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Best Practices for Advising Veteran Students

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A Population in Need

Clark and Kalionzes wrote, "It is one thing to be aware of our diverse students and to know how to address their issues thoughtfully and appropriately. It is an even greater task to learn to genuinely value and affirm diversity in advising work and commit to transform institutions to better support students of color" (2008, pp. 211–212). Academic advisers need to respect the unique backgrounds of all students they advise. Further, they need to understand that diversity is more than race and skin color. All populations of students may be recognized as having diverse characteristics, and advisers need to understand how to advise every type of student. An increasingly relevant student population is veteran students. Veteran students are those transitioning from the military culture to the campus culture and present a unique student population in the field of higher education. With the number of veterans attending college expected to increase, academic advisers need to learn more about veteran students and utilize best practices to serve them well.

To work with veterans, advisers must understand what makes them unique. Morreale (2011) mentioned, "1.6 million military veterans have served combat deployments since September 11, 2001. There were approximately 660,000 military veterans and 215,000 military service members enrolled in undergraduate education during the 2007–2008 academic year" (p. 31). These statistics show veterans are becoming a significant student population in colleges and universities; however, the statistics do not tell us much about who veteran students are. We must also understand their pre- and post-military experiences and the transitions faced when moving from military to civilian life and college to fully grasp what makes veterans a diverse student population (Morreale, 2011). Once academic advisers have established who veteran students are, they need to use the information they have learned to better serve veterans in transition. Academic advisers often use various student development theories to guide and inform their practice. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) explain that transition theory can be applied to many adult populations. Through this framework, Schlossberg's transition theory can provide insights into best practices for serving veterans. After setting the context of veteran students, advisers can apply Schlossberg's transition theory to further understand of veteran students.

The GI Bill

The GI Bill enables many veterans throughout the United States and from all branches of the military to attend institutions of higher education to develop themselves and enhance their lives beyond military service. The GI Bill can be traced back to World War II. Bound and Turner (2002) state "The flood of veterans enrolling in college at the end of World War II contributed to

widespread rhetoric that the GI Bill brought about the democratization of American higher education” (p. 784). The GI Bill ultimately set the foundation that enabled today’s veteran students to attend colleges and universities.

GI Bills are ever changing and have evolved through the years. Because all veterans are eligible for GI Bill benefits, advisers need to be aware of the GI Bill when working with veterans. This is essential, because advisers work in diverse environments and are often faced with questions about which they are not always familiar. If advisers understand the premise of the GI Bill, they can better assist veterans with whom they come in contact. At minimum, advisers should be knowledgeable about where to direct veterans who need assistance with their benefits and what the GI Bill offers to veteran students.

It is clear the GI Bill has been a significant piece of legislation that it has provided veterans the opportunity to seek advanced education. However, the GI Bill often serves as a stressor for those who utilize its benefits. The American Council on Education (2008) explains a significant number of veteran students are unaware of the types of benefits provided by the GI Bill. Veteran students are also confused about the steps to take to receive their benefits (Strickley, 2009). The fact that veterans do not fully understand what their benefits include or how to receive them suggests academic advisers need to build a basic knowledge about the GI Bill so they can assist veterans in locating the best place to help them receive their benefits. If advisers are able to make the proper referrals, they will help to alleviate some of the stress felt by veterans when coping with the structure of the GI Bill.

Combat to College

Veteran students face many challenges throughout their tenure in colleges and universities. A key factor in these challenges is the transition from one environment to another. Veterans are accustomed to the military lifestyle and may have difficulty adjusting to a new atmosphere. The culture of higher education presents veterans with changes that make it difficult for them to establish comfort and belonging. To effectively serve veterans, academic advisers must learn about the transitional issues veterans confront during their academic careers.

When serving veterans it is necessary to understand they may have endured difficult life experiences that have shaped the lens through which they are viewing their educational journeys. Strickley (2009) describes how veterans may be dealing with the psychological aspects of war or a serious injury or disability as a result of combat, all of which can shape their views on life and higher education. Further, the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder describes a percentage of veterans who have experienced war-related experiences by stating “60 percent have been attacked or ambushed, 86 percent have received incoming fire, 80 percent have been shot at, 36 percent have discharged a weapon, 63 percent have seen dead bodies or remains, and 79 percent have known someone who was seriously injured or killed” (Strickley, 2009, p. 4). Advisers need to be aware that veterans may have experienced some or all of these events. Further, advisers should understand that not all veterans will cope with their issues in the same manner (Strickley, 2009). To be fully prepared to advise veterans, it is fundamental that all academic advisers are aware of the physical and psychological health needs of these students.

The transition from a daily military lifestyle to becoming a member of the civilian society presents an interesting component of veteran student life. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) explain that veterans who go to war often face difficult transitions because they are taken away from their relationships and routines and placed into combat. In addition, once they have established comfort within the military lifestyle, they can experience the same transition when re-entering the civilian life. Veterans have experienced a new lifestyle and set of routines as well as built new relationships while serving in the military. Once their military careers are finished, they are faced with yet another transition; military to civilian life. Re-entering civilian life is difficult enough, but veterans who move on to become students face a new lifestyle they have never before experienced.

Veteran students often must resolve social anxieties that make it difficult connect with peers, faculty], and staff (Coll, Oh, Joyce, & Coll, 2009). Keeping these difficult transitions in mind, advisers can interpret and follow Schlossberg's transition and make these students' journeys a little smoother.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory to Best Practice

Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) describe a veteran's time in the military as one that molds them into a unique population. Thus, veteran students on college campuses are a special group within student bodies. As outlined previously, they bring with them distinct challenges and experiences that distinguish them as a diverse population about which academic advisers need to know more. Once advisers have a base knowledge on what makes veterans students unique, they will have a better understanding how to best advise them.

Schlossberg (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 111) defined transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." This definition can apply to veteran students as they enter a new experience by becoming college students. Their relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles will certainly change as they are no longer soldiers, but are instead students.

A key component of Schlossberg's theory addresses the four S's: *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies* (Schlossberg et al., 1995). With regard to *Situation*, advisers need to understand that veterans are entering a new environment with a different set of roles and responsibilities. Veterans are no longer soldiers on the battlefield; rather, they have become students in the classroom. Advisers therefore need to recognize that veterans are dealing with a role change that may pose a difficult task. If advisers approach veteran students in a sympathetic manner, they will establish a foundation and rapport that could be critical in helping veterans become comfortable in their new role as students. Once this rapport is established, veterans will be more receptive to seeing academic advisers, which in turn, will help ease some of the transitional challenges this student population faces in a new environment.

When thinking about *Self*, it is important to understand that all students have a perception of how things should function. Advisers can discuss with veterans their views toward higher education and help them understand what is expected of them and how to succeed as students. Advisers need to acknowledge that veterans' expectations and approaches to tasks have been shaped by

their military service and these are not always the same expectations and approaches that traditional college students bring to their higher-education journey. “These [veteran] students have been shaped by life-altering experiences that affect their thoughts and behaviors at home, at work, and in the classroom” (Coll, Oh, Joyce, & Coll 2009). Once advisers appreciate this fact, they can more successfully address the way they deliver the advising process to veterans. They can frame the educational process in ways that foster growth, development, and understanding for veterans. If advisers approach veterans in this manner, they will establish a relaxed atmosphere that can help ease the transition from battlefield to classroom.

The *Support* aspect of Schlossberg’s theory is perhaps the most significant for advising veterans. Advisers should work to establish an advising process that recognizes the holistic needs of veterans and helps to establish relationships with these students. “With a strong foundation of self-awareness and a familiarity with veteran issues, advisers may engage in meaningful relationships with students, providing a positive and safe environment for them to develop personal goals, seek assistance with school, and make future professional plans” (Coll, Oh, Joyce, & Coll, 2009). Veterans need to feel they have a solid support network to help with the transitional challenges they are facing. Veterans need support from advisers in the form of referrals to other appropriate resources and in the form of a friendly face that veterans can go to in time of need and advice. If advisers work to ensure they are offering support to veterans, they will show veterans there is a network of people in place who care about their success as students, which in turn will help to make the college experience more meaningful for them.

Lastly, the *Strategies* aspect of Schlossberg’s theory is about developing a means of helping veteran students cope. Once all of the other S’s are accomplished and understood, advisers can empower veterans to implement various strategies that will aid in their success as college students. Advisers should make veterans aware of the various support services available to them that will help them with their transition to the higher education environment. Veterans need to know how to locate tutoring, counseling, health, and veterans affairs services. Veterans need to be aware of the various services they can utilize to become a successful college student. Advisers can play an invaluable role in embracing the holistic nature of their work and assisting veterans so they have the means to be successful and gain something from their growth as college students.

Conclusion

Significant increases in the number of veterans attending institutions of higher education suggest academic advisers need to learn more about veterans. Academic advisers often represent the first face that incoming students see, and, because of that, they often become a confidant for students. To succeed and grow, veterans attending colleges and universities for the first time need a meaningful relationship with their academic advisers. If academic advisers respect veterans for who they are and appreciate the experiences they have sometimes endures, they will be better suited to serve them. By using Schlossberg’s transition theory and addressing *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies*, academic advisers can develop plans of action that will allow them to better serve veterans and meet the many needs they bring with them as students. Advisers must remember, “Having encouraging advisers who can help veteran students navigate through

the school experience has proven to enhance the growth and success of veterans students and has promoted institutional retention as well” (Coll, Oh, Joyce, & Coll, 2009).

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