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Article 4

Welcome Home: Understanding and Serving Veteran Transition and Identity Development in College


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Introduction

With the advent of the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, student veterans are becoming increasingly present on college campuses across the nation. Currently, there are over 660,000 veterans within the United States attending postsecondary educational opportunities with 329,000 of those utilizing their educational benefits (National Center for Educational Statistics 2011; Radford, 2010). With these numbers, almost 4% of U.S. undergraduate students are veterans (Radford, 2010), with 38% of the veterans utilizing their veterans’ educational benefits. It is given that there could be many more veterans on college campuses since the report does not include benefits-ineligible veterans or those veterans who are not utilizing their benefits.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki understands that “veteran-students transitioning from active duty service to civilian educational pursuits face unique challenges entering the college setting” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Additionally, President Barack Obama has supported the transition of veterans by expanding funding for transitional programs in his 2012 budget (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Accordingly, colleges and universities are asked to increase tailored services, including counseling, to ease the transition of veterans to campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011; Rumann &
Hamrick, 2009). In addition, universities are encouraged to provide “mental health staff who understand veterans’ issues” (Radford, 2010, p. 5).

For those veterans returning, one of the areas of concern is managing “service-connected injuries” (Radford, 2010). Of the 1.4 million veterans eligible for Veterans Administration (VA) healthcare, over 700,000 have been treated (Veterans for Common Sense, 2011). From those treated by the VA healthcare system over 360,000, or 52% of patients, presented with some type of mental health condition. Further, nearly 18% of those soldiers returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) are receiving disability compensation for psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Cook & Kim, 2009; Veterans for Common Sense, 2011). Finally, approximately 21% are still waiting for a VA decision and approximately 9,500 new claims are filed each month (Veterans for Common Sense, 2011).

Most alarming, however, is the increase in suicide ideation and successful suicide attempts among returning veterans. The VA received 460,000 total calls to their crisis line from January 2011 until July 2011 (Veterans for Common Sense, 2011). From those calls, VA crisis providers stopped over 16,855 suicides from completion. However, nearly 4,600 service members, with varied deployment statuses, committed suicide. With the increasing rates of service members and veterans returning from deployment with varying degrees of mental health, it is imperative that mental health and student affairs professionals be educated in the best practices for student veteran success. This article will outline transition issues of student veterans, as well as introduce the Veteran Friendly Environment Model (Van Dusen, 2011) as a guide for implementing a successful campus environment.

**Student Veteran Transition**

With the expansion of educational benefits provided through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, institutions of higher education are encountering an influx of veterans on campuses (O’Herrin, 2011). Once veterans enroll in college, the institution must be committed to understanding how they develop their identity and make meaning as it relates to their transition. This issue is not new; it has existed since the inception of the original G.I. Bill of 1944. In fact, adjustment to college life was a concern of World War II veterans. As important as this issue may seem, there is a fine line between awareness and attentiveness to transition and stigmatizing veterans.

Student veterans encounter a vast array of transition issues as they arrive on the college campus. Issues range from role incongruities, maturity issues, relationships, and identity renegotiation (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Role incongruities consisted of “military and academic life, the incompatibilities of lingering stress and anxiety with returning to college, and enacting aspects of the student role during deployment and aspects of the military role during college” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 440). Maturity was enhanced for six student veteran in the Rumann and Hamrick study (2010), as each said that they were more motivated to complete their degrees after they had returned from service. In terms of relationships, Rumann and Hamrick found that returning veterans found difficulty in initiating and maintaining previous relationships because of the time lapse where nonveteran students had become several semesters older than the student
veteran. With the difficulty in initiating and maintaining relationships, some veterans feel a sense of isolation because they can share their experiences only with a selective number of others, namely other veterans (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Garza-Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Many student veterans feel a sense of frustration because of the “daunting and unfamiliar bureaucracy of higher education” (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011). O’Herrin (2011) pointed out that the military is also a complex structure, but soldiers are trained from the beginning of their careers to navigate that system.

Recent research (Cook & Kim, 2009; Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, 2010; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Van Dusen, 2011) highlights the need for colleges and universities to be the leaders in raising awareness of the needs of student veterans as a first step in developing effective support services. Veterans affairs staff members, especially trained counselors (Persky & Oliver, 2011), serve a critical role in helping veterans in their transition back to college; but with the increasing number of veterans, they may become overextended (Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Although student veteran transitions are not novel for colleges and universities, the roles of student, service member, and veteran have become “less clear cut and bonded and are often experienced simultaneously as well as sequentially” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 32). Because of this, Rumann and Hamrick (2009) suggested “establishing proactive and working partnerships to help create a more seamless environment for students who need to successfully navigate multiple agencies, organizations, and bureaucracies to help create or find supportive individuals and environments to facilitate the transitions of student veterans” (p. 32).

Student services provided by colleges and universities, including counseling, are not the only areas of concern when addressing a veteran’s transition to college life. The curricula can also be an obstacle. Branker (2009) and O’Herrin (2011) identified the need for college curricula to be redesigned to include the experiences of student veterans, especially those with disabilities. College faculty members essentially strive to teach their students how to become self-sufficient problem solvers once they enter the real world.

With over 620,000 of the 2.2 million soldiers returning from the OIF and/or OEF conflicts making medical claims with the VA (Veterans for Common Sense, 2011), universities must concentrate on this increasing subcomponent of the veteran student population. Burnett and Segoria (2009) highlighted current collaborative approaches being utilized by colleges and universities involving Disabled Student Services (DSS) and Veterans Services Offices, campus programs, and community agencies. Because of the warrior mentality, many returning veterans do not identify themselves as someone that would qualify to receive support from a DSS office. The Veterans Service Office and the DSS office will need a strong relationship to lessen reluctance of veterans to seek the DSS services, allowing veterans to utilize the benefits of appropriate accommodations and support.

Other ways for universities to optimize the success of veterans include; institution-wide committees, student groups, on campus mentors, and increased faculty and staff training (Persky & Oliver, 2011). Burnett and Segoria (2009) and Persky and Oliver (2011) have challenged universities and colleges to be the front-runners in establishing a collaborative relationship with both on-campus and off-campus military support programs to help veterans with disabilities make a successful transition into the
classroom. In addition, O’Herrin (2011) has suggested that colleges should establish specific points of contact in each department to help student veterans navigate the institution.

DiRamio et al. (2008) examined the potential transition issues that affected veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. DiRamio et al. (2008) discussed transition theories and applied the “Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out” model, formulated by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989), to veterans during their combat deployment and their transition into college. When addressing transition during active duty deployment, DiRamio et al. (2008) utilized the “Moving In” stage as follows: why join?, getting “called up,” and serving overseas. The “Moving Through” stage was addressed through discussion of combat duty, memorable experiences, and earning credits. The “Moving Out” stage was identified through discussion of transition programs, returning home, and academic preparation. When veterans transitioned to college, DiRamio and associates (2008) identified transition issues as follows: “connecting with peers, blending in, faculty, the campus veterans’ office, financial concerns, disability services, and mental health” (p. 80).

After discussion of each issue, DiRamio et al. (2008) identified the implications for student affairs administrators. Administrators should aid veterans through the implementation of a personalized, holistic approach. Institutions could train veteran-friendly mentors across campus. These advocates can meet with students to direct participants to appropriate services such as: financial aid, counseling, student organizations, disability services, academic advising, faculty members, and institutional research. DiRamio et al. (2008) also reported female student veterans experience higher levels of financial strain and are susceptible to being victims of sexual assault.

In the summer of 2009, the American Council of Education released a report that discussed how institutions of higher education are currently structuring their veterans’ services and also interviewed a focus group of student veterans to identify their concerns (Cook & Kim, 2009). Cook and Kim (2009) and O’Herrin (2011) estimated that more than half of all institutions surveyed have some sort of veterans’ service program, with public universities and community colleges being more likely to provide these services. They also concluded that the majority of institutions anticipate changing their current structure over the next 5 years through programs that will better educate faculty and staff about the needs of veterans and pursuing grant funds to improve current student services for veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2011). The focus group of student veterans identified the areas of concern as follows: currently available campus services and programs, including a lack of flexibility of some campus programs with respect to military students’ sometimes unpredictable deployment schedule in the armed forces; uncertainty about campus recognition of civilian courses taken while in the military or formal training or college courses obtained as a service member; and lack of strong guidance about navigating the maze of G.I. Bill education benefits (Persky & Oliver, 2011). Regardless of military branch or geographic location, these issues resonated amongst student veterans.

In summation, Student Veterans of America (2011) highlighted the following issues related to student veterans returning to colleges: inflexible / bureaucratic administrative structures and lack of preparation by university systems; unique social barriers with student body as result of age and experience; loss of sense of purpose,
teamwork, and camaraderie experienced while serving; need for cohesive interaction with “true” peers; and significant mental health barriers as a result of military service.

With all of the challenges that student veterans face to be successful, it is the duty of campus administration and staff to implement a model that ensures their opportunity for success. The below model in effect has been effective in informing campus faculty and staff about the unique transition needs of student veterans, as well as providing an outline for which the university can strive to maintain.

**Veteran Friendly Environment Model**

As a result of research conducted by Van Dusen (2011), it was determined that overall campus environment has a significant impact on student veterans’ intent to persist at their current institution of higher education. It was concluded that students conveyed mixed feelings about their campus environment and that for the student veteran to be successful, he or she must have a sense of belonging to the institution in which he or she is enrolled. Van Dusen (2011) suggested that colleges and universities adopt the Veteran Friendly Environment Model. The levels of the Veteran Friendly Environment Model (Van Dusen, 2011) are as follows: policy, institutional, departmental, and individual.

![Veteran Friendly Environment Model Diagram]

The policy level can be influenced at the institutional or governing board level. For example, in Texas, the Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) sets educational policy for all public institutions. This coordinating board sets the criteria for
the core curricula, transfer of credits, and overall residency requirements. In July 2011, SB 1736 was signed into law (Thomas, 2011). This law will require state institutions of higher education to establish “military friendly” transfer of credit policies. Currently, individual colleges and universities are awaiting the protocol to be set by the coordinating board. Additionally, residency requirements set by the coordinating board enable any veteran that receives federal veteran’s benefits is able to receive in-state tuition through declaring intent to become a permanent resident of Texas (THECB, 2011). There may be some difficulty in influencing change at this level, especially at a public institution.

At the institutional level, if there is a commitment from institutional leadership, a paradigm shift is more possible. The first step is to effectively acclimatize student veterans to the campus through new student orientation and a transitions seminar. The next step is to establish a mentor program, either peer-to-peer or university employee-to-student, to assist the student veteran as he or she is engaged in his or her academic pursuits. An additional strategy is the establishment of an in-service educational program for faculty and staff to voluntarily participate.

At Texas Tech University, the “Green Zone” program was established to educate university faculty and staff on the issues veterans may be facing as they are pursuing their education. Using the concept developed for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered “Allies Training,” faculty and staff that have completed the training series are given a sticker to put on their office door to indicate that their office is a “Veteran Friendly Area of Operation.” Four learning outcomes have been established for this training. The first is a description of the current veteran population at the university. The second is a summary the benefits available to veterans. The third is to assist participants in the recognition of issues commonly experienced by student veterans. Finally, campus and community referral resources available for student veterans are identified. The final component of the implementation of this program was to educate the students about what the “Green Zone” symbol means. A poster was created to advertise the program. At the beginning of the academic year, the campus newspaper ran an article about the program. Finally, in the monthly announcements sent to student veterans, there has been an explanation of the program.

At the departmental level, the veteran programs office is working to create a system to effectively serve the needs of student veterans. In collaboration with institutional research and enrollment management services, a system to track academic success is in the process of being developed. At the college and large departmental level, a veteran liaison has been appointed to ensure communication if a student veteran is identified as struggling in any way. In order to assist veterans in understanding the campus structure, the veterans’ programs office has also created a chain of command guide that assigns military rank to the university chain of command. Outreach and educational programs are continually being developed to ensure that student veterans are being effectively served.

At the individual level, the university must provide educational opportunities for non-veteran students to have a better understanding of their student veteran classmates. Pop culture often portrays the military experience in a negative light. One suggestion would be to incorporate veteran and combat experiences in the summer reading program to give incoming students a more realistic image of the experiences of veterans. Additionally, the university community should celebrate and commemorate veteran’s
holidays, such as Memorial Day, September 11, and Veteran’s Day, to show appreciation to the veterans who served and to better educate the campus community on the sacrifices our veterans have made. Finally, the institution must establish individual traditions that celebrate veterans. One example is the “Believe in Heroes” football game at Texas Tech University. This partnership between the university, Under Armor, and the Wounded Warrior Project gives the university’s commitment to veterans’ national exposure and raises money to support the Wounded Warrior Project.

Conclusion

Student veterans are a growing population on college campuses across the nation. It is critical for counselors and higher education administrators to understand their unique needs, including mental health issues, to provide support and enhance their academic experiences. The model by Van Dusen (2011), outlined above, provides faculty and staff members an outline and specific examples for how the campus environment can be used as a tool for student veteran retention. Campuses can promote a sense of belonging for the student veteran by adopting specific strategies at the policy, institution, departmental, and individual level.

References


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