

Best Practices for Serving the Student Veteran



The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has prepared this document to provide highlights from the current literature on the ways in which higher education can serve student military veterans. We include additional recommendations from the McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group.

Each college or university is unique, and some of these strategies and good ideas may work well for one institution but not another. We encourage you to review the information in this document, discuss it with veterans services staff members at your institution, learn more about how other institutions are responding, and determine the course of action that is best for your institution.

A list of references is provided at the end of this document to allow further learning on this topic. Or contact Becky Klein-Collins, Director of Research, CAEL, bklein@cael.org.

Overarching Recommendation

- **Provide top-down support.** Top-down support, particularly from the president's office, makes things happen more efficiently and effectively. Action is made possible through a president's public commitment (ACE, 2010).

Outreach and Information

- **Establish a single point of contact on campus.** This person should be knowledgeable about available services, programs, and resources and prepared to help veterans address challenges in benefits applications and enrollment processes (ACE, 2010; Sternberg et al, 2009; SOC, 2011; MFRI, 2012; Woll, 2010).
- **Provide veteran-specific orientations or break-out sessions** for new students (ACE, 2010).
- **Make it easy to find information.** Establish clear, logical, consistent, and well-known structures for finding information relevant to veterans' needs, including benefits applications and enrollment procedures (Woll, 2010).

Other ideas to consider:

- **Establish a section of the website** specifically for veterans (MFRI, 2012).
- **Educate administrative support and reception and switchboard personnel** on where to direct inquiries made by student service members and veterans (MFRI, 2012).
- **Provide a handbook or guide specifically for veterans** to help them find important resources on campus and in the community (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group recommendation).
- **Assist veterans with financial planning** so that they can better manage fluctuations in their financial resources. This is especially important given recent changes in the GI Bill, which no longer covers living expenses during school breaks (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group recommendation).
- **Tailor your marketing efforts** to service members and veterans and let them know about your veteran-specific programs and procedures (Woll, 2010).

Recognition of Skills and Competencies

- **Award credit for military coursework and/or experience** through ACE guide recommendations, portfolio evaluation, and other Prior Learning Assessment options for evaluating extra-institutional learning (Sternberg et al, 2009; SOC, 2011; MFRI, 2012; Woll, 2010; ACE, 2010).
- **Clearly communicate your policies on military transfer credit and other ways for recognizing prior learning** (ACE, 2010; SOC, 2011; MFRI, 2012).
- **Ensure that advisors and other personnel are trained on how to obtain transcripts for all branches of service** and how to work with veterans to evaluate what they learned from their training and military experience for possible college credit (ACE, 2010).

Recognition of Veterans as a Group with Distinct Needs and Contributions

- **Identify and address student veterans' major issues on your campus**(Woll, 2010). Solicit the views of veterans themselves (ACE, 2010).
- **Track veterans' enrollment and progress** (ACE, 2010; MFRI, 2012). Keeping track of the number of student service members and veterans will help justify programs or services; it also helps you monitor student progress toward academic goals (MFRI, 2012).
- **Find ways to get veterans to self-identify.** These could include welcome receptions, a student veterans organization, a veterans center, or recognition events on special holidays (MFRI, 2012).

Other ideas to consider:

- **Address issues and challenges through a workgroup or task force** that brings together key offices serving veterans (ACE, 2010).
- **Include veterans in diversity discussions on campus** (ACE, 2010).
- **Establish special outreach and services for women veterans.** Women veterans can seem to disappear on college campuses and may not join veteran-specific activities (ACE, 2010).
- **Become a chapter member of the SALUTE National Honor Society for Veterans** to promote academic excellence among student veterans (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group recommendation).

Student Support

- **Provide opportunities for veterans to connect with each other** (MFRI, 2012).
- **Provide support for all adult, nontraditional learners.** Ensure after-hours access to essential services for students who work during normal business hours (MFRI, 2012).
- **Encourage the start of a student veterans organization** (Sternberg et al, 2009; MFRI, 2012).

Other ideas to consider:

- **Create a veterans center** (MFRI, 2012) or online military/veterans group (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group recommendation).
- **Offer classes, seminars, and other activities** geared toward common interests among service members and veterans and/or to promote connections among student veterans (Woll, 2010).
- **Take advantage of the VA's Work-Study program,** which can pay for a student veteran to provide peer-level support and additional assistance to veterans services staff (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group recommendation).
- **If a residential campus, provide housing options for veterans.** Because veterans are typically older than traditional incoming students, some institutions allow veterans to live in graduate housing or family housing (ACE, 2010).

Transition Support

- **Train faculty and staff on veterans issues**(ACE, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; MFRI, 2012; Woll, 2012). Train faculty, advisors, counselors, and administrative staff so that they understand the contributions that service members and veterans bring to higher education and the challenges that they may face(Woll, 2010).
- **Provide advice and guidance on career choices.**As student veterans move forward in their academic careers and begin thinking about life after graduation, it is important to have someone who can help them translate their military experience to other industries (McCormick Foundation's Veterans Affinity Group recommendation).

Other ideas to consider:

- **Provide activities to help student veterans integrate with non-veteran groups.** These activities should be designed to promote connection, constructive dialogue, and mutual understanding between military and non-military students and faculty (Woll, 2010).

Administration: Policies and Procedures

- **Establish and communicate policies to help service members who are deployed,** including waivers for penalties, reimbursement of tuition, streamlined reenrollment processes, and opportunities to make up missed coursework and to earn a grade for a course that was interrupted (Sternberg et al, 2009; MFRI, 2012; Woll, 2010). Establish similar policies for military spouses and other students whose studies may be disrupted by a family member's deployment (ACE, 2010) (Sternberg et al, 2009).
- **Waive fees for late payments** for students using the GI bill or other veterans education benefits(Sternberg et al, 2009; MFRI, 2012; Woll, 2010).

Other ideas to consider:

- **Provide discounts, scholarships, and in-state rate eligibility** for service members, veterans, and their family members (Woll, 2010).
- **Provide alternative admission requirements for veterans,** such as recognition of the GED/high school equivalency diploma (SOC, 2011).

Disabilities and Mental Health

- **Change the name of the disability services office.** Many veterans have disabilities that are new, and so they may not be accustomed to defining themselves as a person with a disability. A name such as the Center for Accessibility & Education Support Services focuses on the services provided, which may help to draw in veterans in need of academic accommodations and other assistance (ACE, 2010).
- **Train counseling staff.** Counseling personnel should be educated about military terminology, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)and TBI (traumatic brain injury), and military and veteran culture (ACE, 2010; Woll, 2010).
- **Train disability services staff on PTSD and TBI** (McCormick Veterans Affinity Group recommendation).
- **Raise faculty awareness** of disability and mental health issues (ACE, 2010).
- **Create a peer mentor program**(ACE, 2010).

Important Things to Remember

- **One size does not fit all.** Recognize that one approach does not fit all needs. Each veteran is unique and has his or her own specific needs (ACE, 2010).
- **Word of mouth works.** More than anything, veterans trust the recommendations of fellow veterans. When you serve one veteran well, they will tell others that your institution is veteran-focused and veteran-friendly(ACE, 2010).

Resources

- ACE (2011). *Accommodating Student Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Tips for Campus Faculty and Staff*. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/MilitaryPrograms/serving/AccommodatingStudentVeterans_06222011.pdf
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- Woll, P. (2010). *Teaching America's Best. Preparing Your Classrooms to Welcome Returning Veterans and Service Members*. Give an Hour/National Organization on Disability. Retrieved from <http://www.nod.org/assets/downloads/AmericasBestTeaching.pdf>