

Veterans Success Center Program Statement

Background

Due to the combined wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the implementation of the Post 9/11 GIBILL in 2009, the population of Veterans on campus increased 183% since the fall of 2008 to a total of 395. The population of family members using transferred benefits has increased 312% to a total of 122 students. Between students using the GIBILL, military related federal tuition assistance, and state funded grants there are nearly 1,000 veterans, military, and immediate family member students on campus. With the completion of mission in Iraq, the upcoming withdrawal from Afghanistan, and expected reductions in the size of the military force the number of those using benefits will continue to rise over the next fifteen years. It is important that Purdue University position itself to best serve this population.

There are two priorities when developing a strategy to serve veterans; access to benefits and the development and coordination of programming and services. Both of these are most prudently served by the creation of a Veterans Success Center.

Access to Benefits

Utilizing education benefits is confusing and often difficult. It is imperative that veteran students have access to the infrastructure needed to make their education benefits function properly. "Although they are the beneficiaries of a new GI Bill that mitigates the financial burden of college attendance, some veterans struggle to overcome bureaucratic, information, or enrollment hurdles as they transition into the higher education community."¹ Benefit usage most often starts with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and eventually leads to no less than four campus offices. This can seem like a frustrating loop and causes unneeded dissatisfaction. The creation of a well-placed and publicized Veterans Success Center would go a long way to establishing an entry and consolidation point to streamline the benefit process.

Development and Coordination of Programming and Services

The challenge of transitioning to college is compounded for service members who are also transitioning from a military environment. It is exponentially compounded if the service member experienced combat:

As a subpopulation of adult learners, military and veteran students also often have unique challenges that other nontraditional students do not face. Veterans who served

¹ *From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members*, Washington: American Council on Education, 2012, 11.

in combat may experience social and cognitive dissonance as they adjust to the civilian college environment. Some veterans return from combat with physical or psychological readjustment challenges and require academic and disability accommodations to successfully reintegrate.²

In order to help veterans transition to the college environment it is vital to provide a targeted approach. In response to a need identified by the Purdue Student Government and the Purdue Student Veterans Organization, the Provost directed a Coordinator of Military Veteran and Nontraditional Student Programs be hired to coordinate and develop programming and services to best help veteran students succeed.

Veterans Success Center

One of the most effective means to increase access to benefits and develop and coordinate services is through the creation of a Veterans Success Center (VSC). Purdue University currently takes a decentralized approach to serving veterans, but this does not follow the national trend. In 2009 56% of public four year education institutions had a dedicated veterans' office and in 2012 this number has grown to 75%.³

According to the American Council on Education's Veterans Friendly Toolkit, a VSC is vital to the development of a strong veteran friendly campus. The center has the ability to be programmed to take advantage of existing campus services and veteran needs:

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, etc.).⁴

Additionally, *Called to Serve: A Handbook on Student Veterans and Higher Education* discusses distinct advantages of a one-stop VSC:

1. Creates increased departmental synergy
2. Results in potential deeper understanding of students needs on the part of staff members
3. Provides deliberate opportunities for community members to advocate on behalf of student veterans

² Ibid., 11.

³ Ibid., 18.

⁴ Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions, <http://vetfriendlytoolkit.org/creprog/VetSpace.cfm> (accessed December 27, 2012).

4. Results in greater continuity of services, including the staff members who work with and know the student veteran and service member community.⁵

In addition to creating a one-stop-shop, the VSC would also provide space for a veterans lounge and study space:

A veteran 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 to be positioned. Natural peer mentorship tends to develop in these locations, which is a win-win for both students and administrators.⁶

Space Programming

A Purdue University Veterans Success Center would consist of the following programmed space:

- Office space for the Coordinator of Military Veteran and Nontraditional Student Programs
- Space available for two to three students hired under the VA Work Study Program
- Space available to host campus partners such as Admissions, Veterans Certifying Officials, Financial Aid, Academic Advisors, and other Counselors as needed
- Veteran student lounge/study space
- Space for the Purdue Student Veterans Organization executive functions
- Resource space for access to veterans services
- Space programmable for private meetings, resource for Purdue Student Veterans Organization, hosting VA counselors and other community veteran resources, providing tutoring, or as a study table

Functional Services Provided

Services and programming that would be provided through the Veterans Success Center:

- Benefit and admissions counseling
- Access to the certification of benefits
- Veterans mentoring and orientation program
- Green Zone veterans awareness training for faculty and staff
- Community partnerships with veterans services

⁵ Florence A. Hamrick, Corey B. Rummann and Associates, *Called to Serve: A Handbook on Student Veterans and Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013, 266.

⁶ ToolKit for Veteran Friendly Institutions, <http://vetfriendlytoolkit.org/creprog/VetSpace.cfm> (accessed December 27, 2012).

Anticipated Utilization

The VSC would be staffed full-time by the Coordinator of Military Veteran and Nontraditional Student Programs. Additionally, Purdue staff would be available as needed to meet with veteran students, members of the military, and benefit using family members in order to process and explain benefits as well as other services. A survey was conducted of Big Ten institutions to determine comparable populations and services. Both Indiana University and the University of Illinois were benchmarked to determine the following utilization.

Anticipated Hours:

- The staffed office hours would be 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday
- The space would be accessible to the Purdue Student Veterans Organization by card swipe access during PMU hours
- The veterans lounge would be accessible to the student veterans by card swipe access during PMU hours
- Depending on programming and services the office will occasionally be open into the evenings and weekends

Anticipated Usage:

- The number of students seeking services would average 10 students per day with peak hours prior to and shortly after the start of each semester
- The number of students utilizing the lounge on a daily basis would be 15-20 students
- The Purdue Student Veterans Organization maintains normal office hours and 1-3 executive members would utilize the space at least an hour each week day
- Additional staff would occupy the space 2-3 days per week
- Occasional representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs and other outside entities would occupy the space on a needs basis

Adjacencies

It would be ideal for a Veterans Success Center to be adjacent to a similarly programmed center for Nontraditional Students. Veterans and nontraditional students are both commonly commuter students and share some of the same concerns. The proximity would facilitate the coordination and programming of services thereby increasing the impact of two stand-alone programs.

The Purdue Memorial Union and the Veterans Success Center

Purdue University has a long history of honoring and serving student veterans. The Purdue Memorial Union (PMU) was built shortly after WWI to honor Purdue students who served with the following purpose:

The Union stands as a permanent memorial to the Purdue men and women who served in defense of their country, protecting the very freedoms that we enjoy today. It is our duty and privilege to maintain the union as a point of identification with the University and its traditions, as a community landmark, and as a symbol of the unity of spirit that transcends our individual differences.⁷

The needs of today's service members are more complex than when the PMU was opened in 1924. The addition of a Veterans Resource Center located inside the Purdue Memorial Union would serve as a modern re-dedication of that mission.

⁷ <http://www.union.purdue.edu/HTML/PMU/AboutUs.aspx> (accessed December 26, 2012).