

HONORING THOSE WHO SERVE:

Raising campus and community awareness

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.

In other reports in this series based on summaries from schools that received Operation Diploma awards, we examine institutional responses to challenges commonly faced by student service members and veterans, such as navigating institutional systems; balancing work, school, and families; and establishing networks of social and academic support on campus. But there is an additional theme running through the grant reports that goes beyond these key challenges: Many student service members and veterans appreciate feeling valued for who they are and for their military service. As these students deal with the challenges associated with transitioning from military to civilian life and returning to or entering postsecondary education, some with additional burdens of service-related disability, many are reassured by a campus community that recognizes and honors their service (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon & Fleming, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Still others report they prefer to remain invisible in order to successfully assimilate into civilian life and student culture (Livingston, et al, 2011). More than 90 percent of award schools reported some form of honoring and recognizing military students. This often revolved around Veterans Day ceremonies, but included other symbolic gestures as well. This report highlights recurring forms of recognition carried out by award schools.

Veterans Day events

Many institutions held Veterans Day recognitions, which were reported to be valuable for a number of reasons. For example:

- » The experiences of a four-year, public institution with enrollment slightly more than 20,000 were somewhat typical. In their words, “Each year, (the) Veterans Day Ceremony gets bigger and bigger. We have learned that attending the Veterans Day Ceremony has become a tradition for many students and faculty members. This year we were not fully prepared for the huge number of attendees, which unfortunately prevented some people from seeing all of the ceremony due to lack of space. Next year, we plan to prepare for an increasing number of attendees and hold the ceremony in a public place that does not limit the number of attendees.” The annual increase in campus participation in this event can be interpreted as growing awareness of and active support for service members and veterans by the campus community.
- » A regional campus of a statewide, two-year, public system developed an event that has become a staple of the local Veterans Day celebration, linking the campus community with the greater metropolitan area in a shared mission. Each year the week of November 11 is dedicated to veterans in the community with a program created by the local Chamber of Commerce. With more than 100 businesses and companies offering discounts to veterans such as complementary food, car washes and discounted entertainment, the school collaborated by offering the annual pancake breakfast for military and veteran families and civilians wanting to honor and support them. Nearly 150 veterans and 400 individuals participated in the most recently reported breakfast, creating a venue for sharing between veterans and civilians, students and non-students.
- » A regional campus of a public institution with undergraduate and graduate enrollment of more than 40,000 hosted a Veterans Day event attended by several hundred. The event included a state senator, a representative from a U.S. congress member’s office and local council members. The veteran services coordinator of the campus challenged students to write an essay focusing on the importance of taking care of retiring veterans and student service members. The contest winner presented his essay at the Veterans Day event. According to the staff, “The award-winning essay and other student veterans who spoke clearly articulated the needs of student veterans. One result of the increased campus awareness is the university’s decision to pursue donations to fund interest-free emergency loans to student veterans. Several elected officials or their representatives requested a copy of the student’s award-winning essay...”
- » Another public institution with undergraduate and graduate enrollment of more than 50,000 incorporated the Golden Book Project as part of its Veterans Day commemoration. This ongoing project records the names of alumni veterans, beginning with the War of 1812, and recognizes their service. According to project staff, “This long-term commitment meant more to veterans than any other single event, program, or service we have initiated. They seem to truly appreciate knowing the university cares about their service commitment. The activities also allowed faculty and staff to better appreciate campus history and connections to military service. The idea that the (Memorial Union) and two other buildings were actually memorials to veterans was a piece of campus history that had been lost in recent years.” For more information, a YouTube video is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8OcbUikkAI>.

365 DAYS A YEAR

Developing programs around Veterans Day, an observance which began in 1919 at the end of World War I, allows institutions to build upon long-held national traditions. On some campuses, these ceremonies are also a fitting way to draw in the local community or unite the community and the institution through observances that bridge the two.

Some schools have found that Veterans Day events compete with other worthy organizations for attention and may fail to recognize that honor and recognition can be done throughout the year. Key people, such as local veterans’ service organization officers and leaders in the business community and local government, as well potential attendees are involved with other community events and therefore unavailable to support a campus event during the very busy days surrounding Veterans Day.

When planning honor and recognition events, remember opportunities throughout the year to acknowledge military service. Veterans Day is certainly not the only way to recognize student service members and veterans.



Telling their stories

In addition to organizing formal ceremonies, schools also planned activities that allowed student service members and veterans to share stories about their military experiences. Staff reported that veteran and civilian students, faculty and staff, as well as those from the broader community, responded favorably to the opportunities. Specifically:

- » A four-year, public university with enrollment of approximately 10,000 planned a series of events on a specific date to focus attention on the presence of student service members and veterans on their campus. They invited area veterans to provide military regalia and artifacts to display in the campus Heritage Lounge. Films and documentaries were shown throughout the day along with a panel discussion among veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq. The school reported, “Interaction and discussion among the (panelists), students, and those from the community was powerful. The films/documentaries (that were) selected formed the focus for discussions, but the veterans themselves, sharing their personal experiences, made a significant impact on attendees.” This type of inter-generational dialog among veterans of different combat eras can lead to better understanding of unique as well as shared experiences.
- » A regional campus of a statewide, two-year, public system published a newsletter that included student veterans’ stories, recaps of recent veterans’ events and student veterans’ organization information. The newsletter “has received many compliments from our veteran and non-veteran population... Several veterans have expressed interest in having their story included in the next release.”
- » A different regional campus of the same statewide, two-year public system participated in the Veterans History Project of the American Folklife Center. This project “collects, preserves, and makes accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war” <http://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html>. According to school’s report: “Nine of our student veterans were able to share their stories. (We had a diverse mix of campus, gender and military branch.) These videos have been provided to the U.S. Library of Congress as well as to each student, each campus, and will eventually be shared with each county where each student lives...”

“[The Veterans History Project] allowed veterans to discuss their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. The videographer was wonderful with the veterans and asked them to not only tell their stories, but also encouraged them to bring meaningful items, such as photos, uniforms, medals, etc. to discuss during the video recording sessions. We plan to use these DVDs to help create additional awareness among our campus community regarding the contribution and sacrifice these individuals have made.... [This was] one of the most rewarding projects we did.”

BUILDING A BRIDGE

Providing a forum for students to share their stories can help them process the past and establish connections with others who have military experiences. When these stories are documented as in a newsletter or The Veterans History Project, these stories can be archived so that other students, faculty, and staff can share the experience or future researchers can benefit from this first person narrative.

Panel discussions can be effective in raising awareness, launching dialog, and, ideally, increasing understanding among veteran and civilian faculty, advisors and other academic staff, and students. Important conversations can begin as various voices share their experiences and perspectives. Likewise, if student service members and veterans share specific challenges they faced as they re-entered civilian and student life in a public forum like a panel discussion, the impact can further raise awareness.



Meaningful gestures and services

Various Operation Diploma award schools reported honoring their student service members and veterans in creative ways that added value to existing initiatives. Examples include:

- » Beginning in 2010 and repeated annually, a private, not-for-profit school with primarily undergraduate enrollment of just under 3,000 incorporated a special veterans' emphasis into their homecoming weekend. Highlighted by a veteran alumni reunion dinner, the inaugural event featured as special guest the school's president emeritus, who is a World War II veteran and former prisoner of war. Other activities during the weekend include tours of the site of school's former military housing turned archaeological excavation site for current students. Veterans, service member and their families are also honored at a basketball game that is part of the homecoming events. Events of this type acknowledge the contributions of veteran alumni, and student service members and veterans, but also military and veteran families. Recognizing the role of family in the accomplishments of student service members and veterans is an often overlooked, but important, aspect of honoring this population (American Council on Education, 2010).
- » The Veterans Support Services (VSS) office of a public institution with undergraduate and graduate enrollment of more than 50,000 purchased and distributed honor cords for veterans, active duty and ROTC cadets to wear at their graduation ceremony. The university president mentioned the cords during commencement remarks and the students each received a congratulatory card from VSS staff. "Students were extremely appreciative of this gesture by the university to recognize their service... We learned that fairly simple gestures can have the greatest impact." VSS staff also took this opportunity to gather information on each graduate when the cords were picked up, which served the dual purpose of recognition and basic outcome tracking.
- » A regional campus of a public institution with undergraduate and graduate enrollment of more than 40,000 offered student service members and veterans, regardless of class level, the opportunity to register with upperclassmen. This gesture acknowledges the multiple commitments of these students by enhancing their ability to more effectively coordinate course schedules with what may be employment, family and military service-related obligations.

Several schools conducted surveys and focus groups to learn how they could better meet the needs and expectations of their student service members and veterans. The unifying thread among the findings was a desire for greater attention to the physical condition of this group of students.

Although some students identified accessibility concerns on their campus, the majority of respondents focused on the need for adaptive physical education courses and more or better "wounded warrior" services. Disability support can be overlooked as a strategy for honoring this group of students, but expanded services of this type certainly acknowledge the realities of military service.

Lessons learned

We offer the following observations and recommendations based on what schools learned about their efforts to honor their student service members and veterans and in so doing raise awareness among the campus community. Recognition events can be a way to gather students together to establish supportive relationships and create learning opportunities. These gatherings can also be an effective forum for sharing information about services on campus or of launching a new program.

As effective as these initiatives can be, it is crucial to understand the limitations of recognition. Expressing gratitude for military service is appropriate and meaningful, but it does not address more practical issues identified by student veterans as barriers to academic success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Recognition can raise faculty, staff and students' awareness, but it is just the beginning of creating a meaningful safety net for student service members and veterans, who are more likely to be first generation students or have other academic risk factors (Kim & Cole, 2013). Approaches such as priority registration are particularly appealing because they require no financial investment, meaningfully express recognition, and at the same time address the practical problem of course scheduling by very busy military students.

Finally, honoring student service members and veterans requires thoughtful planning. What are the goals of the initiative? What will be the next steps? What do we want this event to achieve? How will we know it is successful? It is also important to understand that some students are reluctant to declare themselves as service members or veterans and may actually feel awkward or even exploited in the process (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon & Fleming, 2011). As one veteran services coordinator commented, "Don't pull a rent-a-crowd with these students at athletics events that won't fill the stands otherwise." Veterans must also feel that a gesture is sincere and, hopefully, leads to something greater.

Like recognizing the achievements of other special interest groups on campus, honoring student service members and veterans can achieve more than what is directly measured. Recognition can raise awareness, launch dialog, strengthen networks and contribute to a diverse campus environment that enriches the entire community.

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.

References

- American Council on Education. (2010). Veteran success jam: Ensuring success for returning veterans, May 3-6, 2010, Summary. Washington, D.C.: ACE.
- DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K. (2011). Veterans in higher education: When Johnny and Jane come marching to campus. *ASHE. Higher Education Report*, 37(3). San Francisco, CA: Wiley/Jossey-Bass.
- Kim, Y. M., & Cole, J. S. (2013). *Student veterans/service members' engagement in college and university life and education*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education & National Survey of Student Engagement.
- Livingston, W. G., Havice, P. A., Cawthon, T. W., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(3), 315-331.
- Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *Journal of Higher Education*, 81(4), 431-458.

Also in the *Landscape in Higher Education* series

- » **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
- » **Demonstrating impact:** Designing program evaluations that guide planning and conserve resources

For more information, email Ed-Employ@purdue.edu or visit www.mfri.purdue.edu.