One of the iconic rites of spring on any college campus is the traditional pomp and circumstance of a graduation procession. Graduation exercises and commencement speeches are the hallmark of degree completion—signifying the culmination of years of academic coursework, examinations and capstone projects reflective of one’s selected field of study. For the veteran or military student and his/her extended family, that sense of accomplishment and degree attainment is especially gratifying given the part-time nature of enrollment, interrupted attendance due to deployments or mobilizations, and the guiding principle of “mission first.”

A number of institutions have established effective practices for celebrating graduation and academic achievements and also honoring military service of the graduates.

Since 9/11, countless numbers of servicemembers and veterans have completed undergraduate degrees using educational benefits from Department of Defense military Tuition Assistance and/or Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Many colleges and universities incorporate symbolic forms of recognition for veteran and military graduates into their graduation exercises—bestowing honor cords, stoles or aiguillettes—to distinguish and pay tribute to the achievements and military service of this student population. One campus director of Veterans Affairs shared that faculty veterans were very taken with this type of recognition and quickly jumped at the chance to also wear a Veteran Tribute stole during commencement. At the University of Massachusetts Lowell’s ceremony, graduating veterans bring their children across the stage with them, reinforcing the values of educational degree attainment and family engagement at the event.

The Office of Student Engagement and Wellness at Metropolitan State University of Denver hosts a Veteran’s Graduation Brunch Celebration for graduating military/veteran students, their families, and mentors within the MSU Denver campus and community.

By Kathy Snead
Over 200 campuses throughout the country have established Military Honor Societies to recognize academic accomplishments and challenge military students toward improved grades and academic scholarship. SALUTE (Service - Academics - Leadership - Unity - Tribute - Excellence) is a Veterans National Honor Society established at Colorado State University in 2009 to recognize student veterans and military students at institutions offering undergraduate education. SALUTE, originally funded by the support of ACE/Wal-Mart Success for Veterans Grants, has been structured to encourage flexibility at the local chapters for awarding academic scholarships, establishing community priorities and activities, and recognizing outstanding academic achievements.

Perhaps the most meaningful recognitions of military/veteran student success are the recognition ceremonies and celebrations that colleges and universities host for military graduates, families and their campus champions. AASCU institutions—such as Armstrong State University (Ga.), Metropolitan State University of Denver ( Colo.), Texas A&M University-Central Texas and University of Massachusetts Lowell—host annual Veteran’s Graduation Ceremony & Brunch/Lunch Celebrations to individually recognize graduates and celebrate their accomplishments with family members and faculty mentors. These celebrations honor the veterans’ service to our country, as well as academic and student engagement accomplishments.

One of the unique features of the Texas A&M University veteran recognition efforts is to acknowledge faculty, staff and advisors who have enhanced the campus environment for veterans and military-connected students. Graduating student veterans are given a “Thank You” challenge coin (free of charge) when they receive their graduation cord at the Veteran reception prior to commencement. The coin includes instructions for the student veteran to find and present the coin to the faculty member, staff member or advisor that made the most significant impact on them during their time at A&M.

Gerald “Jerry” Smith, director of the Texas A&M University Veteran Resource & Support Center, shares that the recognition program “has been a bigger success than I could have ever imagined. It literally turned the tide. Prior to this program, we [Veterans Resource staff] were the ones constantly reaching out to faculty/staff in an effort to make TAMU more ‘veteran friendly.’ Now that this program has been in place for about a year, we find that faculty/staff now reach out to us to create partnerships that enhance our veteran-friendly efforts.”

Interested in how your campus might further encourage student success among your military student populations? Follow Metropolitan State University of Denver’s lead of building degree completion as a new student expectation at initial enrollment. The Office of Student Engagement and Wellness videotapes portions of the Veteran’s Graduation Brunch Celebration and uses video clips of the event in their Veteran New Student Orientation each semester. Veterans, new to campus and attending the college orientation, witness first-hand the campus support and recognition systems in place to celebrate their future successes—in essence, setting the stage for veteran/military student success and future Veterans’ Graduation Celebrations.

Kathy Snead is director of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges.