



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

A SELF-ASSESSMENT TO IMPROVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR MILITARY- CONNECTED STUDENTS IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES' INSTITUTE FOR VETERAN POLICY is conducting qualitative research with student veterans to identify promising practices and key gaps in support systems on college campuses.

This self-assessment, a result of our findings, presents an opportunity for higher education professionals to learn practical ways to create or improve supportive practices on campus. Institutional support systems can facilitate access to resources, help veterans acclimate to their communities and their academic lifestyle, and improve educational outcomes.

The following checklist is a good place to begin to improve your programs:

- ✓ **Include military-connected students in strategic plans.** Military-connected students feel isolated and excluded from the campus community. While support can be well intentioned, formalizing the planning process will ensure the institution calls their needs to attention. Create a committee comprised of faculty, staff and students with ways to provide direct feedback of the services offered.
- ✓ **Provide transition assistance to the college environment.** Only 37 percent of postsecondary institutions with services for military and veteran students provide transition assistance.¹ A "cold hand off" is typical of transition from military to student life. These students are left to discover for themselves where and how to enroll in college. Connect with these students to help them process benefits paperwork and adjust to campus life. Consider orientations centered on military-connected students with alumni and third/fourth year student mentors to meet this goal.
- ✓ **Recognize prior military experience for college credits.** Throughout service, military personnel attend specialty schools to develop skills and knowledge which they employ in the real world and in hostile environments. The government recognizes this learning and universities must do the same. These assessments must move beyond the most obvious, like physical education credit.
- ✓ **Provide strong mental health services and support.** Train staff in proper methods to address military sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, as well as housing resources and other case management, all of which are issues shown to affect their academic experience. Consider a Memorandum of Understanding with the VA to provide on-campus services. For many students, transportation to the VA and appointment availability are almost insurmountable barriers to care. Onsite services reduce stigma, encourage healthcare utilization, improves student experience, and can prevent suicidality.

¹ Cook, B.J., Kim, Y.M., McBain, L., Snead, K.M. From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members, retrieved from <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/From-Soldier-to-Student-II-Assessing-Campus-Programs.pdf>. 2012.

² Ibid.

- ✓ **Provide accessible high quality GI Bill benefit assistance.** Provide standard training to certifying officials and limit their additional duties.
- ✓ **Make disability services for military-connected students a priority.** Traumatic brain injury affects the ability to process information due to cognitive impairment caused by blast injuries. Veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder will often feel anxious or hypervigilant. They may also have physical injuries or mobility issues. Veterans are often unaware of accommodations to assist them in class and during tests, and some veterans report that provision of disability accommodations is inconsistent even among veterans with very similar needs. Student and faculty understanding of veteran rights to accommodations must be clearly explained and enforced.
- ✓ **Provide dedicated space where students can study, build a support network, and learn about resources specific to their needs from trained staff.** Office staff should have direct knowledge of student services on campus and VA benefits. The support of peers makes it less likely they'll become isolated and more likely to share resources, advocate together for veteran related issues on campus, and be active participants in student life.
- ✓ **Establish a peer mentor program.** In the absence of a clear mission, it can be hard to find direction. Peer mentors satisfy both of these needs. Alumni who have successfully graduated may be grateful for the opportunity to help a mentee on their path to a degree or secure a job. Students who are further along in their degree can also provide guidance to incoming students.
- ✓ **Train all staff and educators in cultural competency.** The military is one of the most diverse institutions in American life, representing all ethnicities, educational levels, sexual orientations, religions, and political beliefs. But they all share a deep, common cultural identity as members of the military. Training dispels myths and stereotypes, enhances understanding and inclusion, and facilitates access to resources. With the emphasis on equality and tolerance on college campuses, it is important to recognize that these students belong to a culture which greatly contributes to campus diversity. Educators and staff will be better equipped to support veterans in their academic success.
- ✓ **Educate academic and career advisors on occupational specialties.** Military-connected students already possess certain strengths. Encourage students to build on those valuable skills and improve their employment prospects. Making an assessment with the student on their military work history is a great opportunity to build rapport. With a clear picture of skills and interests, advisors can be more effective and help students make wise decisions about their academic life.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on scheduling Swords to Plowshares Combat to Community™ training: Contact c2c@stp-sf.org or call (415) 655-7253.

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? QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELVES?

How does your institution define a commitment to serving veteran students?

How can institutional policies, including outreach, recruitment admission, enrollment, transfer and articulation, and student support services be strengthened to better support the pathways by which veterans access the institution and complete their degree?

How are institutions providing resources on education benefits available to veterans? Are veterans experiencing barriers to benefits that require outside resources? Are veterans burdened with seeking this information themselves? How can this referral be facilitated?

How is your institution screening for military and veteran status? How do you use this information to reach veterans?

Do veterans feel encouraged to self-identify and take advantage of resources?

What potential outreach methods can you utilize?

Do faculty, student affairs professionals, and leaders receive professional development on veteran cultural competency and inclusive practices?

What structured supports does your institution offer student veterans? Are they meeting their intended goals? How do you assess this?

Do you offer on campus counseling for veterans? Are the staff appropriately trained in veteran cultural competency and resources?

Do you feel your institutional policies support and include student veterans?