

DEMONSTRATING IMPACT:

Designing program evaluations that guide planning and conserve resources

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.

Other reports in this series describe the experiences of the post-secondary community as it created and expanded programs to:

- » demonstrate appreciation for student veterans and raise awareness among faculty, staff and students;
- » engage the support of veterans among faculty and staff on campus and in the community;
- » provide student veterans with necessary information in a format and at a time it is most effective; and
- » promote campus engagement as a tool to support academic success.

Implicit in schools' reports throughout the course of three grant cycles was the importance of identifying success metrics and tracking them before and at regular intervals throughout the project. Unfortunately, consideration of success metrics, i.e. "How will we know if we are successful?" is too frequently overlooked until a project is well underway, if at all. Data collection is essential to meaningful program evaluation. Well-designed program evaluation helps schools fine-tune initiatives and wisely use resources. It also helps demonstrate successes in ways that are important to administrators, trustees and other groups with fiscal authority.

Ideally, the results of well-designed program evaluation can be leveraged in grant proposals or applications that can help grow successful programs and reach more student service members and veterans. The purpose of this report is to provide a primer on effective, uncomplicated program evaluation that begins with careful consideration of success metrics, collects baseline data prior to the start of the program and provides useful information on which to build improvements and make evidence-driven decisions. In the best case scenario, the ability to demonstrate impact with a thoughtful, well-designed program evaluation plan can influence decisions about additional resources like funds, space and staff time.

Success metrics

At the onset of planning for a new or expanded program or policy, it is important to clearly identify the goals. Consider: What are you trying to achieve and how will you know if you are successful? Precise and measurable goals are the foundation of success metrics. You ought to know what data you will be tracking before the project is launched and collect the first wave of information **before** the project starts. Comparison data, like baseline information or a contrasting group of students, allow you to answer the question, “Compared to what?” Many postsecondary institutions that received Operation Diploma grants submitted compelling proposals with admirable goals containing words like, “more, greater, better, larger, or improved,” but when we asked the question, “Compared to what?” they were not able to fully answer the question.

Comparators are the cornerstone of high-quality program evaluation.

Measuring impact

Each campus must determine how to use limited resources to greatest effect. Decisions about the best use of resources like time, space, people and funds are ideally based on the type of evidence the program evaluation generates. Program evaluation should be built into the initial design of all programming. Comparisons with baseline or other student populations, e.g. students who did and did not use the resource, offer a number of important advantages. They inform us about utilization and help us better understand where to place future resources. When collected consistently and with solid understanding of the questions to be answered, evaluation data help sort out intuition from actual evidence.

Information about program utilization and user satisfaction are necessary metrics, but they are not sufficient to answer the important questions that will guide and refine your program. Measures of student success that include dimensions like academic persistence offer real evidence of impact. The difference between how many student veterans your program reached and how many of them remained in school for three consecutive semesters is the difference between an **output** and an **outcome**.

Outputs answer the question: What did we do?
Outcomes answer the question: What did we achieve?



Identifying and tracking student veterans

Operation Diploma schools told us that documenting and tracking student service members and veterans was challenging for a number of reasons. These included:

- » variable interpretation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA);
- » constraints of the software used by many admissions, registrar and financial aid offices;
- » lack of interface among tracking systems within different departments on the same campus; and
- » unwillingness of student service members and veterans to self-identify.

Fortunately, a growing number of schools have recognized these challenges and convened cross-campus work groups to address them. Aided by President Obama's 2012 Executive Order: "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses and Other Family Members" (EO 13607, 2012), awareness has been raised and urgency created among state and national postsecondary governing bodies to identify and track the academic outcomes and student debt loads of student service members, veterans and their family members.

Evidence-driven planning

Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in August 2009, the postsecondary community has launched a variety of programs and services aimed at supporting the academic and career success of student veterans and, by association, student service members. In many cases, these initiatives were funded fully or in part by Operation Diploma. The evidence generated by evaluation of these programs contributes to our growing body of knowledge about promising practices and allows institutions to assess the return on their investment. As you decide which programs you will seek to continue, consider the following principles:

- » Modest support necessitates a modest plan. It is not wise to attempt to continue a broad array of programs on a shoestring. Effective, small-scale programs are more powerful than under-resourced, large-scale programs and may be leveraged for additional support in the future.
- » When making the difficult decisions regarding which programs to continue and which to cut, focus on areas in which you compare unfavorably to peer institutions. Allocate resources to those areas where the bar needs to be raised the most.
- » Gather feedback not only from students you currently serve but from those who leave prior to graduation and those who turn down an offer of admission.



It is also wise to look for no-cost approaches that could help student service members and veterans succeed. In the Rallying report of this *Landscape* series, we state that faculty and staff who are veterans or parents of service members represent an important resource. On campus after campus, these individuals expressed willingness to mentor and support military students in a variety of ways. Upper-division service members and veterans are another resource that some campuses are beginning to tap.

Using a different approach, the National Survey of Student Engagement has identified several high impact practices that positively influence student learning and retention. These include service learning, research projects or other out-of-class activities with a faculty member, and completing an internship or practicum. Encouraging students to consider engaging in one or more of these activities can also be a meaningful way of supporting them. These activities involve interaction with diverse others, meaningful interactions with faculty and students, and frequent and meaningful feedback, all important components of building a network of support that ultimately encourages a student toward graduation.

Ultimately, even modest resources that are well planned can bring about tremendous benefits to student service members and veterans. Don't wait until it's too late in your program planning and implementation to ask: "How will we know if we are successful?" Build high-quality program evaluation and success metrics into your work military students and veterans. Make them the the high-impact programs and initiatives that you want them to be.

References

Hossler, D., Ziskin, M., & Gross, J. P. K. (2009). Getting serious about institutional performance in student retention: Research-based lessons on effective policies and practices. *About Campus*, 2-11.

Spaulding, D. T. (2013). *Program evaluation in practice: Core concepts and examples for discussion and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Go beyond SMART program goals to SMARTER program goals

- » **S**pecific
- » **M**easureable
- » **A**ttainable
- » **R**elevant
- » **T**imely
- » **E**valuation
- » **R**eevaluation

Also in the *Landscape in Higher Education* series

- » **Honoring those who serve:** Raising campus and community awareness
- » **Recognizing military training and experience:** Ensuring service member and veteran access to higher learning
- » **Rallying the troops:** Enlisting support of faculty, staff and community veterans
- » **Appreciating the realities of military service:** Higher learning institution policies regarding deployment and GI Bill benefits
- » **Communicating key policies and programs:** Providing useful information for student service members and veterans
- » **Acknowledging multiple responsibilities:** Higher learning institution support services for student veterans and their families
- » **Fostering social connections:** Supporting academic success by promoting engagement

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