How Can I Help Student Veterans Transition to Campus?

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Hi. Welcome to the Magna 20 Minute Mentors. My name is Justin Smith. And thank you for taking the time today to learn about how we can help student veterans transition to college. Like I said, my name is Justin Smith. I’m the director for the Fides Program at the Center for Teaching and Learning where we focus on the academic success of student veterans.

And we do that through professional development for our staff and for our faculty. And today we’re going to focus on understanding modern student veterans, their transitional challenges, and along the way figuring out what we can do to improve their transitional experience.

Let me just start out by sharing an incredible story. One of my, one of the students that went through our class came to me and said, I just have so much respect for our new dean of students. And I said, well, that’s very interesting. Why is that? He said that when she asked questions that she really demonstrated a deep understanding of the student/veteran experience.

And that just immediately built rapport and respect and built that all-important relationship between the student veteran and faculty and staff. And so hopefully at your institutions, you’ll be able to have some of those same experiences through the learning in this mentor series. I’m going to briefly talk about some of the demographics, the risk factors, and their civic commitments.

But I’d really like to start off with the student veterans’ leadership, not leadership but their strengths that they bring. They bring tremendous strengths, including a degree of maturity, experience with leadership, familiarity with diversity, and a mission-focused orientation. They may have first-hand knowledge of the geography, politics, and sociology of strategic areas of the world.

Depending on their advanced training, student veterans may be coming into courses with specific world-tested knowledge on topics ranging from government finance to law enforcement to engineering. These strengths have the potential not only to translate into academic success for the student veterans themselves but to bring fresh, new insights and strengths to our institutional learning environments.

Currently, student veterans represent 4% of our students on our campus according to the Association of American Colleges from 2000 to 2008. And that’s a pretty high number, and I want to, and specifically 27% of these students are women. And it’s really interesting, one of the things that you’ll find when, and you probably have already discovered in working with your student veterans on campus, is they like to blend in.
But women veterans tend to want to blend in even more so than male veterans. And so reaching out and tracking them and being able to identify them so you can gear specific programs towards them is especially important. One specific thing you can do is just in your classes hand out a 3x5 card and get their name and build a relationship with your students. This is good for veterans. It’s good for all students. But just be able to, you know, ask about their leadership experience. Ask them to identify if they’re a veteran or not.

Things to be aware of. The military sexual trauma with student veteran women and also just being able to contact your institutional research and being able to know are we tracking success, are we tracking retention at our institution? And that’s an important thing to keep communications between departments and between areas. That’s a key thing.

Veterans tend to be older and more likely to be non-white than non-traditional college students. They’re more mature. 84.5% are older than the traditional college student. 47.3% are married. Forty-seven percent of them have children, including 14.5% who are single parents. Seventy-six percent don’t attend school full time for an entire academic year.

And they’re often highly career focused. And some of the solutions that your institution can provide is providing a one-stop shop where they can go, and they can get all the information about their benefits and the services that are provided at your institution.

Also providing a place. I mean, it doesn’t have to be a large place. It can be a, you know, one of our institutions in our board of regents, it was actually a, it was a utility closet that wasn’t being used. But it was a place where they could meet and congregate.

And they expanded from there but a place where they can find a camaraderie of people who’ve shared similar experiences and then having one person designated to serve student veterans who are, who is familiar with student veteran issues and a very knowledgeable certified official that knows how to set good expectations when their benefits are coming in, etc.

To elaborate just a little bit, just in those risk factors that I mentioned in the demographics, the delayed enrollment, the single-parent status, having dependents, work intensity enrolled, these factors alone elevate the risk for not persisting to graduation when compared with any other minority student group. And that’s just something to keep in mind.
In addition to some of the demographic risk factors, many student veterans are also facing additional challenges that come from multiple deployments to war zones. And I’ll highlight just a few. Just a quick fact, 800,000 have deployed multiple times. And so the USA Today recently highlighted Army Staff Sergeant Bobby Martin, Jr. He’s been fighting insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan for longer than three years.

So at age 34 when he finished a fourth combat tour, he’s seen 5 of his men killed since 2003, 4 died this year, including 2 on Martin’s birthday in May. Thirty-eight cumulative months in combat had left him with bad knees, aching shins, reoccurring headaches from a roadside blast, and ailments that he hides from his soldiers.

Out of earshot of his troops, he concedes this is a lot of wear and tear . . . and so one practical step here in understanding our student veterans is being able to discern have you deployed multiple times? And this is no guarantee. There’s no carte blanche answer, one-size-fit-all approach, but it’s a tip. I mean, if they deployed multiple times, it’s, it might be a clue that they’ve, they’re at increased risk so we can be more aware of that.

Some of their experiences in a combat zone. When you find out, these are things that you can kind of safely assume based on some of these statistics, if they’ve been in a combat zone, received artillery fire, were shot at, fired at the enemy, saw dead bodies or remains. I mean, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as you know, were different, are different than any other war fought up to this point because of the, having to be constantly alert and on guard at all times.

More experiences. So looking at some of the mental injuries, and I think the key word here when talking about, when talking to student veterans is treating mental injuries on the same level as you deal with physical injuries. And talking about them in the same way is important. The journal of Professional Psychology: Research and Practice published a national study of student veterans. This study explored some of the psychological symptoms, symptom severity, and the suicide risk of 628 student veterans.

What they found in the words of the author was a little bit alarming. Twenty-four percent of the sample experienced severe depression. Thirty-five percent experienced severe anxiety. Forty-six percent experienced significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. And one of the key things here in your student counseling resource center is to have a counselor who’s specifically trained in PTSD who can understand how to specifically treat student veterans who are diagnosed with PTSD.

Forty-six percent of this population demonstrated significant symptoms of PTSD. 7.7% have actually made an attempt of taking their own lives. And
this is why I think it’s critical for all students, service, staff, anybody dealing directly with students to know the VA hotline suicide number. And that’ll be available in your resources if you’ll take time to put that down and put it in a place that it’s easily accessible. And the one shocking percentage is 46% of this sample reported thinking about suicide.

So again, you know, seek to get to know your students. Be aware of warning signs. Utilize the VA resources that are included in the materials. I won’t belabor this point too much, but the suicide rate is of significant concern, even to the degree that the whole Army had a stand down where they stopped services in trying to prevent suicide because the rates are so high. In 2009, we lost more soldiers to suicide than the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

So keep that VA suicide hotline number and also be aware of other resources like VA AboutFace where student veterans can hear the testimony of other veterans who’ve dealt with depression and anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, etc. And they can see that it’s okay to ask for help and seek help, because a lot of times military culture is not one that advocates for asking for help.

So adjusting to new injuries. Nearly half of new vets seek disability benefits. Four hundred thousand new veterans are treated for mental health issues. Some of the transitional challenges that we talked about a little bit, raising a child without a partner, facing the simultaneous civilian and campus transitions, and this feeling like you’re not fitting in to the mainstream campus culture.

If you have good information about quality childcare at your institution or in your community, be sure to put that in their hands, be able to help them find those respites that they need time away to connect to the community resources and to connect to the campus resources. So that’s key.

Even some of the simpler things that we may take for granted, you know, getting benefits started and living on a budget, navigating a new bureaucratic system, balancing work and family and academic endeavors. You know, financial aid folks need to be kind of aware of that and have resources on hand that, you know, how do you, where do I go to learn how to write a budget, I mean, things that we may take for granted.

In a recent study, one of the things that I think is really helpful for our campuses is understanding the amount of social support and cultural congruity. And this study done by Weber from Arizona State found that social support and cultural congruity are key indicators of wellbeing and decisions to persist in college. And I would recommend, and the resource is attached to this material, the social support scale and the cultural
congruity scale that you can survey your student veterans with to kind of get an idea where do you stand as a campus with your social support?

Where do you stand with cultural congruity? And by cultural congruity, I mean do I feel free to be myself, or do I feel like, you know, a fish out of water, so to speak? And so are there ways through student veteran resource centers, through one-stop shops, through faculty and staff training, etc., that I can improve both the social support and cultural congruity on campus, as these have been empirically shown to improve academic persistence decisions.

One of the things, taking a step back from the transition to campus and just looking at the transition to civilian life, the Pew Research Center looked at things that make it easier and things that make it harder. And one of the key things that they found, it was kind of surprising that if a student, if a veteran was married before they went to war, and then they came back, that they would have a 15% harder time transitioning back.

The other key finding was that in their analysis that higher levels of religious belief measured by how frequently the service member attended services showed a 67% easier time reentering into civilian life, along with being an officer or having the clarity of mission or being a college graduate.

But these are things to keep in mind so when you’re asking questions you can somewhat gauge what that experience may have been like. And obviously, this is all, I mean, it’s all statistics and generalizations. But it gives you a baseline to kind of gauge, and, you know, when you ask and you start understanding, you know, ask questions, it may give you an idea of if they had an easier or harder time transitioning.

So Kay Maurin from Southeastern Louisiana University recently completed a study on the themes related to student veteran negotiating transition to college. And I want to take time to highlight a few of them. The identity change negotiation going from warrior to scholar, that can be significant, because they have a learned identity from intense training and combat situations to suppress emotions and move forward, even under emotionally or physically taxing conditions.

They enter boot camp a civilian, and they leave a warrior. We can provide the support by affirming the significance of their current vocation as scholar on the, as, or a socializing institution. Student veterans tend to appreciate our gratitude after service but do not want to be singled out. They want the privilege and benefits they’re entitled to after service, but many experience an internal struggle with taking advantage of their own benefits.
And having to advocate for an entitlement that’s already been earned can be daunting and irritating. We can make the process of getting their benefits as painless as possible by making sure that the certifying official knows what they’re doing and being able to send them to the right place the first time when they ask a question.

And then on-campus isolation that I’ve talked about earlier. Many students feel isolated on campus because of the age and the experience difference. One student veteran related that for every year in a combat zone it ages you four years so that not only are student veterans older than traditional students chronologically, you might also say that they have an older soul. What we can do, we can offer a listening ear and take the time to relate to them as peers, treat them as adults.

Motivation is not a problem for student veterans. They often come back with highly enhanced academic maturity. Consider one student veteran’s comments that’s representative of this. I want to prove myself to the professors. I’m going to do the work that they assign, and I’m going to do it to the best of my ability. It’s all about proving yourself. What we can do, we can recognize this as a real strength and offer sincere encouragement.

One other thing that I noticed, and this is what led me to create a transitions class that involved service learning, was seeing that a veteran’s volunteer hours are significantly more than a non-veteran’s. It’s motivation toward service, so how can we use the motivation toward service to reconnect to community and campus? And team, actually team service learning where you go out in cohorts to serve the community has proven effective in building resiliency in our experience at our institution.

Other pathways to social support, and these might seem overly basic, but it means a lot when you take the time to listen, to care, to try to help. I mean, even if you’re taking the initiative, and you’re seeking to help, this means a lot. I mean, indifference is probably the biggest enemy here. Be familiar with clubs and activities and services. That way, you can point in the right direction.

Building bridges with respectful questions, you know, having the basic knowledge, I mean, between enlisted and officer, you know, knowing some of those differences, and that’ll be in your resources as well that you can look at that. Acknowledging the difference between politics and those that implemented the policy. This is key, I mean, in political science courses or in courses where you may be talking about the war or the wars. Be sure to keep those separated.

Other tips. In welcoming, providing the welcome to campus, symbolism is key, having something on campus that remembers those who’ve been
fallen. One of the things our campus does is every year we put out flags to commemorate those who’ve fallen. And we put it right out in the campus quad. And this is welcoming. It shows that your knowledge is appreciated and respected, and they’ll get a sense that they’re welcome.

Unassuming questions, and I’ll let you look at these, and inappropriate questions and some final thoughts and tips. Top-notch resources, the last thing I’ll leave you with. As I mentioned before, the VA resources AboutFace, Student Veterans of America, Vets Prevail and for faculty and staff the ACE Toolkit are some of the best things that I can recommend to you. And take advantage of that as long as, as well as the resources provided with this DVD.

Remember, you can set clear expectations, you can know your chain of command, and you set the tone for the student veterans’ experience on your campus, and you can make it a great experience. We’d like to know what you think. Please click this link and give us your feedback. Thanks for your time and seeking to understand student veterans on campus.