*Veterans Knowledge Community*

SUPPORTING MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO STUDENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMMING

Amber Mathwig
Student Veterans Assistance Coordinator
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Kiersten Downs
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Applied Anthropology
University of South Florida

Edited by: Lauren A. Runco
Education and Employment Director for the Military Family Research Institute
Purdue University

Social Justice and Inclusion
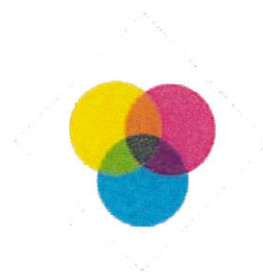
Over the past decade, academic affairs professionals have realized that military-connected students can benefit from targeted academic programmatic support while making their transition to a college or university setting. Given the authors' combined experiences in working with military-connected students and other veterans program administrators, we observe that the most common forms of support tailored for this student population are Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefit assistance, academic success (such as tutoring or assistance for adaptive needs, due to a disability), and various activities that focus on social support (campus-wide veterans' pride events, student veteran-coordinated activities such as picnics or sporting events, and community service days).

Research on military-connected students has increased exponentially during the past several years; however, little is known about the experiences of student service members and veterans through their multiple, intersectional, and often competing identities. Despite attempts by various organizations to provide transition support and academic success, the stark reality is that these organizations often do not reflect the true diversity of military members, nor do they address the competing identities veterans may embrace throughout their educational experience.

Studies suggest that the biggest concern in a veteran's transition into postsecondary education is learning how to navigate the benefits (education and health), and that general, nontraditional student concerns such as time management and child care are also present. Interestingly, studies that have focused on a sub-demographic within the veteran community, such as women, do not appear to find different results in participant needs or address concerns that do not neatly fit under the umbrella of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and psychological issues (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2012). However, if asked, it is likely that women veterans, veterans of color, LGBTQI veterans, or student affairs professionals whose identity differs from the narrative of the stereotyped White heteronormative male combat veteran may offer additional insight into the matter. The authors advocate for academic affairs research that employs intersectional approaches to research design, which will provide better understanding into the needs of these subgroups. With the availability of intersectional research, intuitive models of best practice will result, thus allowing university professionals working with military-connected students to better approach program development and implementation in a holistic manner that serves the entire population, including minority military-connected students.

This article discusses some ways that campuses and researchers are inadvertently marginalizing military-connected students in their attempts to aid them through a blanket identity of "veteran." The authors' intention is to help the reader understand how an intersectional approach to campus programming can lead to more supportive programs and services for all military-connected students. While research has shown that student success is enhanced when campuses provide environments that are both inclusive and supportive, a gap exists in the research connecting those findings to what an inclusive and supportive environment might look like for student veterans (Grimes et al., 2011). In order to jumpstart a conversation on this observation, we have identified three points of concern that we feel must be addressed in research and military-connected campus services going forward.

The Veterans Center as a Transitional Space on Campus

Veterans centers are increasing throughout the country as veterans continue to enroll in institutions of higher learning at high rates (O'Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). Veterans spaces must become transitional spaces that enable separated service members to integrate to a postmilitary life while feeling supported in their transition. A negative example of an environment is a space that has been designed to resemble a recruiting office or command headquarters as opposed to a casual study lounge and gathering space. Many individuals overseeing veteran

service offices may have been career military, serving 20-plus years; however, it is important to remember that most student veterans were not career military, choosing to leave the service for a variety of reasons. So, an office that emulates a militarized environment may do the opposite of what is intended, which is support military-connected students.

We would also like to note that campus partners referring to the veterans center as the only opportunity for veterans to connect and engage on campus may limit a veteran's knowledge of and engagement with appropriate places to seek support and resources. Vacchi (2012) argued campuses should not view student organizations as a panacea, as some groups, especially those that are poorly organized or isolated, may do more harm than good. Instead, consider using the veterans lounge on campus to host other campus or community-based affinity groups (women's center, Black cultural center, etc.) to provide military-connected students with a greater opportunity to connect with the organization that best meets their individualized academic and/or social needs.

The Benefit of Skill Development in Cultural Competence and Conflict Resolution

Several questions were raised at the 2016 NASPA Symposium on Military-Connected Students about how to reclaim student veteran lounges on campus from becoming a "hangout" for some veterans who engage in behaviors such as overt sexism. Audience members who have experienced the use of inappropriate, racially charged language by their peers within military-connected student lounges also expressed concern. They felt that this behavior deterred some students from seeing the lounge as a safe space that fosters support for all veterans. Those audience members were primarily seeking advice on how to address these instances when they occur.

As campuses establish programs that increase the cultural competency of the military, those running the veterans center should in turn also be increasing their own cultural competency. Many campuses offer training on how to support the LGBTQI population, first-generation college students, sexual assault survivors, and others. In addition to the veterans service providers, any student veteran in work-study or leadership roles on campus should also be encouraged to attend these trainings. Taking a leadership approach that emphasizes cultural competency knowledge will better prepare military-connected office leadership, staff, and students to improve engagement in these situations. An additional conflict resolution technique would be to educate peer leadership on how to utilize a Socratic approach in office and leadership management. For instance, asking, "Can you tell me what you mean by that?" is a better strategy than confrontation, which can escalate when sexist or bigoted behavior is observed.

Fostering the Intersectional Identities of Military-Connected Students

Campus service providers must intentionally engage with non-stereotypical veterans in ways that provide them an opportunity to define their military and life experiences; these providers must also offer them transition support as they move forward in their education. In terms of programming considerations, campuses are encouraged to go beyond the mass media stereotypes in order to address the lack of engagement from the veteran population. Veterans program administrators have expressed difficulty in programming participation overall, but specifically among women veterans, who are less likely to attend veterans events or seek services through veterans support offices (O'Herrin, 2011).

Campuses often host panels or speakers comprised mostly or entirely of White male combat veterans; however, they focus exclusively on the female military experience through such tools as The Invisible War (Ziering & Dick, 2012), an important documentary regarding sexual assault in the military. While we do need to provide space to discuss the traumas specific to service members, we need to do so in a way that is constructive and affirming of the individual veteran's experience. Campuses are encouraged to seek gender and racial diversity in all their panels and speakers, as well as highlight veterans outside of traditional military experiences (e.g., a LGBTQIA veteran during LGBTQIA history month or a Latino immigrant veteran during Latino heritage month).

Closing

In conclusion, we want to encourage veteran program administrators, researchers, and other campus partners to engage students in dialogue that is constructive and that focuses on the whole student. When veterans are only given the opportunity to speak of their lived experiences as a veteran, the importance of acknowledging and supporting their intersectionality can continue to be denied. However, if we provide opportunities for them to speak of their other identities—of which veteran is just one part—we can start to examine the importance of those identities in their military experiences. Transition assistance must go beyond explaining benefits processing and rolling student veterans through orientations designed for more traditional students. It is imperative for student affairs professionals to understand that by providing holistic and person-centered care for the most marginalized of our student veterans— such as the unacknowledged female combat veteran; the gay veteran who served under Don't Ask, Don't Tell; the veteran of color who may experience discrimination in his or her daily life—we are able to provide for all.

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