

Awareness Points for Interacting with Military Veteran Students

Persons who have returned from active military duty and are now seeking admission to universities and technical colleges are a unique group of students with issues and concerns which may be different from the “traditional” student. The following are typical qualities of veteran students and concerns to them.

As Veterans:

- Military service had both positive and negative effects on the individual
- Will be going through a difficult transition stage. This transition varies greatly in both the level of difficulty and the duration of the transition. Some step right back into their lives with little to no transition stage while others never fully make the transition and maybe never will.
- Will have a changed outlook on life which can be either positive or negative in nature. The combat veteran will typically either be more appreciative of the “little” things in life, or view the world as an unsafe place and have issues with trust.
- May have trouble adjusting to “normal” life (family, job, free time)
- Making their own choices and having the freedom to set their own schedule can be a challenge. However, for those who had a large amount of decision making responsibilities in the military, transitioning back into the “civilian life” can leave them feeling that most all of the choices made in everyday life are miniscule and unimportant in comparison.
- May be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder
- Depression, substance abuse and PTSD are common for returning soldiers. Self-medication is an overwhelmingly popular method of coping with their issues by the new generation of veterans.
- Symptoms of PTSD may include: depression, obsession with certain tasks, relationship changes, nightmares, sensitivity to certain noises, hallucinations, flashbacks, irritability to friends and family, inability to fall asleep, and the list

goes on and on. Some important issues to consider are hyper vigilance and ability to concentrate. Hyper vigilance involves being constantly on guard and alerted. For example, walking down the hallway in the student union might be a daunting if not avoided task by a vet with PTSD. In the military you are trained to clear a building and never let down your guard. It becomes difficult to segregate a safe from an unsafe situation in everyday life. Concentration can easily be impaired by a PTSD sufferer. This can greatly impact a student’s success.

- Talking about military experience is helpful and needed by most veterans but the important element is *who* they are willing to talk to about their experiences and *when* the individual is willing to talk. Many will only feel comfortable “opening up” to those they feel can relate.

As Students (either Veteran or Non-veteran):

- May be entering an institution of higher education for the first time.
- May be returning to school after a significant time lapse since graduating from high school.
- May be returning to college after having “stopped out” for a time
- May be enrolled part-time or full time.
- May feel like they do not “fit in” with the traditional aged college student.
- May need to “brush up” on their academic skills and have fears and anxiety about performing well.
- May feel intimidated asking questions. They are in a role reversal. At home they may be in charge and now in school they need assistance.
- May be commuting long distances.
- May be a single parent.
- May have child care concerns.
- Money and financial aid may be a concern.
- Many are juggling school, family duties, and a part-time or full-time job.
- May not have the support of their families or friends in their decision to return to school.
- Some older adult students are caught between commitments to their children, grandchildren and aging parents.
- Because of the two previous points, they are strapped for time. They need to be well organized and want information provided to them in a timely manner. Many will use email to get answers to questions rather than set up a face-to-face appointment (which cuts into their precious time).
- Adult students have accumulated life experience which most professors appreciate in the classroom. These experiences may help them relate to subject material.
- Class scheduling is a major concern for adult students. Classes need to fit around family and jobs which come first to this population.
- Adult students may feel intimidated having a younger student teach them (e.g. tutoring). It is important that the younger person not “talk down” to them, use appropriate language (not slang that the older person may not understand), and be respectful.

Ways to Assist Veteran/Adult Students to be Successful

- Understand the unique needs of adult learners and the multiple roles and responsibilities they are juggling. They are making sacrifices (family, time, money, lifestyle) to be a student. Help to make the experience a positive one for them.
- Provide support systems and let them know that they are not alone. (They love being with other students like themselves). For new vets of the War on Terror, a support group to speak to one another about their experiences and the issues they face will be very beneficial. A support group provides assurance that they are not alone in dealing with issues.
- Provide opportunities to schedule classes that will fit with the demands of their families and work schedules.
- Address issues of uncertainty and fear of change.
- Provide a schedule/syllabus well in advance so as to allow time for planning and arranging work and childcare schedules if need be to avoid “last minute surprises”.
- Provide encouragement and feedback as quickly and positively as possible. They need to feel that they are doing the right thing and that they are doing it well.
- Encourage them to use their experience whenever they can to help build on learning new material.
- Most adults are practical and want to apply learning to their present situation. Content should be meaningful to them and relevant to future employment.
- Adult students prefer to be involved in the learning process and want to support each other. Provide opportunities and spaces for adult students to work/study together.
- Offer workshops where they can gather information on such topics as how to apply for financial aid and scholarships, time management, budgeting, and stress management.
- Schedule extra-curricular activities during school hours so as not to cut into their family time, or schedule events which their families can attend with them.
- Provide opportunities for adult students to learn how to use computers, navigate the library, brush-up on math and other academic skills, etc. with other adult students and in a non-threatening manner.
- Make sure they understand the free campus resources available for them (e.g. tutoring, counseling services, career services, etc.)

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Ways Campus Advisers Can Help Military Veteran Students

- Be aware of the strengths military veterans bring to campus
- Draw upon their past experiences and how those skills transfer to civilian life
- Help to make them feel welcome on campus
- Help with scheduling conflicts and other frustrations
- Learn some military vocabulary—be able to “talk the talk” when appropriate
- Encourage students to network on campus, make new friends
- Encourage to become engaged in activities (such as a Veteran’s Club)
- Activities should be well-planned and tailored to specific needs
- Programming should be unique to their needs, responsibilities and schedules
- Create a campus “safety net” for military students
- Refer to counseling centers and disabilities offices as appropriate
- Help them understand they are having “normal responses” to “abnormal experiences”

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Do's & Don'ts of Welcoming Returning Veterans to our Campuses

Do's

- Welcome the soldier home
- Express your appreciation for their service & sacrifice
- Provide a welcoming environment
- Offer help
- Offer support with patience
- LISTEN
- Recognize that loud noises and sudden situations can startle and evoke over-reaction
- Understand that returning to normalcy can take a while

Don'ts

- Be offended or pressure them about sharing specifics about their services if they choose not to share
- Minimize the challenges
- Condemn because of your personal political/foreign policy opinion
- Single out without approval

It's Ok to Ask the Right Questions

Do Ask

- What did you do in Iraq/Afghanistan/elsewhere?
- How are you and your family doing?
- Let us know if you need any financial aid or personal help. We are here to help you.

Don't Ask

- Did you kill anyone? Did you see anyone die?
- Are you glad to be back?
- Do you have to go back?
- Do you think we are winning?