

# SUPPORTING STUDENT VETERANS: ADVICE FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Increasing numbers of students are also U.S. military veterans. These students prefer to be called “student veterans” (much like the phrasing of “student athletes”) which prioritizes their student identity.

Many universities recognize the assets that student veterans bring and are excited to have student veterans join their educational programs. Based on research about student veterans in engineering, funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the goal of this report is to help faculty and higher education administrators support student veterans and foster their talents. Student veterans bring unique experiences and in-depth knowledge to the classroom and research laboratories. Many will bring the leadership skills and self-discipline honed in the military to their teamwork. Our research indicates that many student veterans devote themselves to their studies in the same way they devoted themselves to their military missions. In the classroom, this may manifest with a need for clear and direct instructions, high expectations of their peers, and high value placed on mature and respectful classroom conduct. Student veterans tend to be older than traditional first-time college students. Many expressed a lack of tolerance for disorderly classroom conduct by their peers “like students not showing up on time, or being disrespectful to teachers, just being rude” in the words of one student veteran. Be aware that such dynamics may play out in the classroom and that embedding a framework of accountability resonates positively with student veterans.

Our research indicates that faculty members and administrators who reach out and demonstrate an interest in student veterans’ professional formation can have a profound impact. For example, one student veteran in our study said it was very helpful when someone reached out and, “would pretty much walk [them] through [the process].” Such an approach can make student veterans feel welcome. Other student veterans can serve as guides. One student said, “I would introduce [potential student veterans] to my professors. I would say, ‘Hey this is my professor. This is what we do. Let me know if you’re interested in this school, and I’ll walk you through the process.’” An openness and willingness to help one student veteran can often produce multiplier effects with others.

Student veterans may bring concerns about financing their education through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)-earned educational benefits including the Post-9/11 GI Bill. As these benefits have time limitations, students may be anxious about making progress toward their degree in a timely manner. Faculty members can direct students to the typical services on campus that may work with student veterans, such as financial aid, off-campus housing and student affairs. They may also share information about a national network for student veterans, Student Veterans of America (SVA). Faculty and administrative guidance can make a big difference, even explaining how to navigate faculty office hours because, as one student veteran shared, “...it would make things easier because, for me, I was completely lost.”

### **Diversity of student veteran needs**

Student veterans are a diverse group with a range of demographic characteristics and experiences based on military branch and position. Some student veterans may have experienced combat, for example, and our research revealed that some students can feel uncomfortable in their physical classroom spaces, feel sensitive to sounds and loud noises or might prefer a seat next to the door. Like other students, some may utilize mental health counseling services. Some student veterans describe their status as “invisible” because it is not always evident to their professors that they served in the military. To break the ice, consider making a statement such as, “If you have served in the military, I especially welcome you to introduce yourself to me after class.” Continue the conversation with, “Thank you for serving, what branch of the military did you serve in? Please don’t hesitate to ask if there is something I can do to support your participation in this class.” Such simple introductions promote student persistence. Some student veterans choose not to disclose their veteran identity and this should be respected.

Also keep in mind that student veterans are typically transfer students who often bring college credit from other institutions. Many students also indicate they could have benefited from basic software training for Microsoft Excel, for example. Faculty and administrators could offer them direction on where to find needed services.

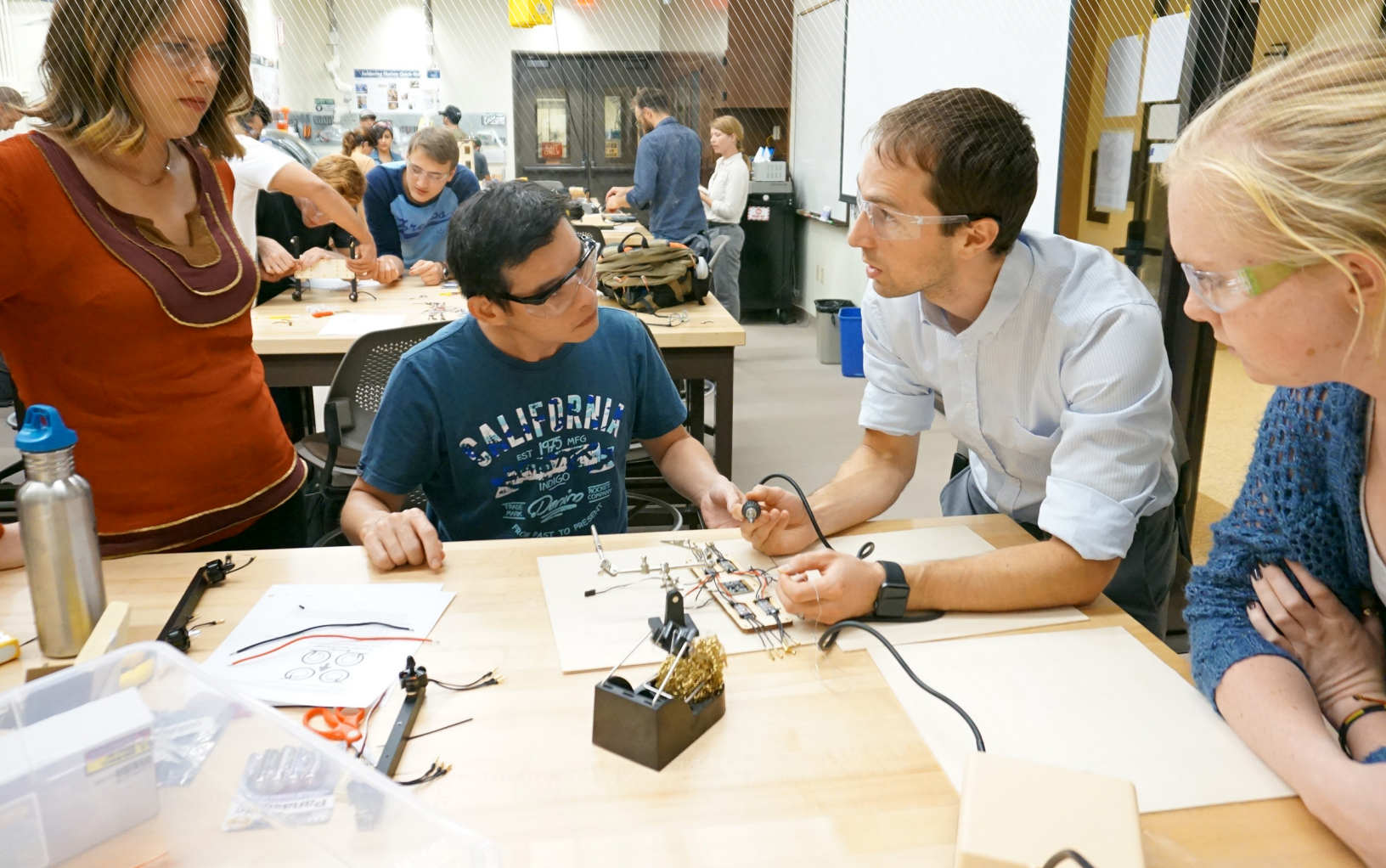
### **Funding resources, Forever GI Bill (started 2018)**

Many student veterans will be utilizing their Forever GI Bill benefits. Like previous iterations of the GI Bill, the Forever GI Bill provides 100% of in-state tuition for 36 calendar months of benefits. Other sources of funding, such as through vocational-rehabilitation, also covers tuition costs and the duration of this benefit is dependent upon the length of study required for veterans to become competitive in the labor market. Note that many private colleges and universities offer financial support to student veterans through the Yellow Ribbon Program.

### **Fostering belonging and supporting student veterans**

Many student veterans express a sense of alienation upon beginning a degree program and often allude to being overwhelmed during their first semester. Transitioning from the military into civilian culture, and then to a culture of higher education can be stressful. Many institutions have begun to implement the following recommendations as success strategies for student veterans:

- » Given their status as transfer students, create an appropriate introduction to the university through an orientation. Some universities have initiated transfer orientation programs specifically for military veterans.



- » Help promote an active Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter on campus, as a way to offer specific points of contact for student veterans.
- » Empower student groups to create co-curricular activities with student veterans (one successful example is a physical training morning workout open to all students).
- » Generate a resource list of community organizations to provide comprehensive services.
- » Improve campus climate by creating an allies program (sometimes called “Green Zone Training” or “Military Ally Training”) to disseminate information to faculty and staff about student veteran-specific issues.
- » Designate a student veteran-specific resource center or space.
- » Create student veteran-specific learning communities on campus.
- » Ensure the process flow for student veteran resources (such as mental health counseling) is streamlined. For example, gatekeepers of mental health services should be trained to ask if the student is a military veteran and seek to expedite their needs.
- » Offer priority registration to student veterans so they do not lose their tuition benefits as a consequence of not securing a class placement.

Additional information about student veterans can be found at <https://studentveterans.org/aboutus/research>





## About the project

The NSF-sponsored project “Military Veteran Students’ Pathways in Engineering Education” brings together an interdisciplinary research team from engineering, sociology, and education with expertise on veterans, gender, race/ethnicity, social capital, and persistence in higher education providing a strong foundation for advancing knowledge in engineering education. The project addresses gaps in the literature on student veterans in engineering by exploring their pathways and experiences across four institutions. During the four-year study, dozens of student veterans in engineering were interviewed individually and in focus groups to study the conditions under which student veterans pursue engineering education and the factors that support their success. The goal was to understand what made them successful as they transitioned from the military to pursuing a bachelor’s degree in engineering and understand how the military and universities can best support the success of student veterans. University administrators and veteran support personnel were also interviewed to learn about policies and practices that shape successful student veteran experiences. The results of this project can help student veterans thrive in college and specifically in engineering majors and inform strategies for faculty and administrators in serving student veterans.

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