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Veteran and Military Student Challenges

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Abstract

It is imperative that institutions of higher education have the tools in place to assist veteran and military students transitioning into higher education. This population of learners has unique needs and experiences which make their transition different than the traditional learner. It is necessary for institutions that serve this population to disseminate the tools to those prospective students. Recognizing the veteran and military student early in the application process will afford the student the best chance of success.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify challenges veteran and military students currently enrolled in higher education institutions have experienced as they transition from the regimented military life to one of a less formal institutional life. These troops are returning to an environment where it is very difficult to obtain a good paying job based on their military experience and training. The difficulty is leading them to use the GI Bill and veteran and military student specific programs that they have access to, in order to work toward a degree in the hopes of obtaining a well-paying job.

Many of the colleges and universities have designed programs to assist this population with completing their degree. It is the challenge of the institution to publicize these programs in a way that catches the attention of the potential veteran and military student. This paper walks through the challenges faced by many of veteran and military members who are entering secondary education for the first time while bringing a wealth of experience after their service. The challenges that many of these students face are addressed, including: Transitioning from Active Duty to Student; Becoming a Student; GI Bill; Evaluating Credit for Military Service and Training and Support Directed Programs.

Background

Colleges and universities have struggled to design effective programs which assist the veteran and military student with degree completion. The veteran and military students have special needs and unique challenges when seeking to achieve degree completion. It is imperative for the institution to recognize these needs and challenges when the veteran and military student enrolls at the institution.

Many of the veteran and military students attending higher education institutions use some version of the GI Bill. The versions that are used most frequently are the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post 9/11 – GI Bill. The Post 9/11 - GI Bill allows any veteran with active duty service on or after September 11, 2001, to

receive educational benefits. According to the study on Services and Support Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions, 2012-13, by Queen and Lewis (2014), there were 265,300 military servicemembers and veterans, enrolled in public four-year institutions. As many veteran and military students have converged on college campuses since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, some institutions have seen an increase upwards of 65% in students using the GI Bill (Brown & Gross, 2011; Kirkwood, 2014; Moon & Schma, 2011; Schnoebelen, 2013).

Programs have been developed within the higher education system to contribute to veteran and military student success. Veteran-specific programs facilitate a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community and promote well-being and success for veterans (Gregg, Howell & Shordike, 2016, p. 7). In order to serve this unique population, government has set the criteria and standards for being “Military Friendly” or “Veteran Friendly.” Becoming a “Military Friendly” institution requires specific criteria be met in order to receive that honor. Receiving the designation of “Military Friendly” speaks to the commitment of the institution towards the student-centered practices and being service-oriented. These criteria are not rated by students, but by the institution itself reporting the services they provide. According to Military Friendly®, the ratings are evolving and each year the institution is held to a higher standard than previous, based on “improved methodology, criteria and weightings” (2018, para. 1). The key criteria used to define a “Military Friendly” institution provided by Brown and Gross (2011) include the following:

- Offering priority registration for military students
- Simplified or expedited application process
- Flexible enrollment deadlines
- Academic and counseling services targeted to military students
- Special Web pages for returning military students
- Support groups
- Transfer credit policies that minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of coursework
- Limited academic residency requirement of 25% of undergraduate degree programs on campus and 30% for fully online programs
- Acceptance of ACE credit recommendations for learning experiences in the armed forces
- Awarding of credit for college level learning validated through testing, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Services exams, and Excelsior College Testing
- Deferred tuition payment plans
- Veterans lounges and centers
- Research focus on meeting the needs of military students

(p. 2)

Transitioning from Active Duty to Student

The veteran and military students experience transitions which are unlike those experienced by a traditional student when seeking a higher education degree. An action as normal as enrolling for college courses can be a tremendous challenge for this population. The veteran and military student may be overseas or active duty in another part of the country and unable to register directly at the institution. According to Rumann (2010), students who have been members of the military, experienced conflict, and enroll for courses, expect to receive support specific to their needs. As the student has recently separated from the military, it may be difficult to feel as though they belong at the institution. As Napham and Elliott (2015) state, “Even if veterans are surrounded by social support, they may still feel alone if no one can relate to their experiences” (p. 44).

Stewart (2016) posits “Successful Military Friendly schools build relationships with prospective military students ‘right from the beginning’ and continue those relationships through the students’ matriculation” (p. 17). As shared by Whikehart (2010), for the institution to have success with students reaching

graduation, the following is required: “The infrastructure of the mission must be sustainable, focused, and designed for flexibility and rapid response” to this population (p. 921). If the students are unable to obtain the required support, they may not continue with their degree. This phenomenon applies to those who have attended prior to being deployed, and to those who are enrolling for the first time (Ackerman, DiRamio & Garza Mitchell, 2009).

Becoming a Student

Re-enrolling or enrolling as a student is not as simple as it may seem. The veteran and military student may have challenges that are unlike the traditional student transitioning from high school to college (Schnoebelen, 2013; Brown & Gross, 2011). As stated by Mr. Dakduk, vice president of University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) chapter of Student Veterans of America, “Assimilating back into life as a civilian and a student isn’t always easy” (Mangan, 2009, p. 2). Becoming a part of the community takes time and effort on the part of the veteran and military student. Student Veteran Organizations (SVOs) provide a supportive environment where veterans are unlikely to feel the need to hide their affiliation to the military (Summerlot, Green & Parker, 2009).

As the number of veteran and military students pursuing a secondary degree has and continues to increase, it behooves the institution to provide programming for this unique population. One way institutions welcome students and indoctrinate them to the life of university participation is through orientation. Orientation is generally conducted at institutions right before or during the beginning weeks of the fall semesters and geared towards the traditional freshman. Veterans who use the GI Bill tend to be older, between the ages of 25 and 34, than the traditional student, and are often married (Field, Hebel & Smallwood, 2008). Understanding the veteran student may not need the same level of orientation as the traditional student is important. As Dillard and Yu shared, “First-year seminars have been proven to establish lasting rapport between students and strong mentorships between faculty and students” (2016, p. 185). The goal of the orientation for the veteran student “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” (American Council on Education [ACE], 2018a, p. 8). It would be beneficial for each institution which enrolls veteran and military students to have an orientation program designed to meet their needs.

Orientation programs have been developed specifically for the veteran and military student at many universities (Field et al., 2008; Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe & Sanders, 2010). Field et al. (2008) noted, “At the University of California at Berkeley, veterans get a special orientation program and priority enrollment—a privilege previously reserved for athletes and disabled students” (p. 6). According to Moon and Schma (2011), the Student Affairs Leadership Council recommends offering separate and specific orientation programs for veterans, delivered by key university contacts, for veteran and military students to receive pertinent information which may impact this population of learners. As they are in a different place based on age and experience, it behooves the institution to provide an orientation program designed specifically to meet those needs (Field et al., 2008).

GI Bill

Upon the signing of the legislation to put forth the first GI Bill, Franklin D. Roosevelt stated the reasoning behind the legislation which governs the GI Bill is that the members of our armed forces are due this assistance because “they have been compelled to make greater economic sacrifice and every other kind of sacrifice than the rest of us, and are entitled to definite action to take care of their special problems” (“History and Timeline,” n.d., para. 25).

According to McGrevey and Kehrer (2009), under the provisions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, effective August 1, 2009, “Veterans who pursue college level training at the associate degree level or higher will receive tuition and fees . . . not to exceed the cost of the most expensive in-state public institution of higher education” (p. 92). More recently, a study by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) examined the completion rates of veterans within higher education. The “Million Records Project” sought to examine the completion rates of veterans with the intent of determining the best practices and procedures to promote the best outcome for student success within this population (Cate, 2014). The Million Records Project specifically narrowed in on those veterans who used the more recent versions of the GI Bill — The Montgomery GI Bill or the Post 9/11 GI Bill between 2002 and 2010 (Cate, 2014, p. iv).

In years past, GI Bills have allowed usage to the veteran student for up to 10 years’ time. Unlike previous educational bills the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill can be used for up to 15 years, cover a total of 36 months of tuition payments, and unlike any previous GI Bills, can be transferred to a family member (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009). The Post-9/11 GI Bill allows funding for books and a living allowance for those attending educational institutions. As of Fiscal Year 2012, there were 945,052 veterans utilizing the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Kirkwood, 2014, para. 5). More recent changes to the Post-9-11 GI Bill, now known as the “Forever GI Bill – Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act” include the “Elimination of the 15-year limitation to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill Program” for those who are separated after January 1, 2013 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017, para. 2).

The cost of the student’s education is covered in most cases, as well as partial living expenses during the time of school. That is, if the money comes through. According to the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, “65% of military service members and veterans borrowed no money” to complete their education (Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2017, p. 1). Part of the financial challenge for military and veterans is receiving the educational benefits. An Air Force veteran complained, “It took eight or more weeks to receive benefits during which time I had to come up with out-of-pocket expenses for tuition and related college expenses” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 9). Institutions have put policies in place to remedy the stress created during this waiting period. An additional challenge to the veteran and military student is the fact that not all campuses have the ability or have programs in place at their institution which would assist the new veteran and military student (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 8).

Many veterans return to a place which they feel comfortable, may have family or friends, and where they intend to start their life as a civilian. This may or may not be the location which they lived prior to their time in the service. It is imperative that the cost of tuition not be insurmountable as they search for a location to begin their degree. A tremendous hindrance to the cost of a postsecondary education is the difference between a resident and non-resident of the institution’s state. It has become apparent to institutions that, in order to support the veteran and military student as much as possible, the residency requirement must be waived. Of the public four-year institutions enrolling veteran and military students, 46% reported that they provide in-state tuition to those students, regardless of their length of residency (Queen & Lewis, 2014).

Evaluating Credit for Military Service and Training

Veteran and military students bring much experience and training with them when enrolling for courses at a college or university. Training can be generalized, much like boot camp and would count for nine credits at most colleges. In order to receive credit for any military training one’s military transcript is required. The evaluation is completed through the American Council on Education (ACE) which was created during the first World War and assists military members and colleges with evaluating the training and experience connected to military service (“College Credit for Experience,” n.d.). Each branch of the military had a

specific system which was used to record the military education and credits for experience of each member.

In March, 2013, the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTES) switched from the multiple transcripts for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard and adopted the Joint Service Transcript (JST) as the official transcript for their members. The JST provides validation and documents the recommended college credit for personnel in these services. DANTES Director Dr. Berry stated the JST provides for a “single officially recognized military transcript” (DANTES and Naval Educational and Training Command Public Affairs [DANTES and NETC Public Affairs], 2013, para. 4). The Air Force continues to use the CCAF to capture training and experiences of their members.

The American Council on Education (ACE) continues to evaluate the military schools, correspondence courses, and occupational training in order to determine if they qualify for credit. “The ACE military evaluations program is funded by the Department of Defense (DOD) and coordinated through DANTES” (“College Credit for Experience,” n.d., para. 3). In addition to the ACE credits being awarded, Texas A&M University System partnered with Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Central Texas College and the Texas Workforce Commission to provide veterans credits towards their degree, based on the skills that were learned in the armed forces (Reed, 2013). This is the first program of its kind and really speaks to the value of the experience military members have obtained.

The number of hours awarded and the recognition for experience while on military duty does much to encourage the military and veteran student, while also putting them on an educational trek that is not quite as daunting. There are, however, inconsistencies with the awarding of credit for experience that often was unclear and left students wondering why they did not receive the credit they felt they earned (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). ACE reviews whether or not a course or occupation has the necessary content, scope and rigor to apply college credit and makes that recommendation. However, it is at the discretion of the institution to award credit (American Council on Education [ACE], 2018b). Of the public four-year degree granting institutions, 90% award academic credit to the veteran and military student for military training (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Ultimately, this initiative puts the military and veteran student on a trajectory to re-enter the workforce and begin their post-military career much sooner.

Support Directed Programs

The definition of a military veteran as “defined by federal law, moral code and military service as any person who served for any length of time in any military branch of service” (“What Is a Veteran?,” 1973, p. 1). In recent years, it has been the norm for institutions to receive the designation of “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates their meeting explicit criteria to address the specific needs of the military and veteran student population. How these students are received by their peers at the university, the campus and classroom climate, and how they are able to interact with others university as a whole will impact their entire experience and ability to be successful through degree completion.

As Moon and Schma (2011) state, “28% of adult learners comprise the student population,” (p. 53). There is much value in the life experiences the military and veteran student brings to the classroom. There can also be many challenges. It has been stated that “Student veterans report feeling isolated, from both fellow veterans and anybody remotely familiar with military culture. And they often feel at odds with younger classmates” (Sander, 2012, p. A3). The differences in age and maturity can lead to tense moments or awkward exchanges between classmates. Naphan and Elliott (2015) found “The greater the social cohesion they felt while in the military, the more difficult was their transition into civilian life” (p. 44-45). Add in a mental disability that neither the military and veteran student nor the traditional student may be aware of, and the interactions can be an extremely difficult.

It is imperative for the university system to provide veteran and military specific programs which meet the needs of the veteran and military students enrolled at their institution. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) state the importance of specific veterans' office on campus with knowledgeable staff who are able to provide resources to the military and veteran student. Having a central office to provide the necessary guidance is appreciated by the student. Areas of support may be academic/tutoring, academic advising, study skills workshops, assistance with employment and career planning, financial aid, mental health counseling, disability services and VetSuccess programs. As this population has experienced many life events unlike those of the traditional college student, it is crucial to provide services which address the needs of the veteran and military student.

Conclusion

The number of veteran and military students at secondary institutions continues to increase. Identifying challenges that this population has experienced as they transitioned from military to civilian student will afford the institutions a way to disseminate a path for the student to use as a guide for success. It is essential for the institution to address specific program areas which research has shown are necessary for the success of this population.

It begins with the transition from active duty to student by developing the infrastructure to build the relationship. The first contact from the potential student should make the veteran or military member feel as though they belong at the institution. Transition and orientation courses specific to this population assist by getting them into the frame of mind as a student to study and attend classes, assimilating to the civilian institution, and building a support network of peers. The GI Bill is a key piece of the success for this group of students. There are many facets to the GI Bill, it is constantly evolving. The latest version of the Post-9/11 GI Bill affords the veteran and military member an unlimited timeline to complete their degree, within the bounds of the 36 months of tuition. In many cases, the veteran and military student has funds available for books and living allowance which eliminates or reduces the need to work while a student. The number of credits to reach matriculation for each veteran and military member differs. Through the American Council on Education (ACE), the military training and experience is evaluated for awarding credit, however it is still up to the discretion of the institution to award credit as reviewed. More than 90% of four-year institutions which award academic credit for military training. And finally, support directed programs are essential. This population of learners has life experience that many cannot relate to or fathom. A central office is critical to the veteran and military students success; a clearing house of services, which the veteran and military student can contact for support or assistance in academics, advising, study skills, career planning, mental health, disability services and VetSuccess programs.

Through meeting these challenges, the veteran and military student is able to move from application to matriculation, while also feeling their needs were met and that they are a part of a broader community.

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