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## **Advising Veteran Students**

### **Reaching for the Stars: Helping Student Veterans Achieve New Heights in Higher Education**

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Research has shown that the military-affiliated student population is increasing at colleges and universities due to significant education benefit packages such as the Post 9/11 G. I. Bill and Yellow Ribbon Program (Byman, 2007; Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). In order for institutions of higher education to effectively address the needs of this unique student population, adequate resources in the form of recruitment, retention and student services must be made available (Lokken, McAuley, & Strong, 2009). Due to their direct contact with students, academic advisors face unique challenges in regards to understanding both external policies and institutional processes facing the military-affiliated student population.

This article details past and present veterans educational assistance policies and discusses how these policies have evolved within the academy. Secondly, it discusses a variety of issues that military-affiliated students may encounter while completing their postsecondary educational goals. The article concludes with recommendations on how academic advisors can identify and help circumnavigate barriers to the educational goals of military-affiliated students.

To lend clarity for advisors with limited interactions with military-affiliated students, this population includes individuals actively serving in the military, those in Reserve status, Veteran status, or a dependent or spouse of a service member (UNC Serves, 2011).

### **Veterans Education Assistance**

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights) significantly impacted the United States economically, socially, and politically (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). After World War II, thousands of veterans returned to the country seeking employment. In an attempt to help veterans assimilate into civilian life, avoid an increase in unemployment rates, and thwart another depression the House and Senate approved the bill in early June 1944. The success of the 1944 G.I. Bill of Rights prompted additional legislation for later generations of veterans.

On July 16, 1952, the Veterans' Adjustment Act was signed into law and provided Korean War veterans with education benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009). The Veterans' Readjustment Act was revised in 1966 in response to the Vietnam War and extended benefits to service members who served during times of war and peace. The Montgomery Bill of 1984 (commonly called MGIB) was the last veterans' education program before the installment of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. Service members are still eligible to receive benefits through the MGIB or they can irreversibly change their benefit plan to the Post 9/11 G. I. bill (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill provides education benefits to military-affiliated students and covers all

resident tuition and fees for public, undergraduate institutions (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Currently, the bill covers up to \$17,500 per academic year for private postsecondary institutions. Actual tuition and fees may exceed these amounts if the military-affiliated student is attending a private school whose tuition exceeds \$17,500 or is enrolled as an out of state student. Subsequently, postsecondary institutions can elect to participate in Yellow Ribbon Program to make additional funds available to military-affiliated students without additional charges to their G. I. Bill entitlement (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

### **Barriers and Challenges**

Academic advisors face a twofold challenge when working with an increased number of military-affiliated students (Education Advisory Board, 2009). To begin, academic advisors must understand the unique challenges this student population faces while transitioning to higher education, particularly in terms of administrative (e.g. admissions process, financial benefits, transfer credit), transitional (e.g. identity development, community involvement, coping skills), and personal challenges (e.g. reluctance to seek assistance and understanding limitations). The second challenge is to assist military-affiliated students in recognizing and navigating through institutional roadblocks.

Four primary obstacles are prevalent within institutions of higher education that require attention from academic advisors. The first obstacle is a lack of information regarding available resources for military-affiliated students. The second obstacle involves working within the university's processes which are often slow to change. Concerns of funding military-affiliated students due to diminished institutional resources constitute a third obstacle. Lastly, the campus environment itself imposes a challenge to military-affiliated students' integration into higher education by creating stereotypes of the students' experiences.

### **Recommendations**

Although not a comprehensive list, there are several noteworthy recommendations for academic advisors who work with military-affiliated students. One of the initial steps in building a strong advisor-student relationship is to recognize that differences exist between military-affiliated students and the civilian- student population. As detailed in the previous section, military-affiliated students encounter many barriers and challenges that the general student population may never experience. To that end, academic advisors should have a strong knowledge base of the military culture and campus resources available for this unique population. This can be enhanced by attending institutional and independent programs, in-services, and symposiums. Awareness of institutional programs and resources for military-affiliated students will assist academic advisors in creating and building partnerships.

When working with students it is also important for academic advisors to identify as soon as possible whether or not the student is affiliated with the military and if they receive educational benefits through the Department of Veteran Affairs. This knowledge can assist the academic advisor with discussing available course options and campus resources. Furthermore, the academic advisor should be aware of institutional policies and guidelines regarding military transfer credit as this may alter the student's graduation requirements. Accordingly, it is valuable for academic advisors to understand commonly used military-related acronyms (e.g. DD-214,

CCAF, DANTES) and how they may be applicable to the student's academic program. A common occurrence military-affiliated students face is deployment during the academic year which may require withdrawal from the institution. By understanding the institutional policies, academic advisors will be better equipped to assist the student with the withdrawal process.

Lastly, it is beneficial for academic advisors to learn how to identify and help military-affiliated students that have mental and/or physical disabilities. A significant percentage of military-affiliated students return to society and higher education with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, traumatic brain injuries as well as physical disabilities (Tanelian & Jaycox, 2008). Coordinating services among disability support offices, counseling centers, and other resources on campus can better assist academic advisors in meeting the immediate and long-term needs of these students. Helping these students build their self-advocacy skills and encouraging them to seek needed care can help these students succeed. Academic advisors should have an understanding of the various disabilities and disorders common with this population. Several resources are available concerning this topic and are available for review at the NACADA Clearinghouse website

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/clearinghouse/advisingissues/military.htm#dis>

## **Conclusion**

The military-affiliated student population in higher education is continuing to grow with the advent of the Post 9/11 G. I. Bill. As a result, academic advisors should educate themselves about this unique student population and the challenges they encounter while pursuing their degree. It is important to understand that each institution is unique and may have different resources and processes for the military-student population. Thus, academic advisors should continually keep abreast of ever-changing institutional and governmental policies to maintain an accurate knowledge base pertaining to this group of students.

## **Questions for Discussion**

- ☐ What are some ways academic advisors can be proactive in circumventing potential barriers that military-affiliated students may encounter?
- ☐ How can academic advisors incorporate governmental and institutional resources for military-affiliated students in their standard practices?
- ☐ How can academic advisors apply the knowledge they possess about resources for military-affiliated students to their civilian advisee population?
- ☐ How can academic advisors build partnerships with other departments within the institution in an effort to help military-affiliated students succeed?
- ☐ What are resources your campus has in place to assist military-affiliated students with mental and/or physical disabilities?

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### **References/Annotated Bibliography**

Brainard, J. (2011, June 3). Veterans report less preparation for college and less confidence in their prospects. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Veterans-Report-Less/127768/>

Results of study indicate that military-affiliated student report lower self-confidence in their academic abilities as compared to civilian students; in addition, tutoring and remedial work is cited as a need for this unique student population.

Byman, D. (2007). Veterans and colleges have a lot to offer each other. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54 (16), B5-B5. Retrieved from <https://chronicle.com/article/VeteransColleges-Have-a/10596/>

The author discusses individual benefits military-affiliated students glean from a higher education as well as the benefits civilians, administrators, and society gain if more military-affiliated students seek postsecondary education.

Department of Veterans Affairs. (2011, August 18). *Benefits of the Yellow Ribbon Program*. Retrieved from [http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911\\_gibill.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp)

The web page is designed to explain the benefits of the Yellow Ribbon Program as well as eligibility standards for students.

Lipka, S. (2011, March 8). To support student veterans, be visible and engage other students, grant winners advise. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Grant-Winners-Offer-Tips-on/126653/>

Grant winners share information on services designed to help military-affiliated students reintegrate and succeed in higher education.

Lokken, J. M., Pfeffer, D. S., McAuley, J., & Strong, C. (2009). A statewide approach to creating veteran-friendly campuses. *New Directions for Student Services*, (126), 45-54. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ847295&site=ehost-live>

Introduces a process used by universities within the state of Minnesota to help military-affiliated students feel a sense of community and belonging while enrolled in postsecondary education.

O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing veteran success in higher education. *Peer Review*, 13 (1), 15-18.

Identifies a number of ways university personnel can help military-affiliated students succeed in college, including streamlining communication and improving the campus climate.

Ryan, S.W., Carlstrom, A.H., Hughey, K.F. & Harris, B.S. (2011). From boots to books: Applying Schlossberg's model to transitioning American veterans. *NACADA Journal*, 31 (1), 55-63.

The authors provide advice on how to assist military-affiliated students transition to postsecondary education by applying the tenets of Schlossberg's model.

Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009). From military service to student life: Strategies for supporting student veterans on campus. Washington, DC: Education Advisory Board

This document provides a great deal of information regarding how to support military-affiliated students in a postsecondary setting.

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