

Veterans on Campus

The Essentials for Advisers, Staff, and Faculty

by Dr. Nicholas J. Osborne



It is no surprise to the higher education community that veterans are arriving on campuses across the country, and this population is forecasted to grow. Since the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act took effect in 2009, more than 1 million veterans have pursued an educational program. With a majority of departing service members aged 35 or younger, veteran populations will continue to rise in higher education and necessitate a new wave of assistive services and research.

Veterans are a unique population of learners who require specialized support and attention. As students, veterans are nontraditional in that they are more likely to be first-generation, to be older than their peers, to have dependents, to be career-focused and to have had a break in their education. Additionally, many veterans who are college bound have served in various combat capacities prior to their enrollment; these experiences have matured them and set them apart from their civilian peers. Finally, for veterans who were injured or wounded during their service, an acquired disability adds another layer of complexity with regard to serving them and leveraging higher education support services effectively.

In order to effectively serve veterans on your campus, it is imperative to learn more about the diverse experiences of this population and the ways that you can offer support.

Some Ways to Offer Veterans on Campus Your Support:

Cultural Differences

Veterans arrive at college after having spent a good portion of time living and working within a unique environment. In addition to a military alphabet and collection of traditions, there is a distinct culture within the military, which can be characterized as highly structured and hierarchical. Getting up early, emphasis on physical fitness, long and irregular work schedules, family separation, moving every couple of years, and the threat of injury and death are a few core examples of what makes a military career unique. Some veterans speak of the military as a “different world” when compared to civilian society. While on campus, veterans are likely to encounter these differences in culture.

The Veterans Office

Increasing numbers of veterans on campus have precipitated the establishment of Veterans Offices at most colleges. This office is the central contact for student veterans and provides assistance with their application and transition to campus in addition to other functions related to financial aid and benefits, housing, disability, Veterans Affairs matters, and faculty and staff training. Many Veterans Offices work closely with their Student Veterans Organization and spearhead events such as discussion panels, orientations, and a transition class for incoming veterans. Familiarize yourself with the services of this office and see how you can get involved.

Provide Resources that Support Integration

Many veterans attend school while working and raising families. Additionally, veterans often live off-campus and commute to their college, which makes them less involved in campus-based activities. To support veterans with integrating into their college, a student organization such as Student Veterans of America, and a Veterans Lounge, are excellent resources for connecting veterans to similar peers and for providing a designated space to study and hang out between classes. Existing offices, such as Women’s Resources and Career Services, are also well positioned to provide specific programming for veterans.

Prioritize Refresher Courses, Writing, and Critical Thinking Skills

Continued training and education are a fundamental part of today’s military. After completing basic training or boot camp, most service members attend a follow-on school to learn the specific job they will perform in the military. However, the way that teaching and learning take place in the military can be very different from a college classroom.

The military emphasizes practical application instead of theory, and most educational programs are structured so that military personnel progress as a class. Exams often consist of a combination of hands-on exercises, as well as true or false and multiple choice questions. As students, veterans may feel rusty engaging math problems they’ve not seen since high school. They may also find it challenging to write papers and formulate arguments that don’t have



a “right answer.” Connecting student veterans to refresher programs, writing labs, and critical thinking courses are excellent ways to develop competency in these areas.

Not All Veterans are Traumatized or Have Served in Combat

Although service-connected injuries such as traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress, depression and military sexual trauma should not be minimized, many veterans do not suffer from these conditions. A moderate percentage of veterans have not experienced direct combat nor had their safety threatened while serving in the military. It is important to not lump veterans into a single category and assume that their service histories were a traumatic experience.

In addition to not making assumptions about their service, it is important to be mindful of your words when working with student veterans. Disparaging comments about the wars in the Middle East should be avoided as well as questions and comments like, “Have you ever killed anyone?” “Are you mentally okay?” “Do you think we should be over there?” and “These wars are a waste.”





Don't Single Veterans Out in Class

It is wonderful to hear students' comments, particularly when it contributes to course material and stimulates discussion. However, before putting a veteran on the spot in class, it is imperative that you first clear this with him or her. Veterans do not want to be the "spokesperson" or "voice" for the entire military or to have their combat experiences construed as encompassing of all service members. Although veterans, no doubt, bring a wealth of interesting and unique life experiences to the classroom, including their perspective requires careful and sensitive communication.

Establish Rapport and Trust

A core aspect of military culture includes difficulty asking for help. While in the military, service members learn to be self-reliant and resourceful and to endure through challenging experiences. Although this training can develop strong discipline and resilience, veterans can also find it challenging to ask for assistance.

Establishing authentic rapport with a veteran is critical in order to build trust and to see the bigger picture. Some veterans may feel shame seeking counseling or tutoring services or they may have a brain injury that is undiagnosed. Further, some veterans may require accommodations related to special seating arrangements or taking exams in distraction-free environments. Consistent interaction with student veterans and ensuring that their questions are answered timely will support healthy communication and trust.

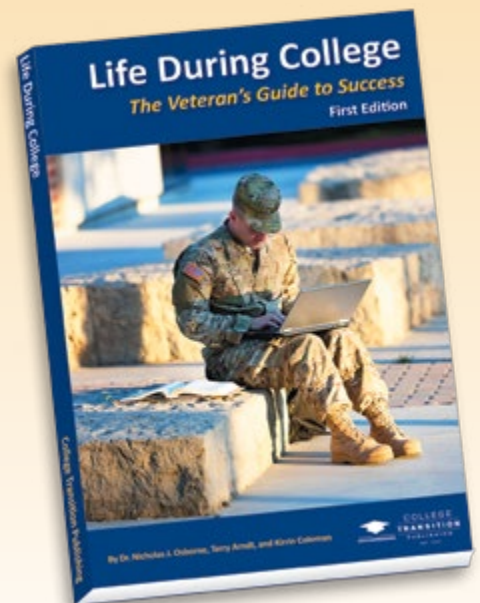
Ask Veterans What They Need

Look beyond the chronological age of the veterans you work with. Although they may seem young, many held positions of leadership in the military and have experiences that matured them and make them responsible. When working with a veteran, it is helpful to ask, "What can this college do to support you and other veterans?" Many veterans aren't afraid to speak up and share their ideas. It is also recommended that you communicate with other offices to inquire how they work with veterans. Most campuses have a Veterans Committee or Task Force comprised of student affairs and academic units. Hold meetings throughout the semester with a diverse group of administrators, faculty, staff and students to ensure that your college is continually assessing how veterans are doing and the ways that you can enhance support.

Want to Help Veterans Transition into College?



Consider using:



For more information, resources and tools on assisting veterans with the transition into college, read *Life During College, The Veteran's Guide to Success*, and also find additional resources online at:

www.CollegeTransitionPublishing.com



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