What Learning Activities Help Student Veterans Succeed?

Presented by:
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Bruce Kelley: Hello, and welcome to this Magna 20 Minute Mentor on how to develop activities to help your student veteran succeed. As we go through this presentation, we’ll be looking at how to build on student veterans’ success and how to help them navigate through some of the challenges that they face as they transition from the military into higher education.

I’m Bruce Kelley. I’m director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of South Dakota. And I’m director of a $500,000 FIPSE grant that is designed to help faculty, staff, and administration better understand and serve student veterans.

As we go through today, I have several learning goals. First, I hope that the listeners will understand how different types of learning activities can enhance student veteran success. And I’m interested in exploring how physical, emotional, and behavioral climates can lead to positive learning outcomes.

But before we go any further, I’d like you to pause the recording and fill out the Are You a Veteran-Friendly Instructor checklist, which is found in your resources attached to this CD. When you’re finished with that, please return.

Welcome back. As we talk about our learning activities, I’d like to focus on three areas. I’d like to talk about communication and specifically writing. Then I’d like to talk about service learning and then team-based learning. Before we go any further though, I’d like to talk about the strengths of our student veterans. And they bring many strengths to our classrooms.

First of all, they have a maturity that goes far beyond just the age difference that is typical between them and the traditionally aged students in the classroom. The experience of serving in war zones has given them a maturity level that exceeds what most students have experienced. They also have experience with leadership, and it’s important to understand that. They’re used to taking charge in situations, and that can be used as a strength in the classroom. They have experience with diversity.

In the military, there’s a higher amount of diversity, especially racial diversity, than there is in the typical higher educational setting. And so they have experience not just being around people that are different than them but also experience working and achieving, accomplishing great things with folks that are different than them. And they also have a mission-focused orientation. They’re capable of taking a goal and working very hard to accomplish that.
Many of our student veterans have a cultural literacy that far exceeds what other students have. They’ve served in areas of the world that many of us have little experience with, and so they have the feeling that they understand in some respects, they understand the cultures better than perhaps even instructors do. And they have advanced training in real-life experience.

In the military, for example, in the Army, once you’ve gone through basic training, you go to advanced individual training, and you may have gone through armor school or chemical warfare school, but you may have also gone through the finance core school. And if that was the case, you have experience with budgets, with payroll, with disbursing public funds. And so if, for example, if you’re teaching a business class, you may have student veterans that have real-life experience in some of the things that you are teaching.

I think that perhaps the biggest difference between the military and higher education is that the military calls its students, calls its personnel to action, and in higher education, we call our students to deliberation. This is not to suggest that the military doesn’t deliberate, especially at the strategic level, but I think it’s important to understand that student veterans coming to our classes have been trained that they should make decisions quickly and to act and that this whole idea of working through ideas in time, as is common in higher education, is an idea that they’ll have to get used to.

All right. So let’s talk about communications in writing. Military personnel are trained to communicate in very specific ways, precise, formal, in a chaotic battlefield, because miscommunication in the military can result in accidents. It can result in death, unfortunately. It can result in the loss of multimillion dollar property. So students who transition into the military, from the military into higher education must learn to change how they even think about and use language in addition to the other transitional challenges that they face.

Communication in the military is jargon laden and direct. I’d like you to pause the recording and take a few minutes and write out what you think this phrase means. Indian base, 614, ten mikes out, two plus three zero for a hot pump cruise switch. When you think you’ve got it figured out, please return to this recording.

Welcome back. If you said, squadron headquarters, this is helicopter number 614, I’m currently 10 minutes away from home base, when I land, I will have 2½ hours of fuel remaining, and I would like to fill up my tanks, send out the next flight crew, well, then you’ve got it. You understand what the military means with jargon-laden and direct communication.
Here are some examples from the Army’s writing style guide. And each of the armed forces have their own communications guide. So in the Army, they’re trained to use short sentences. They’re trained to use short words and short paragraphs, no more than one inch deep. So a student that’s been trained to communicate in this way that is coming out of the military and moving into your classroom may have some difficulty adjusting to the more reflective types of writing.

So what are some of the things that we can do to help our student veterans? And I’d like to give a shout out to Kelly Dalton’s From Combat to Composition: Meeting the Needs of Military Veterans through Postsecondary Writing Pedagogy, which is a master’s thesis from Georgetown University. She has come up with some of these ideas, which I’ve modified slightly.

But some of the strategies that we can use. First of all, it’s important to precisely define the activities and the goals of each writing assignment. In essence, you want to give each assignment a mission objective. It’s important to break long assignments up into smaller projects that can be coalesced into a whole. This mimics the military’s training of, which they call crawl, walk, run, which means that you start off with small types of activities that build into as realistic activities as you can.

I think it’s important that you precisely define the criterion by which each assignment will be graded. In the military, assessment plays a very important role. And student veterans are taught that any type of activity that’s not assessed is, in fact, a waste of time. And so because our student veterans are coming into the classroom having this experience of knowing what they have to do to reach the next level in the military, they’re interested in knowing that in our own classrooms.

And so writing rubrics, for example, can be very helpful. And I’ve provided one in the resource packet, and there are many examples that are available out on the Web as well. It’s important to provide timely, direct feedback on writing assignments and offer opportunities for revision. Assessment in the military is meant to help units and individuals get better.

And assessment in higher education also follows that same best practice. It should, and so what we’re talking about here is formative feedback that allows the students to improve on their assignments and so that they can improve the next time around.

It’s important to emphasize the reflective nature of academic writing. And, in fact, there are certain types of activities that you can do to help with
that. Using learning blogs, using wikis, using the discussion boards of the learning management system are all ways that you can help student veterans kind of build in that reflective time that they need to work through the writing. And then emphasize that college writing is a process, a working out of ideas through time.

The military is really good at telling their personnel why it’s important to communicate directly and clearly. And I think higher education doesn’t do as good a job at emphasizing that there is a value and a reason for wrestling with ideas in time. It’s important to help all of our students, including our student veterans, to understand that this writing is a process that helps us identify ideas and think of new things as we go through this.

Now student veterans do have strengths when it comes to communication. As I mentioned earlier, the military assesses its personnel often and directly. And so student veterans come to the classroom with that expectation of being assessed often. And you can be direct in your assessment of them. In addition, they have gone through life experiences that help them to write about things with perhaps a greater depth than many of your other students.

They have these significant life experiences that they can use to write with. And, in addition, these writing assignments can sometimes help them go through a healing process. And, in fact, a writing as a healing agent can be an important part of the transitional process for our student veterans.

Okay. Next I’d like to go to some team-based learning. And I’d like to reference Michelson, et al.’s Team-Based Learning of Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching. And, again, the reference is provided in a bibliography in your resource packet. Small group activities can include all sorts of things, from collaborative learning to think-pair-shares to team-based learning to long-term team activities that are dedicated to completing and learning through projects together.

Collaboration is second nature to most of our student veterans. They’re taught to work in teams. In the Army, for example, the Army training manual states that teams are formed to share information and lessons gained from experience. Small groups in team-based learning activities share the same process. They create a learner-centered environment where students assume responsibility for their own learning.

They share information, and they’re able to draw on lessons learned from the team’s experience. Michelson says that team-based learning creates conditions in which people who are very different from one another learn that they need to work together and make their differences an asset rather
than a liability. This is very important for our student veterans who often feel a sense of distance from other students.

Part of that is because of the maturity that I talked about before, the differences in life experiences. And part of it is from the other students as well who are not sure exactly how to approach a student veteran, especially if they’re not traditionally aged. So team-building exercises, the team-based learning exercises help our student veterans to connect with the other students in ways that are very positive and benefit both as they learn to work together.

There are advantages to team-based learning. In the military, team equals strength. And in the classroom, research has shown that students commit to a very high level of effort in team-based learning activities. One of the complaints that student veterans have about the non-veteran students is they just don’t work very hard.

And in team-based learning, the students typically kind of pick up the pace and work harder and can work up to a student veteran’s expectations. In addition, the abilities of a team far exceed the individual abilities of any one person. And so well-designed team activities build into the strengths of student veterans and can be a positive educational experience for the entire class.

All right. Next I’d like to talk about service learning. Student veterans are much more likely to engage in service activities than the average college student. They volunteer more hours per month, 22.9, than any other demographic and 7.6 hours more on average than non-veteran students. And service learning is any type of activity that meets real needs out in the community. But what separates it from just regular volunteer work is that there’s a critically reflective academic project that occurs as a result of it.

There is a reason that the armed forces are called the service. Student veterans bring with them an understanding of civic engagement, leadership skills to successfully navigate between the institution and the community, organizational skills and a work ethic that allow them to see projects through to completion, and life experience that engenders respect from the community in ways that other students simply can’t.

They’re also often connected to community veterans organizations who may themselves be involved in service activities. So faculty who use service learning in their classes will find that a student veteran can be a tremendous asset to the course and bring connections to the activity that few other students are able to.
Service learning also benefits the student veterans. Astin and Sax did a study that show that service learning contributes to stronger faculty relationships, improved student satisfaction with college, and has a positive correlation with graduation. These are all very important things for the student veterans. Service learning projects allow them to connect to the community while they’re connecting with their faculty member and their classmates.

And in addition, service learning projects are typically goal-oriented, action-based, and have definable outcomes. And so they’re the closest thing to military training that higher education offers. Finally, faculty may find that student veterans help them create synergy with community and serve as a force multiplier, because they’re able to open up opportunities to even more service learning opportunities throughout the community than was available before.

All right. Next I’d like to talk about some of the environments in our classroom. And obviously, we want all of our students to be able to succeed and to feel comfortable in our classrooms. So I’m going to talk about the physical, the behavioral, and emotional environments. Now obviously, we want our classrooms to be compliant with the ADA, but we have to understand that beyond that, there are certain spaces that can be highly disconcerting for student veterans based on their training.

If they’ve been a member of the ground forces in the Middle East, for example, they’ve been trained to be hyper vigilant in watching their immediate surroundings. Any unexamined package, whether it’s left alone in a classroom or just being carried around by an unknown student, such as a backpack, could be an explosive device. That’s what they’ve been trained to think. Areas where many people are milling around are especially dangerous, because they’re popular targets.

And so ground forces have been trained to secure rooms, which means that most of the exits are locked, only one exit remains, and anybody that goes in and out of that doorway is searched. So a typical learning space in the college environment can be very distracting for a student, especially if they’ve just recently transitioned back into higher education. This is an example of one of our active learning classrooms at the University of South Dakota. It’s a wonderful learning space.

It’s almost impossible to do a traditional lecture there. It’s set up to emphasize team-based learning enhanced by technology. But as you can see, if you happen to be sitting where the young man in the checkered shirt is sitting, he has his back to most of the students, his back to the instructor, and his back to the doorways of the classroom. That could be a highly uncomfortable situation for a student veteran.
All right. So what are some of the solutions that we could come up with? Well, first of all, allow student veterans to sit in a location where they feel comfortable, such as the back of the room or the corner of a room where they can kind of watch who’s coming in and out without having to turn their head, and they can kind of keep an eye on the doors. While it may not be overtly something that they talk about, subliminally, this can help them feel more comfortable.

Second, make sure that your office doesn’t require students to sit with their back against the door when they’re talking with you. And then lastly, as an institution, you might want to consider veterans-only classes or sections of courses that are veterans, have reserved spots for student veterans so that they can take courses with their comrades, their compatriots, and it just makes them feel a little bit more comfortable.

All right. Let’s talk about the behavioral environment. And what I mean by this is how faculty and students act in class. A typical lecture looks like a formal military briefing. There’s a person that’s in charge. They walk in, they deliver information, and they set out a goal of activities. And so student veterans might need time to adjust to this idea that it’s not a formal military briefing.

For example, it’s considered very rude to interrupt a formal military briefing. And so a student veteran in your class may hesitate to interrupt you in a lecture, and they may want to talk with you after class. But more than that, the behavior of non-veteran students can be very destructive. In a formal military briefing, you’re expected to check your cellphone and drinks and food at the door.

And depending on the formality of the briefing, you may be required to sit with your feet flat on the floor at attention throughout the entire briefing. So students that are checking Facebook, they’re texting each other, they’re falling asleep can be very destructive for a veteran student. And they may take it out on the instructor feeling that the instructor is abdicating their responsibilities as the leader of the class in accepting such behavior.

All right. So what can we do about that? Well, obviously, the instructor just needs to be sensitive to disruptive behavior, what we call undirected student behavior in terms of technology, and devise activities, active-learning activities preferably, to keep those students engaged. And then also as an aside, it’s important to not use a red laser pointer in class. The red laser is used as a targeting device in the military and can be distracting for student veterans if you’re using that.
All right. Finally, I’d like to talk about the emotional environment. And I want to talk about whether or not you should even, how or even if you should determine if you have student veterans in your class. If that’s important for you, you want to do it unobtrusively, perhaps by asking students to fill out a 3x5 card with some information on it that’s relevant to their academic careers. And are you a veteran could be one of the questions that you have.

If you assign writing assignments, an assignment that asks about leadership quality might be an element of that, and you could find out who your student veterans are based on that type of assessment. It’s important to understand that not all student veterans hold the same political views. While student veterans tend to be conservative, they’re not all. And if you spend any time with members of the military, you’ll find that their views go from far left to far right.

Student veterans represent both a resource and a challenge for faculty who teach courses related to cultures and policies where the U.S. military is active. And so students may have had very, very significant experiences in dealing with the population of those areas. And they may feel like they have expertise in ways that you don’t.

So carefully consider how to handle in-class issues related to the global war, and I’ve included a Best Practices for Classroom Discussions Covering Middle East Policies in your resource packet. Separate your feelings toward the armed forces and its mission from the individual students sitting in your class. And understand that student veterans may see themselves as having expertise in this area, and try to build on that rather than developing an adversarial relationship.

Finally, you need to understand that there are certain questions that should never be asked of a student veteran. Did you kill anyone, or did you see anyone die are patently offensive questions. Student veterans hate being asked them and hate having to answer them. And so if a student happened to step into your class or a student happened to ask these questions in your class, you need to step in, as you would with any other patently offensive comment, and redirect the conversation or use that as an opportunity to help the entire class see that that is an offensive statement.

So why is it important that we do this? It’s because we believe that as we provide our student veterans with the opportunity for an extraordinary education, we enhance the educational experiences of the entire academic community. Thank you.