Highlighting the Needs of Veteran Students on College and University Campuses

by Lee Erica Elder

Colleges and universities are recognizing and prioritizing the specific needs of veteran students on college and university campuses, and meeting these demands in a way that respects the challenges and barriers veteran students face as non-traditional learners. Today’s veteran students are aided in completing higher education by the biggest investment in veterans education since the original GI Bill, the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The core Post-9/11 benefit pays for up to the highest amount of in-state undergraduate tuition and fees at a public educational institution in the state depending on a veteran student’s eligibility. Other associated benefits for eligible students include housing and book stipends. The optional Yellow Ribbon Program allows institutions to contribute toward veteran students’ tuition and fee costs that are higher than the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit (such as out-of-state charges); the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs then matches that contribution. “Given the generous nature of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans now have the opportunity to attend almost any institution to which they can gain admittance,” says Ted Timmerman, associate director of the Office of Veterans Programs at Penn State University.

Institutions are responding to a rise in veteran matriculation by adding or developing dedicated veteran services programs; strengthening recruitment, academic and financial planning; outreach; and providing distance-learning opportunities. According to a recent report by a collaborative of higher education associations, “More than 57

Photo: As the Western Connecticut State University Police Color Guard looks on, student Derek Roy, a sergeant in the Connecticut Army National Guard, lays a wreath during the 2009 Veterans Day observance on the WCSU campus.

A look at the current climate and tomorrow’s goals for veterans on campus
percent of campuses have programs that are specifically designed for military veterans, and 65 percent of colleges and universities have increased their emphasis on military students since September 11, 2001” (“From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus”).

**A Home Away from Home**

One of the most basic needs of veteran students is full integration and comfort in their learning environment. Their social interests might not always align with those of traditional college learners (recent high-school graduates, about 18-22 years of age), but many still wish to remain connected to the fabric of their chosen institution with as seamless a transition as possible. “Veterans are a distinct cohort of students,” says Mark Kinders, vice president for university relations at Northeastern State University (Okla), which offers a veterans-only orientation, a living-learning veterans community in a residence hall, and veteran-preference enrollment in certain courses. “They bring maturity, experience and commitment beyond traditional students, although their age difference is typically not that substantial,” he says. Many campuses provide veteran centers where students can connect with their peers and participate in annual programs honoring and acknowledging veteran students and staff. As part of Veterans Day celebrations last fall, Western Connecticut State University hosted a salute to those who have served in the military and unveiled the school’s new veteran center. “It’s great to have a place to come to where we can feel comfortable,” said WCSU student Jeremy Mack, president of the university’s Student Veteran Organization (SVO) and member of the Connecticut Army National Guard. “I think a lot of veterans feel out of place at school,” said Mack. “This provides a place to be with other veterans we can relate to.”

For some institutions, such as Troy University (Ala.), where combined staff boasts more than 1,000 military members, veteran needs have long been a priority. “I think the most important thing that any institution can do with regards to its service to the military is to demonstrate through actions, through services and through support, that the institution cares about the military, who they are, what they’ve done, and the important contribution that they make to our society,” says Joseph Houghton, associate director for military programs for Troy’s Global Campus.

Veteran-to-veteran college support is valuable because it recalls connections forged while serving. “First and foremost, veterans want to know they are not alone on campus,” says Kinders. “Many of them prefer to blend into the woodwork and not stand out from other students; nonetheless, all of them have a deep sense of pride and accomplishment in having served honorably in the military, and they are seeking that comradeship from other veterans
Veterans must navigate a complicated benefit system and are frequently overwhelmed by the options available. It is essential to have, if not a dedicated staff, at the very least a connection to the appropriate resources to assist in financial planning.

while on campus. They will be the first ones to recognize if another is having difficulties adjusting to college life, or is experiencing a service-related issue.”

**Academic Planning**

Addressing the scholarly needs of a veteran population is a complex undertaking; some issues unique to these students include academic transcripts that often encompass not only credits from other institutions of higher education, but military education credits and credits granted by examination (such as CLEP) as well as placement questions. (Active-duty students’ academic needs must also take into account matters associated with military operational tempo.) These complicate academic advising, course scheduling and graduation requirements for active-duty military and veteran students alike. “If they are still active they may be doing specific programs, the choice of which was to help them with climbing the military ladder in regards to promotion, and/or staying on in the service for a longer period of time, because they make themselves eligible for a better position within the service,” says Houghton. Therefore, it’s imperative that educational institutions look at the entire landscape of a veteran’s career beyond what appears on their current transcript. “Being veteran-friendly is about serving the needs of adult learners, which includes course delivery that is flexible and convenient and having learner support services that understand the unique needs of adult learners,” says Ginny Newman, assistant director of military education for Penn State Outreach.

A large number of veterans’ needs are based on distance learning programs that many may have grown used to while on active duty. Some veterans may not be able to attend a brick-and-mortar campus full-time due to reasons that can include injuries or, like many of their civilian classmates, juggling multiple responsibilities. Houghton explains, “The trend is very much away from the traditional classroom, in favor of distance learning. Because of our global network we are able to complement that very nicely with in-class options.” Troy offers courses at more than 30 military bases and counts half of its population as online learners. By developing social networking and making other online resources available to students, institutions can reach a vast network of veteran learners who need flexible choices.

**Fiscal Considerations**

As part of any comprehensive effort to help veterans adjust to academic life, institutions must offer counseling on financing college using veterans education benefits. Veterans must navigate a complicated benefit system and are frequently overwhelmed by the options available. It is essential to have, if not a dedicated staff, at the very least a connection to the appropriate resources to assist in financial planning. “Veterans need close counseling on
which element of the GI Bill they ought to enroll under,” says Kinders. “Each has advantages, depending on the veteran’s needs. For example, Chapter 33 is the correct title for the current version of the bill, providing very generous education, tutoring and living allowance benefits, but not counseling services support. The older bill, Chapter 31, provides funding for this, but less for education. However, once a vet elects [Chapter 33], he or she can’t revert back to [Chapter 31] and get that counseling direct support if required.” Veterans who are members of the National Guard or ROTC have different considerations as well. Students need the option of speaking with someone knowledgeable about the various options and configurations of tuition assistance. Houghton notes that it helps if schools develop a close relationship with local VA regional offices. Troy University has at least 20 VA certified staff members who are knowledgeable in all of the variations on the GI Bill. Similarly, at Metropolitan State College of Denver (Colo.)—where nearly 800 veterans currently receive VA educational benefits—the veterans services office provides information on applying for educational benefits, tracks academic performance and provides a liaison between Metro State and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, according to Leroy Chavez, a Metro State alumnus, U.S. Army veteran and project director of the Federal TRIO Veterans Upward Bound program at Metro State.

Many institutions also participate in programs that assist in educating military families. Troy offers scholarships that can be transferred to spouses and dependents, and participates in the Department of Defense’s Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts program (MyCAA), which allows military spouses to receive academic and job training in skills considered transferable, to better complement the transient nature of military family life (see article “Serving Those Who Also Serve,” this issue).

### Health and Medical Needs

Some veteran students may enter college after sustaining service-related injuries requiring rehabilitation; some may have permanent disabilities. Certain types of disabilities, such as combat-related injuries, may be ones with which campus disability service offices have little previous experience. “Social adjustment to campus culture and the possible challenge of accommodating physical or psychological disabilities due to combat injuries are needs that are unique to veteran student populations,” says Kathy M. Snead, director of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC). Snead recommends that institutions complete an intake review prior to admitting veterans so that services can be tailored to individual needs. Institutions near military installations can partner with these locations to access additional medical care and specialized support as needed.

Penn State Outreach currently offers a student center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), with counselors trained in PTSD, and schools such as Northeastern State are working to make veteran counseling more readily available. “The VA notes that many vets, perhaps up to 20 percent, are suffering from some service-related disability that requires counseling,” says Kinders. He observes his students need help with adjusting to civilian life, PTSD, anger management and other issues, resulting in his recently lobbying before a congressional delegation for counseling funding. “Counselors who are veterans are crucial to our campuses.”

### Feedback

One of the most basic but effective ways that educators are tapping into the needs of veteran learners is by simply listening. Institutions are polling veterans in the areas of personal and family needs, health issues, finances, advisement, etc., and making adjustments accordingly. As a result, more veterans are receiving post-college and career planning assistance, as well as continued help with financial and academic planning.

Veteran needs on college and university campuses remain a diverse issue, but are receiving more attention and effort from institutions around the country. By identifying the needs of veteran populations, schools are investing in and developing students with both the foundation and proven potential to become academic and career leaders, given the right motivation and support. “The most important thing a campus can do is to directly tell veterans that they are welcome on campus, and then deliver on the promise in tangible, meaningful ways,” says Kinders. “By recognizing and accommodating veterans we are acknowledging that they bring unique experiences and viewpoints that will enrich our learning and teaching experiences for our students, as well as for our faculty and staff.”

---

Lee Erica Elder is a freelance writer in New York City.