RALLYING THE TROOPS:
Enlisting the support of faculty, staff and community 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.

Critical review of existing policies and programs, developing plans to create or expand programming, and assessing the effectiveness of the changes can be challenging for any campus initiative. Successful programming for student service members and veterans and their families carries with it the added challenge of understanding military culture and gaining awareness of the attributes and expectations of these students. This report summarizes what schools learned about their attempts to engage faculty and staff in better understanding and supporting this unique student population. They found:

» Professional development and awareness-raising can take several forms and reach across multiple departments. It need not be elaborate or expensive, but it should lead to ongoing conversation, planning and program evaluation.

» The responsibility for developing and providing supportive programming does not reside solely with those with a title of veteran services coordinator or similar.

» Many faculty and staff want to be involved. They may be motivated by their own military history, the service of a close family member, or simply out of gratitude or altruism.

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» Public acknowledgement and celebration of engaged faculty and staff sends a powerful message to the campus community that supporting these students is a team effort and encourages others to be involved.

» Involving multiple departments in planning and implementation of programs, and seeking endorsement of campus leadership, seem to improve the chances that initiatives will be effective and sustainable.

Professional development for faculty and staff

Veteran services coordinators at many schools believed that educating faculty and staff about the unique needs and contributions of military students is essential to providing relevant, effective support. They also noted the recognition and raised awareness that tends to accompany the learning process. Most institutions that received Operation Diploma awards and even some that did not provided professional development opportunities to their faculty and staff. Formal evaluation and informal feedback from participants about the training sessions indicated that awareness was raised, knowledge was gained and many participants felt motivated to change some of the ways they were interacting with military students. Several specifically commented on how little they had understood the challenges encountered by military students. Examples of efforts to engage and educate faculty and staff that were reported to be effective include:

» One regional campus of a large research university hosted a faculty and staff luncheon with Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs). The meal launched discussions about personal and professional experiences among participants, some of whom were veterans. During the luncheon, faculty were encouraged to invite veteran speakers into their classes, which many did.

» A regional campus of a statewide technical college had some success with purchasing professionally produced videos about military culture and student veterans. These were available on the school's website, thereby reaching more faculty and staff than would have attended face-to-face presentations.

» Some schools supported faculty and staff to attend national and regional conferences followed by teach backs at faculty meetings and other campus venues.

» Many institutions invited MFRI to present "Understanding the Student Service Member and Veteran," typically in partnership with the designated student veteran campus contact. This served to identify the co-presenter as the on-site resource and expert. These presentations frequently resulted in MFRI being invited back to campus to present on additional topics such as "Military Service-related Disabilities" and other content relevant to the academic setting.

Garnering support of faculty and staff

Many schools found that raised awareness led to faculty and staff expressing willingness to support student service members and veterans. For example:

» One public institution with enrollment of approximately 20,000 found that "faculty veterans and veterans serving on the staff are more than willing to assist student veterans as advisors and mentors."

» A large, public research university reported: "We currently have some 45 faculty/staff who are veterans themselves who have volunteered to be mentors and have attended an introduction program and a training program. The enthusiasm on the part of the faculty/staff has been significant. As well, we have heard from many non-veteran faculty/staff that are willing to participate when and if needed."

» The public institution with the largest veteran enrollment in the state (1,000) sponsored a veteran appreciation luncheon that brought faculty, staff and students together. The stated goal was to demonstrate that "the Office of Veteran and Military Programs and campus community recognize and support **all** veterans on campus, including the staff. The underlying goal was to identify faculty and staff veteran mentors for student veterans, which was also achieved." The school learned from the faculty and staff that they had never been recognized or acknowledged on campus for being a veteran and they overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation. A secondary benefit was to bring faculty and staff from different departments together under the unifying umbrella of military service to discuss how to bridge gaps in support for student service members and veterans. "[We] learned the degree to which service members and veteran students and faculty are willing and eager to be involved in the development of resources, programs and services to help current and future veteran students succeed in completing their academic goal and degrees," said one staff member.

» A private, faith-based institution with enrollment less than 10,000 took this idea a step further by holding a faculty and staff breakfast for those whom student veterans had nominated as being especially helpful. Instead of taking the negative approach of telling faculty what they were not doing, the school chose to recognize those who were role models.

Engaging institutional and community leaders

In addition to the essential support faculty and staff can provide, institutional leaders and veterans in the community served as important advocates for military students on several campuses.

» The same private institution described above included its President Emeritus as a special guest at the campus Veterans Day service. His presence as a World War II veteran and former prisoner of war was a very powerful symbol of the institution's history and support for the military.

» Another private, faith-based institution created a Military Friendly Advisory Board (MFAB) that included cabinet members, staff, faculty and students. The Board was active in the recruitment of and transitional process for military students and the staff and faculty members on the board helped keep veteran students' needs visible to their colleagues: "Survey results show that 100% of MFAB members felt the MFAB is an effective way to address concerns in becoming more military friendly."

» A public, research university with enrollment of approximately 40,000 created a Student Veteran Advisory Team which functions primarily at the policy level:

> "This group, comprised of senior staff/faculty who are involved in supporting/serving various aspects of student veterans, has been actively pushing the student veteran agenda forward. This includes discussing policy which will address student veteran class excusal for military duties, to proposing student veterans being afforded the opportunity to wear a red, white and blue Honor Cord during commencement, to visiting with staff at neighbor state campuses who are working in student veteran programs to learn about best practices. This effort has also focused more attention on acquiring better data regarding our student veteran population beginning with more accurate counts of student veterans (for both undergraduate and graduate students) and better understanding of student veteran demographics. As well, we developed a brochure in concert with the Graduate School that can be used in recruiting. Finally, we engaged the student government this past year. This body now has a student veteran representative who has championed the issues of student service members and veterans and played an active role in the Student Veteran Advisory Team."

What have we learned from our schools?

A well-informed faculty and staff are keys to engaging in effective, sustainable programming. Our schools told us that changing campus culture and facilitating meaningful improvements required motivation that could come only when faculty and staff had some appreciation for the unique experiences and expectations of student service members and veterans. Schools reported that once the conversation was begun, support and elbow grease often came from unexpected sources, but that leadership at the highest level of the institution was essential. And finally, professional development opportunities were more likely to be successful when institutions took into account the many competing demands placed on faculty and staff and offered opportunities that were asynchronous. Affirming activities that offered campus-wide recognition of those who served as role models were also seen as successful.

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.

Also in the *Landscape in Higher Education* series

» **Honoring those who serve:** Raising campus and community awareness
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» **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

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