

# FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:

## Supporting academic success by promoting social engagement

### 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.*

Enrolling in college after military service can present academic, social, emotional and even physical challenges (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Steele, Salcedo & Cooley, 2010). Establishing social connections and networks with others not only helps smooth these challenges, it can be an important factor in persistence and academic success (Hossler, Ziskin & Gross, 2009). With support from Operation Diploma in the form of grants, consultation and other resources, institutions worked to create or expand ways to help student service members and veterans connect with one other. Their experiences are summarized in this report.

### **Student veterans' organizations**

Even before the launch of Operation Diploma, student service members and veterans were creating student veterans' organizations (SVOs) on their campuses, but too often these organizations were formed without the knowledge of campus administration or official sanction from the institution. The combined effects of failure to obtain campus support, poorly articulated mission statements and goals, and other challenges often resulted in unsustainable groups with life spans so short they often dissolved before reaching their potential.



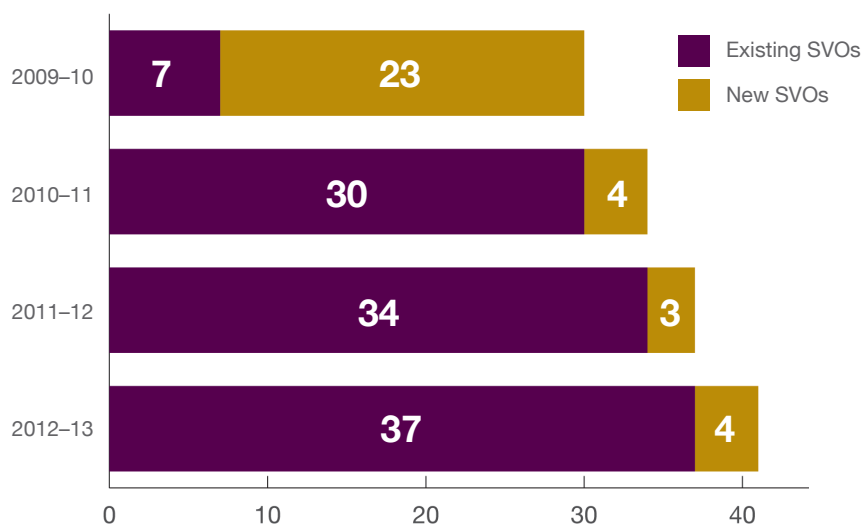
While Operation Diploma worked separately to strengthen SVOs as described in *Success in 3-D: How to Design, Develop and Deliver a Thriving SVO* ([https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources/public/Success\\_in\\_3d.pdf](https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources/public/Success_in_3d.pdf)), we simultaneously encouraged institutions to promote and support SVOs through our grant-making process. The result was a growth of SVOs in Indiana by more than 400 percent from seven in 2009 to 37 currently. These groups were uniquely positioned to provide valuable social connections, informal academic and student services information, and affinity to student veterans as they engaged with the campus community. As the lifespan of these SVOs increased, many matured into organizations that were able to look beyond the immediate needs of their members to partnerships with other student organizations and to community philanthropy and advocacy.

Based on the reports of Operation Diploma institutional grant recipients, their experiences with SVOs varied widely. On some campuses, the groups largely focused on social events, while SVOs on other campuses addressed academic and career issues. Topics addressed by the latter SVOs included campus resources and policies, employer panels, and résumé writing. Still other SVOs had a holistic focus with programs that included inviting a counselor to meetings to help students process their military experiences. SVOs that tended to focus on more than strictly social events attracted and retained the most students, suggesting student service members and veterans are not different from civilian non-traditional students in their attraction to organizations that have a socio-academic purpose or create a “call to action” (Deil-Amen, 2011).

As we were able to help institutions and SVOs create stronger organizations by encouraging them to create mission statements, strategic goals, reasonable budgets and sustainability plans, we observed more durable, sustainable organizations. In fact, only one SVO dissolved between 2009 and 2013. Figure 1 illustrates the growth.

In spite of these supports, many institutions reported their SVO struggled to grow membership. According to results of surveys and focus groups conducted on several campuses, student service members and veterans have commitments and obligations that make involvement in an SVO difficult. In fact, students reported that one of their biggest hurdles was balancing work, family and school. Perhaps it is not surprising then that several schools encountered difficulty building enrollment and growing a strong, sustainable SVO, as evidenced by the stories on the following pages.

**Figure 1: Growth of Indiana SVOs**



### *Regional campus of a statewide, two-year community college system*

“‘Still Serving’ has been a hard project to bring to fruition. [The school] is a commuter college...initial attempts to form the club were achieved by compiling mass email listings and then sending out a request for interested parties to respond. We then had to try and find a time when a majority could attend a meeting. A president was nominated, accepted, and after two months had to resign. A search was started for a replacement and after several months we were ready to start again. [In May] our club was finally in position and was formally recognized by Ivy Tech.”

### *Public, four-year campus with enrollment of 10,000*

“We continue searching for a convenient time for veterans to meet for networking events. Early morning/breakfast events are not well attended; however, late afternoons make it impossible for many vets (especially those living off campus or with jobs) to attend. Events during the peak hours of the day interfere with classroom schedules. We have tried to compromise by offering different events during different times of the day, afternoon or evening.”

### **Dedicated spaces**

Nearly half of Operation Diploma award institutions used a portion of their grant to create dedicated space for their student service members and veterans on campus. Using this space to facilitate interactions among military students was a priority for many schools. A central location, programming, complementary beverages, tables where meals could be eaten, computers and televisions all helped to attract students. The facilities were also used as a place to share resources, to initiate interactions between staff members and students, to offer services such as tutoring, and in some cases to provide military Common Access Card (CAC) readers allowing students to access their military benefits and status reports online.

Several schools reported mixed success with dedicated spaces, noting a tension between the positive aspects of having a safe place for sharing and networking and the inhibiting effect these spaces could sometimes have on students’ integration into the broader campus. The institutions that reported being most satisfied with the impact of dedicated space were those that did not try to recreate a military environment or a secluded area, but instead created a comfortable area that was an integral part of the university environment and conveniently located near important campus offices or departments. Two large, public, research institutions reported a great deal of success and high traffic volume by locating their dedicated spaces in the student union, housed within steps of frequently visited student services offices, food and beverages, and entertainment.

### **Dedicated courses**

Approximately 25 percent of schools reported experimenting with so-called veteran-only courses or learning communities as a means of smoothing the transition into postsecondary education. Considered to be a strategy for promoting relationships with peers based on shared past experience and collective focus on current academic tasks, schools reported limited success with this approach. Operation Diploma funds were used by large, public, research institutions, private, not-for-profit, four-year schools, and regional campuses of community colleges to launch veteran-only: mathematics and/or writing tutoring, general education military transition courses, and learning communities.

### **TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

Based on reports from Operation Diploma award schools, SVOs face challenges that may not be experienced by other student organizations. Because the target SVO member is older and more likely to have non-academic commitments than civilian students (Kim & Cole, 2013; NSSE, 2010), attracting members, positioning and keeping leaders, and sustaining the organization can be difficult, but are not impossible. Schools that reported success in creating or expanding an SVO tended to have dedicated staff or faculty, who were persistent and creative. National data suggest that student service members and veterans will respond favorably to one-on-one relationships with faculty and staff members, especially if the time they spend engaging with these people has a clearly defined purpose (Kim & Cole, 2013).

Once established, SVOs can be an important pathway to engagement with the larger campus. To the extent that students affiliate with their SVO, they will benefit from continued support from faculty and staff advocates, who will be the unifying, sustaining force as students naturally disengage from the SVO to affiliate with other groups on campus and through graduation. This churn is not unique to SVOs. All student organizations and their advisors should recognize and plan for it. Additional information about creating vibrant, sustainable SVOs can be found in *Success in 3-D: How to Design, Develop and Deliver a Thriving SVO* ([https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources/public/Success\\_in\\_3d.pdf](https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/resources/public/Success_in_3d.pdf)).





Although these offerings generally garnered high satisfaction ratings by students who participated, they were not well utilized and deemed unsustainable by project staff. The exception to this was a veteran-only new student orientation launched by a public institution with undergraduate and graduate enrollment of slightly more than 20,000. The project, which was subsequently adopted by the university as a permanent orientation program, utilized a combination of on-site and virtual offerings that provided hands-on experiences with the campus resources available to all students as well as opportunities to meet and engage solely with student service members and veterans. Student veterans who participated in the veterans-only orientation had a higher semester grade point average than student veterans who did not and had at 100 percent retention rate compared to 90 percent for student veterans who did not participate and 93 percent for civilian first-year students after one semester (Ritz, Heggen, Ericson & Harris, 2013).

Success in creating a campus environment that fosters social connections among student service members and veterans, faculty, staff, and civilian students is most likely based on an appreciation for the variety of interests of all students and creating a range of organizations, spaces and academic offerings from which each student can find something appealing.

## CONNECTIONS MATTER

Connecting student service members and veterans can be a challenging task given their multiple roles and often limited time on campus. The SVO experiences of our award schools varied widely. Those that were successful tended to have mission-based initiatives.

Designated spaces or shared academic experiences can promote a sense of community for underrepresented groups that enhance feelings of affinity and a sense of mattering to the institution (Patton, 2006, 2010; Schlossberg, 1989). They can also further marginalize students who may already feel different or unacknowledged (Deil-Amen, 2011). Within the body of grantee reports to Operation Diploma, we have examples of both.

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