

# Integrating College Student Veterans on Campus Through Peer Mentorship Programs: The Role of Social Work

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*In 2020, approximately 2 million veterans attended colleges and universities in the United States. College student veterans face unique challenges integrating into campus environments and completing their degrees. Research has shown that these students take longer to complete their degrees and have difficulty integrating into campus environments and connecting to traditional students, who are often in different developmental stages and life circumstances. U.S. colleges and universities vary widely in resources provided for student veterans, with just over half offering programs for veterans. Peer mentorship programs have been shown to be successful with this population, enhancing integration and persistence in education. To grow the number of peer mentorship programs, colleges and universities should consider replicating existing models that have proven successful. Campus stakeholders, including students and administrators, are critical to implementing peer mentoring programs for veterans. Social work programs are uniquely positioned to play a vital role in these efforts, offering advocacy, clinical work, education, and scholarship to support the implementation of veterans' peer mentorship programs.*

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, from 2001 to August 2021, represent the longest period of sustained military combat efforts since Vietnam. As those conflicts come to an end, more than 2.5 million veterans have returned home and transitioned to civilian life. One way veterans have made that transition is by enrolling in higher education to obtain a degree and become more competitive for employment in the civilian world. In 2018, more than 650,000 veterans pursued higher education using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Postsecondary National Policy Institute,

2019). College student veterans face unique challenges integrating into campus environments and completing their degrees (Van Dusen, 2017). Yet, the successful transition of student veterans into college and university communities continues to be a critical need. Here, I explore the role of peer mentoring programs within a social work framework for meeting that need.

## **Unique Challenges of College Student Veterans**

Nationally, research has shown that college student veterans have difficulty connecting to traditional students, who are often in different developmental stages and life circumstances (Barry et al., 2014). For example, student veterans are typically older, married, and more likely to have children (Borsari et al., 2017). In addition, many veterans came of age in highly predictable and prescribed military environments, and the lack of external structure of most campuses can be challenging to navigate (Allen et al., 2014; DiRamio et al., 2008). Besides structural differences, other obstacles to successful integration and retention of student veterans include social connection and identity (Borsari et al., 2017), unique mental health concerns of veterans (i.e., PTSD, alcohol-related problems; Elliott et al., 2011), high rates of physical disabilities (Wurster et al., 2013), and, until recently, the possibility of redeployment.

## **Peer Mentorship Programs at Colleges and Universities**

The disparities between campus and military cultures create circumstances where veteran students often feel disconnected from school and less inclined to complete their education. Colleges and universities across the United States vary widely in terms of resources for student veterans. Just over half (57%) of universities have programs for veterans (O'Herrin, 2011). These include veterans' organizations, veteran student centers, student representatives, and liaisons between military organizations and the college or university. A more robust approach being used in some colleges and universities to address these challenges is a peer mentorship model.

Peer mentorship programs have been shown to be successful in helping students adjust to college life and persist in higher education (Shook & Keup, 2012). These programs are a natural fit for student veterans, given that very few understand the unique transition from active duty

to college student better than a fellow veteran. Obstacles to starting such a program include the time and resources necessary to build one, but model programs exist. For example, the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE; Kees et al., 2017) is a peer support program that connects incoming students with existing student veterans trained as peer advisors. Goals of the PAVE program include: (a) supporting the transition to college life, (b) increasing sense of belonging on campus, (c) improving retention rates, (d) improving academic performance, and (e) identifying resources for health-related concerns (Kees et al., 2017). Over five years, PAVE grew from a three-school pilot in Michigan in 2012 to more than 40 schools nationwide (Kees et al., 2017). Participants in the program have reported a greater sense of connectedness and belonging on campus and less stigma associated with seeking mental health care than student veterans who did not participate (Lake, 2021).

Support programs on college and university campuses succeed because of interest at the grassroots (i.e., student) level and support from the highest levels of the administration (Kees et al., 2017). As such, implementing a veteran peer support program requires significant interest from the key stakeholders on campus, including student veterans, faculty and staff, deans, and administrators. In addition to getting buy-in from institutional stakeholders, finances may present another challenge. For example, two years of program implementation for PAVE costs between \$13,000 and \$16,000, depending on the size of the school (Lake, 2021).

## **Implications for Social Work**

Given the scope and complexity of college student veteran integration on campuses, what role could social work play in implementing a peer mentorship program for veterans? Individuals with knowledge of social work principles on many campuses include students pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees in the discipline, independently licensed clinicians (i.e., MSWs), community organizers, and teaching and research faculty. Each has an area of expertise to bring to addressing this need.

Students pursuing social work degrees, especially student veterans, could serve as peer mentors supporting the transition to campus of military veterans. Peer mentorship could also provide an opportunity as a field instruction site for undergraduate or graduate students. Community organizers are ideally suited to support peer mentorship

programs by identifying, recruiting, and organizing key university stakeholders. Clinical social workers provide a significant share of mental health services in the United States. The benefits of linking a licensed social worker to the peer mentorship program include easy navigation of campus or local mental health services and a “warm hand off” to a provider, which has been shown to improve service utilization (Davis et al., 2016). Faculty and researchers could play a vital role in successfully implementing a peer mentorship veteran program at various stages of development through training and supervising peer mentors and applying for internal and external federal funding for program implementation. They can also disseminate the program’s outcomes and provide evidence of a need through scholarly writing and publication.

## **Broader Impacts**

With the growing number of student veterans enrolling in colleges and universities across the United States, successful integration into higher education and degree completion is critical. Beyond degree completion, graduation marks an important milestone in the transition from military to civilian culture. For veterans, obtaining a college degree is one path towards upward mobility and integration into civilian life. Individuals on campus trained or being trained in social work are valuable partners in supporting this critical transition for military veterans.

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