

Preparing Your Campus for Veterans' Success: An Integrated Approach to Facilitating the Transition and Persistence of Our Military Students

by Bruce C. Kelley, Justin M. Smith, and Ernetta L. Fox
Published by Stylus Publishing, 2013, 246 pages.

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War and conflict are an unfortunate happenstance that has shaped the majority of American history. Many are affected by war, and those affected the most are those who are called to go to combat. Families have a challenging time dealing with a loved one serving on the front lines. Employers face the challenge of needing to reassign job functions in the absence of a military staff member. However, those most affected by being called to war are those servicemen and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice by agreeing to protect and serve their country.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill, was partially created to provide military personnel with a variety of benefits for the service they have provided their country. The benefits range from financial assistance in purchasing a home or getting unemployment benefits, to the opportunity to continue their education.

The college system is comprised of students of different ages, cultures, and backgrounds. While there is a mixture of traditional and nontraditional-aged students attending school, a large number of students in the current population attending an institution of higher learning are members of the armed services. Colleges and universities are accustomed to serving the needs of traditional students who typically fall between the ages of 18 – 22. This book shares with the reader how to incorporate the students who fall into the category of veterans. More specifically, the authors discuss the specific needs that this protected class of individuals require in order to be successful on a college or university campus.

In the book *Preparing Your Campus for Veterans Success*, the authors discuss how various departments of an institution need to work together to meet the needs of veterans. While it is important that all departments and offices work together for the benefit of the student, this book specifically describes how the offices that focus on orientation, retention, and transition play a critical role in veterans' adaptation

to a collegiate environment. It is vital for these three entities to understand what role they play in the overall success of these students. Individuals responsible for orientation activities need to inform veterans and military students of the various services available on campus to meet some of their specific needs. Colleagues who aid all student transitions and adapt to an institution of higher learning must understand the need to offer and provide this protected population with specific programming to assist in readjusting to society. Finally, it is important to make sure adequate services are available to our veterans to allow them the opportunity to be retained and persist in academia. It is important to keep in mind that some of these individuals may not have the same learning capacity as some traditional students. Therefore, offices that offer academic support services such as tutoring, note-taking skills, and test-taking skills need to be capable of handling the adjustments veterans may face. The authors of the book place the chapters in a logical sequence and provide the reader with a background of veterans in higher education and some of the challenges they may have faced during their transition.

The initial three chapters provide a foundation for one to have a better understanding of the history surrounding veterans in the higher education system. It is important for administrators to realize that while veterans have specific needs, they are not looking to be coddled by the administration. In short, they want to be treated like traditional students with the understanding that they have specific needs to be met.

Chapter 1 focuses on the importance of “setting the stage,” by making sure their needs are being met whether they are seen or unseen. Having served in the military, veterans bring distinct strengths to the college or university setting that traditional-aged students may not. Due to being in the military, some of these students have been exposed to society earlier in life. Veterans normally have already established themselves, may have a family, and may have already gained their financial independence. On the opposite end of the spectrum, institutions of higher learning need to be aware that veterans have a higher probability of not being academically successful in obtaining their bachelor’s degree. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of understanding the transitioning veterans’ experience. The authors make a comparison in this chapter to the thoughts a traditional-aged student might face and suggest that one also consider the same questions being answered by a veteran; there’s a difference in the response. The difference in answering the questions can help in the transitioning of veterans to a collegiate environment. Chapter 3 discusses the challenges veterans with disabilities may face when they return from combat. The most common disabilities are ones that affect the cognitive skills and involve brain trauma. Faculty members should understand the challenges student veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or traumatic brain injuries might face when re-acclimating to civilian life. Understanding how these injuries impact some veteran’s learning ability; faculty and disability services will be able to better meet the needs of the students.

Chapters 4 through 7 provide detailed information about best practices that have been done by the more frequently used student services. Additionally, these chapters detail student and administrative services, programs geared specifically

toward student veterans, and the experiences and challenges student veterans may face while attending community colleges. These chapters begin by examining how successes and failures of the administrative offices of recruitment, admission, and orientation can either make or break the experience veterans have when they transition. It can be difficult to determine students that identify as veterans. It is important to make sure recruitment of this subpopulation is done ethically and with the understanding that veterans or their dependents are eligible to use these benefits; therefore, communication needs to be clear.

Chapter 5 focuses on the importance of creating specialized student services for veterans. Some institutions have begun creating separate offices to handle all of the needs of students who fall within this population. These institutions understand the varying needs of veterans and look to lessen their confusion by providing them with assistance as they continue transitioning from serving the country to being in the classroom. Chapter 6 provides tools institutions can implement to aid in the transition of veterans to college life. It is important to keep in mind while this may be a veteran's first year experiencing college, one needs to keep in mind to not "categorize" them in the same setting as incoming freshman. It is understood some of them might need to have "remedial" courses, but caution should be practiced to not include veterans in how this course type is explained. This chapter's focus is discussing the transition of veterans and their needs. Student veterans are a unique part of the college population. Institutions need to be concerned with the transition of all students regardless of traditional or non-traditional status. Administrative offices need to be concerned with the transition and retention of all students and make sure they are providing all populations with the necessary tools to be successful. Chapter 7 discusses the unique opportunities community colleges can offer veterans. These opportunities range from offering specific online courses to their military population to having classes offered on military bases close to the school, which is done by Tidewater Community College in Virginia. Community colleges are in a position where their services can be more tailored to their population, unlike four-year institutions.

While the majority of the previous chapters provided an overview of the administrative services offered and how they need to make changes, the next chapters, 8 through 10, provide a more in-depth explanation of the curriculum and role played by faculty members in facilitating veterans' transition to academia. Chapter 8 reviews the structure of the classroom. It addresses how faculty members can use the strengths of veterans in the classroom to help these newly transitioned students achieve academic success. Chapter 9 continues to build on the classroom environment and places a focus and emphasis on adult learning. Finally, Chapter 10 looks at the classroom environment from three different angles: physical, behavioral, and emotional. It is important for those in the classroom to understand that veterans have possibly experienced combat. With experiencing combat comes a level of maturity and a low tolerance for distractions that sometimes happen in the classroom with traditional-aged college students. The descriptions of these three varying environments support the reason institutions should consider a different method of educating veterans; being separated from the

typical college student is more beneficial for veterans than integrating them with a population that might cause frustration.

The last two chapters focus on the collaboration that needs to take place between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. The authors suggest that collaborating is essential in the success of progressing the experience veterans have on campus. The authors encourage joint professional development opportunities to be offered in bridging the gap, which may exist on some campuses. The concluding chapter is brief and serves as a summary of the preceding chapters, while suggesting how to make the transition for veterans friendlier moving forward.

In summary, there are some repetitive themes in this book that those who work in this area should take under advisement moving forward. The themes of being clear and consistent and maintaining open communication with veterans throughout this book and during their entire stay at the institution are evident to this reader. Another reoccurring theme that appears is understanding that veterans have specific needs different from the traditional college-aged student. It is important to be aware most veterans have been out of high school for many years. Veterans' absence in academia may require them to take remedial courses to help refresh their memory and prepare them for collegiate-level classes. The authors speak about curriculum and instruction as well as administrative policies and procedures institutions need to be aware of that can affect the enrollment of veterans.

The book is divided into three sections providing the reader with a clear understanding and description of the contents to follow. By doing this, the authors allow the readers to pick and choose what they desire to read. Chapters do not build upon each other, so the readers can assess the needs of their institution or department and go directly to the area addressing those needs and see what some institutions have implemented as a best practice. One of the things the authors of the book do well is provide readers with examples of institutions that have implemented what they are describing. Providing readers with information on best practices allows readers to look further into specific programs that meet their institutions' needs. Additionally, it allows the reader to be able to easily access information as it relates to areas of concern and interest to professionals in higher education dealing specifically with the aspects of transition, orientation, and retention.

In conclusion, most institutions of higher learning strive to make sure services are being provided to all of their students. This includes those who fall into the non-traditional category. Individuals working in the area of transition, orientation, and retention should be eager to make sure their institutions are providing services to help all students, not just those of traditional age. Ignoring the needs of all students would be an injustice, not just to the population affected, but to the institution.