

ACKNOWLEDGING MULTIPLE RESPONSIBILITIES:

Higher learning institution support services for student veterans and their families

SUMMARY OF OPERATION DIPLOMA AWARD INSTITUTIONS' REPORTS

Thousands of military members leave service every year, and due to the benefits made available by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, military downsizing and a challenging economy, many recent veterans are choosing to pursue higher education. What are student service members and veterans looking for in higher education? Are colleges and universities equipped to integrate them? How do postsecondary schools address the complex nature and demands of military life? Do they recognize specialized training and service? Are support systems in place to handle their unique situations and issues? Those are some of the questions the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University sought to answer through its *Landscape in Higher Education* series.

Who are military and veteran students and what challenges do they face?

The unique skills and experiences that student service members and veterans acquire over their military career distinguish them from other students, and higher education institutions vary in their readiness for this population. Concerns of student military members and veterans as they return to campus include the following (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; NSSE, 2010; Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010):

- » access to educational benefits;
- » acknowledgment of extensive mastery-based training;
- » recognition of multiple commitments and obligations;
- » appreciation of the realities of military service; and
- » availability of support for hidden and visible disability.

Student veterans are more likely to be male, older than 24, first generation college students, enrolled part-time, transfer students, distance learners, married with children, and work full- or part-time than other students (NSSE, 2010). One in five also has at least one service-related disability (iCasualties, 2012).

The purpose of this report series

During the past five years, MFRI has assisted almost 100 colleges and universities as they worked to support military personnel and veterans enrolled at their institutions. Our education initiative, called Operation Diploma, provided a variety of forms of assistance, including grants, to two- and four-year public and private institutions. These grants, and their proceeds, improved the lives of more than 6,000 student service members and veterans. As institutions designed and implemented new policies, programs and practices, we monitored their progress and learned from their experiences. This report documents results from our studies of institutions' progress regarding specific actions on behalf of student service members and veterans.

Armed with input from members of both military and civilian communities, available research, and student veterans themselves, we created a set of questions to ask both staff and administrators that focused on areas of the institution that affect student service members and veterans. The goals of the *Landscape in Higher Education* series were to:

- » collect information for benchmarking and program improvement;
- » assess awareness of the student veteran population in colleges and universities;
- » determine what supports and services existed;
- » increase awareness of the needs of this group of students; and
- » identify promising practices.

Who we contacted

Given our location at Purdue University, we focused our project on Indiana, contacting all of Indiana's postsecondary institutions. Similar to many states across the country, Indiana has no active duty military bases and few active duty service members, but is home to several higher learning institutions and large contingents of National Guard and Reserve members. The data reported below come from 75 institutions (80 percent of the total) that were diverse in size, sector (public/private), category (not-for-profit/for-profit), and degrees offered (undergraduate/graduate). We also contacted 25 benchmark institutions from the list "Best for Vets" institutions published by the *Military Times Edge* (2011) that were particularly friendly to student service members and veterans — these schools also were diverse in terms of size, focus, public or private, and profit or nonprofit status. Data reported here were collected in 2010 and 2012.

How we did it

We used a "secret shopper" method, whereby calls were made by student service members or veterans to frontline university staff. To compare responses from staff and administrators, the information obtained for each institution was compiled and mailed to a senior administrator at each college or university for confirmation or correction.

We also collected information about the number and duration of calls, how many times callers were transferred, and how helpful schools were when responding to inquiries about military programs. On average, callers made a total of two 11 minute inquiries to obtain information about all interview questions, and were transferred three times during each of the two calls. The student callers rated their agreement with the statement "I believed there was a genuine attempt to provide the requested information" on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The average rating improved from 3.06 in 2010 to 4.14 in 2012.



In this report we focus on how the schools recognize military training and experience, asking schools:

- » Do you have a designated person to work with military members?
- » Can your contact person direct wounded warriors to disability support services?
- » Do you have a student veteran organization?
- » What special assistance do you have for military spouses or family members?

What we learned

Designated representative for military members

Student services departments for veterans and their families may or may not be part of traditional university support networks. A designated military representative can help military learners navigate the various services available to them.

In 2010, significantly more administrators (63 percent) than staff members (43 percent) reported that their institutions had a designated person to work with military members. This disparity may have less to do with an actual knowledge gap than one's definition of a designated person, however. In 2012, the majority of staff members (75 percent) and administrators (84 percent) reported having a designated person to work with military members.

From 2010 to 2012, the percentage of institutions **without** this service decreased (staff reports: 40 percent to 19 percent; administrator reports: 15 to 9 percent). "Don't know" responses from both staff and administrators also fell, from less than 23 percent in 2010 to less than 8 percent in 2012 for both groups.

Disabled warrior referral support

Military veterans may have both hidden and visible disabilities. Having access to appropriate support services increases the chance that these students will successfully fulfill their educational goals. We anticipated that the person to refer a student service member or veteran to disability services would likely be the contact person designated to work with military students.

In 2010, two-thirds of administrators and slightly less than half of staff members reported that their contact person could direct wounded warriors to disability support services. Almost half of staff members and just over a quarter of administrators did not know if their contact could direct wounded warriors to disability support services.

By 2012, approximately 83 percent of both staff and administrators indicated that their contact person could direct student veterans and service members to support networks. The referral to disability support services may also come from multiple contacts and not just the staff designated to work with military students.

Student veterans' organizations

The transition from military life can be challenging, and it is helpful for veterans to have peer support and opportunities to interact with others who face similar obstacles and have had similar life experiences. Support for students with military experience is part of the function of student veterans' organizations (SVOs). Such organizations can increase the social support resources available to student service members and veterans.

In 2010, only 19 percent of staff members and 28 percent of administrators reported that their institution had an SVO. There seemed to be a knowledge gap, however, as we had documented the existence of SVOs on at least 40 percent of responding campuses. In addition, a notable percentage of both staff members (36 percent) and administrators (24 percent) did not know whether an SVO existed at their institution.

Although approximately one-half of the institutions in 2012 reported that either they did not have or did not know if they have a student veteran organization on their campus, the percentage responding that such an organization did exist had increased markedly since 2010. The actual percentage of documented SVOs in 2012 was 43 percent.

Military family support system

Of the 646,302 Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in 2012, 93,508 were dependent children and 54,367 were spouses, representing nearly 23 percent of users (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Family members also deal with the stresses created by deployments and reintegration and could benefit from support services. Military family members may also have difficulty completing a degree due to frequent moves and relocation and might benefit from educational and career counseling as well as mental health or other support services.

In 2010, only 9 percent of staff members and 20 percent of administrators reported that special assistance for military family members was offered at their institution. This support might be family member referral to appropriate off-campus resources or family housing placement on a residential campus. Almost half of staff members and a quarter of administrators did not know if assistance existed for family members of veterans.

In 2012, while the majority of both staff (80 percent) and administrators (68 percent) reported that no such military family support services were in place, the percentage of schools that did not know if they had special assistance dropped significantly indicating possible increased awareness of programs offered.

Higher learning institution differences in veteran support

When we looked at differences among types of higher learning institutions in their support for student service members, we found:

- » Public institutions reported offering significantly more services for student service members and veterans than private not-for-profit schools.



- » There were no significant differences among administrators between small (less than 10,000 students) and large institutions (greater than 10,000 students) for military student support programs.
- » In the area of student services, staff at institutions with graduate programs and large or public institutions reported offering more services than those at other institutions.

Staff versus administration gap

Though the situation has been improving since our original study in 2008, we still see a knowledge and information gap both among and between administrators and staff. In 2012, administrators gave significantly more positive answers than staff when asked if they had a designated person to work with military, and whether special assistance was available for military families. No statistical difference was noted when asked if an on-campus student veteran organization existed, or if a designated representative could refer disability services.

Benchmark institutions

Benchmark institutions gave significantly more positive responses than Indiana schools when asked if:

- » they had a designated person to work with military (staff: 92 versus 75 percent; administrators: 92 versus 84 percent);
- » the designated military contact could direct wounded warriors to support services (staff: 92 versus 84 percent; administrators: 92 versus 84 percent); and
- » they had a student veteran organization (staff: 88 versus 49 percent; administrators: 92 versus 53 percent).

We found no significant difference in responses regarding special assistance availability for military families. It is important to remember that these schools were viewed as being institutions that offered notably high levels of support to student service members and veterans. The 2012 Soldier to Student II report found that there is “great diversity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where services and programs are housed within the administrative infrastructure.” (American Council on Education, 2012 p. 8).

Why appreciation of military service matters

The number of student service members and veterans taking advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities is expected to increase substantially in the coming years as troops return from Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S. reduces military force size (ACE, 2012). Veterans are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill which provides 36 months of tuition at two-and four-year colleges and universities, trade and vocational schools, licensing and on-the-job training programs. In addition, the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Benefits Administration has conducted an aggressive marketing campaign promoting GI Bill educational benefits.

Student service members and veterans need to balance student, family, and work roles like other nontraditional students, but they also face unique challenges. It can be difficult for student service members and veterans to transition from military to life on campus. Points of contact who are familiar with campus programs, policies and resources for student service members and veterans help successfully navigate this transition (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). With frequent moves, deployment stress and reintegration challenges, military family members may also have difficulty completing a degree and might benefit from educational and career counseling as well as mental health or other support services.

Having a dedicated staff member to work with service members and veterans may increase the likelihood of having knowledgeable resource available to these students. Students with multiple roles and competing demands and timetables value access to information and services outside traditional business hours. It is also reasonable to expect single point-of-contact websites offering access to essential information could be helpful, as would access to financial-aid counselors, educational advisors and academic tutoring during evenings and weekends.

Veterans and especially combat veterans are more likely than nonveteran students to have one or more disabilities that can affect their educational experience. Almost one in five student combat veterans have at least one disability; for nonveterans, the frequency is one in ten (NSSE, 2010). For service members and veterans who began receiving disability compensation during the 2011 fiscal year, the most common military service-related injuries were tinnitus, hearing loss, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and knee and back injuries (VA VBA, 2012). Additionally, many service members and veterans experience hidden health challenges, including anxiety, depression, chronic pain and traumatic brain injury (Seal et al., 2009; Kraus and Rattray, in press).

Fifty-five percent of survey respondents in the ACE 2010 study Service Members in School indicated that coping with service-related disabilities was a moderate or major challenge. Focus group participants reported the following physical and psychological challenges:

- » difficulty being able to walk quickly from one class to the next across campus;
- » hyper-alertness and anxiety caused by PTSD;
- » difficulty concentrating, caused by traumatic brain injury; and
- » difficulty relating to others or keeping one's temper in check in social or academic situations.

In addition to having higher rates of disabilities, the disabilities of student veterans are more likely to be newly acquired. As a result they are less likely to be well informed regarding services and resources that can help them be academically successful and are less likely to self-identify (Kraus and Rattray, 2012). Designated campus personnel who can reach out to disabled veterans are an especially important resource.

Existing research reports that compared to nonveterans, student veterans reported less campus support. However veterans also reported that other veterans, SVOs, tutoring or writing centers, and professors, among others, were 'quite' or 'extremely' helpful to their pursuit of academic goals (Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010). SVOs offer student service members and veterans the opportunity to connect and obtain support from other students who share similar experiences and challenges. Groups such as Student Veterans of America (SVA), which currently has over 1,100 chapter affiliates (Student Veterans of America, 2015), provide student service members and veterans the opportunity to discuss their unique life experiences and challenges as well as to share information about resources.



Those institutions that provide a designated representative and enhanced support networks for the challenges student service members, veterans and their families face will be more likely to attract and retain this growing student demographic.

About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to conduct impactful research and to conduct outreach and engagement activities informed by scientific evidence. We strive to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families, including researchers and practitioners from both military and civilian communities. MFRI is a part of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Health and Human Sciences at Purdue University. For more information about MFRI and its programs, visit www.mfri.purdue.edu.

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