

COMMUNICATING KEY POLICIES AND PROGRAMS:

Providing useful information for student service members and veterans

SUMMARY OF OPERATION DIPLOMA AWARD INSTITUTIONS' REPORTS

During the past five years, the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University has worked with colleges and universities to strengthen their motivation and capacity to support military personnel and veterans who enroll at their institutions. Through Operation Diploma, our education initiative, we awarded grants to two- and four-year public and private institutions. These grants, and their proceeds, affected the lives of more than 6,000 student service members and veterans.

Schools that received Operation Diploma grants submitted accountability reports describing their progress and results. From these and other methods, we learned institutions that took advantage of Operation Diploma resources were significantly more likely to report support for student service members and veterans than schools not involved with the grant. Additionally, the more often staff and administrators engaged with us, the more likely their schools were to offer supportive programming.

This report is part of a series documenting the promising practices, and lessons learned through Operation Diploma efforts.

Many postsecondary institutions that received Operation Diploma awards conducted focus groups or surveys to learn about the concerns and expectations of the student service members and veterans on their campus. The challenges most often cited were navigating institutional policy and governmental systems, particularly military service-related education benefits.¹ Comments typical of student concerns reported by multiple institutions include the following:

- » “I need help understanding all the benefits that I have available to me.”
- » “The thing I most want to learn about are veterans’ benefits.”
- » “The biggest obstacle I face is getting VA benefits and getting answers to questions in one place at the school.”
- » “I would love to have one place where I could go to get all my answers.”
- » “It is difficult navigating the government and school systems.”

¹ Focus groups ranged in size from one to eight participants. Surveys were conducted with participants at the conclusion of events or, in at least one case, a survey was sent to the entire population of student service members. In most cases, survey response rates were quite low or did not involve a random sample of students so findings should be interpreted with caution.

This report offers examples of approaches institutions have used to address these concerns, including written communication, various formats for first-year orientation, and one-on-one assistance. The role of evaluation in this process is also discussed.

Communicating in multiple modalities

To communicate information that could help students navigate governmental and institutional systems and policies, staff tried electronic and printed newsletters, flyers, brochures, mass emails, blogs, social media, and Web pages; all with varying success. Blogs, posting articles written by student service members and veterans, and Blackboard communities seemed to attract more traffic, but it is also easier to monitor traffic on these forums. Some schools added lists of local businesses that offered military discounts and complementary services to attract readers to both electronic and printed communications.

First-year orientation

Social connections and learning from others can play a key role in helping students navigate complex institutional and governmental systems. An incoming student of a public, four-year institution with an enrollment of nearly 30,000 (undergraduate and graduate) explains:

- » “Veteran orientations should include students who have already made it through their first year so that they can provide insight from their experiences so new veteran students will know the things they must do to get their benefits, register for classes, figure out what they are supposed to be doing, and know about the DD214 and prior learning stuff.”

Recognizing the value of veteran-specific information during orientation, several schools offered military-specific break-out sessions as part of their programming for new students. Although unable to determine the impact of these types of sessions on academic success, comments from students and staff who participated are encouraging. Students reported making early connections with an affinity group, and staff observed that opportunities to meet and engage with student service members and veterans during their early days on campus (prior to or immediately after they arrive on campus) established rapport and a positive foundation for future interactions. Schools told us that students and staff mentioned feeling better equipped to connect names with faces and to identify familiar faces on campus during the critical first weeks because of the connections made during veteran-specific orientations.

Some schools found that preparing experienced peers to serve as mentors during new student orientation created another opportunity to make early and, ideally, long-term connections. Some potential mentors are not available or willing to assume a possibly long-term commitment, but can very capably provide one-on-one assistance during orientation. Completing the various forms required for course registration, financial aid and other enrollment requirements can be daunting to any new student, but schools reported peer mentoring eased the stress for first-year students.

While some schools reported veteran break-out sessions during traditional orientation programs were sufficient, at least one school decided to create an entirely separate orientation for its student service members and veterans. This four-year, public institution with enrollment slightly more than 20,000 offered a day-long orientation program that included a scavenger hunt to familiarize students with key campus locations and landmarks, small group discussions of challenges student veterans might expect to encounter during the first semester, and a bus tour of the community that included a stop at the local VA clinic.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Regardless of the method, early and regular communication of accurate information is important to academic success (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim & Wilcox, 2013). Following are four related recommendations to consider:

- » Clearly identify a contact person in all forms of communication.
- » Be sure information from a website can be obtained efficiently, i.e., with a minimum number of “clicks.”
- » Like other students, some student veterans have sensory limitations. When providing information online, Internet best practices should be considered. Examples include creating PDFs that are compatible with character reading software, and limiting use of flash players, sound blasters, etc.
- » For all students, particularly those with cognitive challenges such as traumatic brain injury, consider the principles of Universal Design and present information in multiple modalities (<http://www.nea.org/home/34693.htm>).



Recognizing the many demands on student service members and veterans, the school offered a companion web-based component to its orientation. The modules, billed as “highly recommended” for students to complete before registration, covered veterans’ education benefits, basic college terminology, academic tips, study skills, and help in transitioning to the community. Although incentives were offered for students who completed the modules, initial participation by students was low.

Despite initial low participation in the web-based component, the school found that student veterans who participated in either the on-site or web-based orientation had a higher course completion rate, higher GPAs, and a higher rate of retention from fall to spring semester compared to student veterans who did not participate (Ritz, Heggen, Ericson, and Harris, 2013). Based on these first-year findings, school administration incorporated the veterans-only orientation package into official campus programming for first-year students.

Providing one-on-one services

In addition to assisting students through electronic and print materials and with orientation programs, many campuses also used grant funds to provide direct, often individualized, services to student service members and veterans. The most frequently reported initiatives were a designated student veteran contact position and tutoring. Experiences with each are summarized below.

Veteran services coordinators

Using non-recurring grant funds, primarily or solely from MFRI, a number of schools created new positions to work specifically with student service members and veterans. Collectively termed veteran services coordinators (VSCs), individuals in these positions served as the designated institution contact for a wide range of programs and services, including financial aid, academic advising, and student services. Schools reported that, given adequate resources to implement promising practice — including sufficient workload hours — the VSC provided valuable support to student service members and veterans. In addition, the VSC often acted as an ombudsman serving as liaison among the student, faculty and staff.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Asynchronous methods for getting necessary information to busy military and civilian students, as well as programming that is offered at non-traditional times, i.e., evenings and weekends, may be worth consideration. These approaches acknowledge the multiple roles veterans fill as students, employees and family members and therefore may address an important need. These approaches need not be confined to orientation; key campus offices may find that non-traditional hours offer a cost-effective return on a relatively small investment of resources.

Even though a few schools are finding veteran-only orientations may be effective, we recommend that student service members and veterans also be included in the general campus orientation. Although segments of the general program may not be highly relevant to them, orientation offers an early opportunity to transition to campus life and ensures that all first-year students receive essential information necessary for early success and confidence. Finally, participation in general orientation provides an opportunity to begin building a network of support with staff members and peers.

For more information: President Obama’s Keys to Success for Student Veterans: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/08/13/8-keys-success-supporting-veterans-military-and-military-families-campus>

Students who utilized a VSC were reported to be generally satisfied, but no school provided data about academic outcomes associated with VSCs. Schools told us the VSC position “reduced frustration” for student veterans entering the college environment or served as “a bridge to other departments on campus.” For some campuses, the VSC also plays a key role in recruiting new students, interpreting and certifying military service-related education benefits, and advising the student veterans’ organization.

Veteran services coordinators who worked directly with students had a unique opportunity to learn about specific needs these students had. For example, a private, faith-based school with enrollment just over 1,000 reported creating a special short-term, no-interest loan fund as a direct result of working with individuals and understanding their financial needs better.

As described previously, results of survey and focus group indicate that student service members and veterans place a high priority on assistance with navigating government and institutional systems. Some institutions, however, reported having a difficult time getting students to use the VSC as a source of this type of information. To encourage utilization, institutions used a variety of approaches. Those that were reported to be at least moderately successful are summarized below:

- » One private, not-for-profit school requires students to meet with the VSC at least once a semester.

Note: Mandatory meetings may be most suitable to a relatively small student population or a very well-resourced student veteran’s office. The ability to apply consequences for non-compliance may be greater in smaller institutions in which opportunities for staff-student encounters are often greater.

- » A community college VSC “performed a weekly review of class schedules to identify students who changed, dropped, or added classes. This resulted in a reduction of the timeframe between VA notifications. Weekly monitoring also allowed [the VSC] to contact veterans and/or their dependents when changes occurred, ensuring that they understood the full educational and financial impact of their actions.”

Note: At-risk students are often the least likely to seek campus resources (Hossler, Ziskin & Gross, 2009), making an approach that requires no effort on the part of the student especially appealing.

Of concern is the number of schools that reported their VSC positions disappeared when the grant funds supporting them expired. The institutions that were ultimately successful in preserving VSC positions, typically with recurring institutional budgets, tended to have kept solid data about student usage and academic outcomes. They were able to document success, or at least usage, and demonstrate to their administrators that students relied on the services.

Tutoring

Returning to an academic setting after a few or many years away can be a challenge for students who may perceive themselves as different from the general student population (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Steele, Salcedo & Cooley, 2010). To address this, some institutions offered tutoring for veterans, which was separate from other students. Other schools promoted tutoring for student veterans, but offered it through a centralized campus service. One public institution with enrollment of approximately 20,000 reported success with priority student veteran tutoring during designated times at the campus learning center. This approach provided shorter wait times for veterans without the costs of dedicated tutoring and segregated space.

Most institutions had difficulty tracking the number of student veterans using services and particularly determining the relationship between tutoring and indicators of academic success such as grade point average (GPA) or retention. Of the few schools that collected data of any kind, low utilization tended to be the theme.



One large, public, research institution, however, found that student veterans who participated in mathematics tutoring earned slightly higher GPAs in their mathematics courses than the overall student veteran population (2.1/4 and 1.9/4, respectively). Additionally, the school reported a lower number of students withdrew from their course after tutoring was implemented. Tutoring was offered in the student veteran center during evening hours. The school reported that by allowing students to study with peers at times that were compatible with their many non-academic commitments the program provided needed support where and when it was most useful.

The ability to provide tutoring, especially during non-traditional hours, is often a resourcing challenge. Several schools reported success by partnering with other campus departments. By sharing resources of dollars, staff and space, collaborating departments may be able to expand hours of service and reach more students without stressing resources of any single department. Some schools reported the added benefit of raised awareness on the part of faculty and staff that may not otherwise work with student service members and veterans.

Getting information to those who most need it

Schools reported a number of challenges in providing directed support to student service members and veterans. The most prevalent were related to identifying the students at greatest risk and getting them the necessary resources. Schools that used an inclusive approach with multiple points of entry across the institution reported the most success in identifying and supporting at-risk students. These schools tended to describe systems that were open to an array of faculty and staff, involved multiple campus departments, and did not rely on students to self-identify. Instead, early warning systems were in place that identified and actively pursued students, an approach considered to be a best practice (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009; Kuh, 2007). As one veteran services coordinator commented, “If I ask students face-to-face if they would like to have a tutor, almost everyone will say yes. But if I send out a mass email, I get no responses.”

Less formal than institutional early warning systems and interdepartmental programs, but potentially as effective, are mentor programs and veteran affinity groups like student veterans’ organizations (Patton, 2006, 2010; Schlossberg, 1989). Faculty, staff, and even upperclassmen, who are veterans themselves or have some military affiliation, can provide information and resources when and how they are most effective. Faculty mentoring relationships can be particularly effective in early identification, intervention, and subsequent student persistence (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010).

Getting necessary information to student service members and veterans at pertinent times it is both an art and a science, but need not be a mystery. Our schools recognized the challenges of identifying the teachable moment and responded creatively. Not all initiatives achieved their full intended impact, but the lessons learned and reported to us can inform future programming. Orientation for first-year student service members and veterans was reported to be associated with somewhat stronger student outcomes during the first year and is a fairly cost-effective initiative. Offering information in multiple modalities acknowledges the busy lives of these students and efficiently disseminates it to a broad audience, whereas one-on-one services can provide more refined and individualized support.

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