop a diverse range of perspectives and to enhance collaborative opportunities, the formulation of a committee made-up of persons from various student affairs units, student veterans, faculty and administrators, and community veterans is essential. A committee is helpful for defining what “veteran-friendly” means for the specific institution.

Educate the campus community: Provide training and resources that pertain to veterans. Our office provides ongoing “Veteran Ally” training to faculty and staff to educate them about veterans’ issues. Topics addressed in the training include military culture, transitional experiences, as well as strategies for working with veterans. A particularly helpful strategy includes providing faculty and staff with information about questions and topics that should be avoided when working with veterans.

Additionally, we created a “Faculty & Staff Resources” link on our Veteran Student Support Services webpage. This section includes peer-reviewed and student-authored articles and resources that pertain to veterans’ issues. Resources should be screened carefully and crosschecked with veterans for accuracy in addition to being inspected for content. Topics that focus disproportionately on post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and similar trauma-focused areas should be included only sparingly. Note also that the American Council on Education has developed a Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions. http://www.vetfriendlytoolkit.org/. This useful webpage allows institutions to upload their own practices and to review best practices from other schools.
Enhance visibility and provide initiatives that honor and highlight veterans' diverse experiences.

Student veterans are concerned about attending institutions that they believe are "anti-military" or that will discredit their service and the sacrifices they have made. In addition to faculty and staff training, initiatives that highlight veterans’ issues are a critical part of a veteran-friendly program. We currently highlight student veterans at various athletic events. During a home football game that falls close to Veterans Day, we provide our veterans with free tickets and an opportunity to go on the field to be honored. We also host a month-long display at our library that features a detailed timeline, pictures, and an assortment of artifacts that showcase the University’s rich military history. The media has run stories that profile our student veterans, which provide opportunities for veterans to discuss their service backgrounds and transitional experiences. A final strategy that has been effective for enhancing visibility is our Student Veteran Discussion Panels. Over the past three years we have hosted six panels that provide an opportunity for veterans to share their personal narratives and military experiences with the larger campus community. Student veterans have positively commented that these initiatives make them feel like they are respectfully recognized and have a place on campus.

Initial Contact and Transitional Assistance

Have an effective webpage. When veterans leave the military they attend a Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Research suggests that there is great variation in terms of how the TAP is structured, though it is commonly cited as being employment focused rather than providing information on education. At the UIUC, student veterans have described their college search and the application process as “intimidating” and “confusing.” To address this limitation, a well-crafted webpage is paramount. An effective webpage should be co-designed with student veterans, easy to navigate and developed in jargon-free language. A step-by-step explanation of the application process, educational benefits, frequently asked questions, peer-to-peer support, and profiles of currently enrolled veterans should be highlighted.
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**Brand services for student veterans.** Our Housing and Career Center offices recently created sections on their webpage that brand their services for veterans. We are expanding this initiative with other campus units and working on a brochure that showcases how various campus resources can benefit veterans specifically. Other collaborators include the Women’s Resource Center, Campus Recreation, Student Legal Services, Disability Resources and Educational Services, and the Counseling Center.

**Identify veterans and make contact with them prior to their arrival on campus.** Our institution identifies veterans through their self-identification on their admissions application and through the certification of military benefits. Each semester I contact incoming veterans prior to their physical arrival on campus. This initial contact provides them with a direct point of contact at the institution and is helpful for making referrals to various campus and community offices before the rush of the first week of classes.

**Peer-to-Peer sponsors.** During the initial contact I also link interested incoming veterans with a currently enrolled veteran sponsor. Veteran sponsors are volunteers who have been on campus for at least one year and provide mentoring to new veterans in addition to introducing them to other service members and students.

**Establish a separate orientation for veterans.** Each semester we host a separate orientation for veterans. The orientation is optional but provides incoming veterans with opportunities to meet currently enrolled veterans and to learn more about support services on campus and within the community. The orientation is structured as a “Kick Off,” and we provide food and beverages along with speakers from across the campus and from the VA. Over the past three years we have made the event informal based on feedback from our veterans. *It is important to note that research suggests that student veterans do not actively participate in formal events and prefer more informal venues.*

**Communicate with veterans often.** My office maintains a veterans’ listserv. Each week I send out announcements that pertain to veterans’ topics such as campus activities, student organization events,
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changes in VA benefits, and highlights of success stories such as veterans who make the dean’s list. Students have positively reported that these weekly emails reinforce their feeling that the University recognizes and is committed to serving their diverse needs.

**Partner with the student veterans organization on campus.** Most colleges and universities have a student veterans organization that is affiliated with the national organization, Student Veterans of America. An SVO is the student veteran voice on campus and is paramount for getting perspectives of campus climate. SVOs are also helpful for enhancing visibility and for welcoming incoming student veterans. At the UIUC, I work very closely with the Illini Veterans in all phases of program development.

**Establish a veterans’ lounge.** One of the most successful additions to our program was the Student Veteran Lounge that opened in January 2013. The lounge, housed inside our popular student union, is open to all students but was created to honor our veterans in particular. With the assistance of veteran volunteers, the lounge provides a place for veterans to study, watch television, socialize, and access veteran-specific information.

**Tutoring.** The Department of Veterans Affairs provides financial compensation for individual tutoring. We also have a list of tutors that offer free or reduced services for veterans.

**Disability and Mental Health**

**Change the name of the disability services office.** Many veterans have disabilities that are new, so they may not be accustomed to defining themselves as a person with a disability. Additionally, some veterans associate a negative stigma with the word “disability” and are therefore less likely to access services.

**Train counseling staff.** A counseling office should have a designated counselor who is a part of the Veterans Advisory Committee and who can serve as the central contract for that office. This person should access webinars, attend conferences and other specialized trainings and be able to share this information with his/her peers.
Administration: Policies and Procedures

Activation and deployment support. Approximately ten percent of our veterans remain affiliated with the National Guard or a reserve component of the armed forces. In situations where a student veteran is activated and forced to leave his/her degree program, a clearly defined policy is in place. This policy is provided during the orientation and also included on our webpage. Additionally, our office continues to correspond with activated students and establishes a re-entry meeting upon their deactivation.

Track veterans’ enrollment and progress. To monitor veterans’ progress toward an academic goal, keep track of the number of student veterans on campus as well as key indicators; such National Guard and Reserve affiliation, grade point average, withdrawal, and themes that emerge over time.

Closing Recommendations

Career / Job Fairs that are geared toward hiring veterans. Student veterans are career-focused and often need support to articulate their military backgrounds onto a civilian resume. Our Career Center has designated an employee who works exclusively with student veterans in this area. This person also provides ongoing emails of job opportunities and career fairs with a list of employers who are looking to hire veterans.

Establish a class for credit for incoming veterans. We recently developed an LAS-101 section for veterans. This mandatory course was co-developed with a student veteran to provide new learners with skills and competencies that prepare them for the rigors of the University. In addition to traditional assignments, the course includes a tour of the campus and also embeds guest speakers from various campus units and the VA.