



Supporting The Next Surge: Helping Veterans Transition to Higher Education

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Author(s):	<i>David M. Gwin, Katherine Selber, Nancy F. Chavkin and Arnold Williams</i>
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Supporting The Next Surge: Helping Veterans Transition to Higher Education

David M. Gwin, Katherine Selber, Nancy F. Chavkin and Arnold Williams

When veterans transition to higher education, they often face a number of transitional challenges (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Selber, 2009). Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) have resulted in over 2 million deployed armed services members, many of whom will take advantage of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill (Kaufmann, 2010). Active duty troops and veterans and their families represent a growing enrollment source, including roughly 2 million active duty troops, 25 million veterans, 411,000 reservists, and 659,000 Air Force and Army National Guard members (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009, p. 62). Student veterans face unique financial, personal, and educational challenges when transitioning to higher education, and college administrators, faculty, and staff can be important in helping student veterans address these challenges. The need to provide specialized programs and services for these veterans will become increasingly important as an influx of new student veterans flood higher education campuses in the next five to ten years. According to Cook and Kim (2009), the Post-9/11 GI Bill will support an enrollment surge of military personnel in higher education not seen since World War II. Veteran-friendly policies, programs, and services are integral to veterans' successful transition from combat to the classroom, and the need for campuses to adequately prepare is essential (Cook & Kim, 2009). DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) and Cohen (1998) agree that while the GI Bill that followed World War II changed higher education campuses forever, "it was not until veterans from a later

conflict, Vietnam, came to campus, that there was any recognition that combat veterans represent a unique population" (DiRamio Ackerman, & Mitchell, p.74).

While literature details the research related to non-traditional students, there has not been sufficient research assessing the specific challenges facing student veterans. Few studies have been conducted evaluating the needs of student veterans or the services and policies helping veterans transition into higher education. In addition, the existing studies have been primarily qualitative in nature (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2009; Selber, 2009). Higher education institutions are still learning about the transitional needs of student veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2009) suggest that student veterans, and particularly combat veterans, have special needs and addressing these unique needs will positively impact retention and educational success. It is important then that these transitional needs are adequately identified and examined in order to develop programs and policies that help keep student veterans enrolled and successful.

The purpose of this article is to report the findings from a needs assessment survey of student veterans at a state university in the southwestern region of the United States. The development of a needs assessment survey instrument, the implementation and outreach performed, and the survey findings are examined. As well, the article reviews policy, service, and program development implications.

David M. Gwin. MSSW is a graduate of Texas State University – San Marcos.

Katherine Selber, PhD is a Professor at Texas State University – San Marcos.

Nancy F. Chavkin, PhD is a Professor at Texas State University – San Marcos.

Arnold Williams. MSSW is a graduate of Texas State University – San Marcos.

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Literature Review

Campuses that implement distinct programs, services, and policies to assist student veterans are referred to as veteran-friendly, although a specific definition of this term is not uniform (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009). Researchers have learned that veterans use this term to refer to campuses that have programs and staff assisting in the transition from the military to higher education (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2009). However, only in the last several years have researchers begun to explore and describe veteran-friendly services and better understand gaps in these policies and services across universities (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In a 2008 national survey of 2,582 institutions of higher education that explored the services provided to student veterans, 57% of the 723 responding institutions were currently providing some level of programming for student veterans and military personnel (Cook & Kim, 2009). Not only is more research needed describing the existing programs, but a comprehensive assessment of the efficacy of the programs and services is required so that model programs can be replicated more easily (Selber, 2009). Research shows there is also a need to add to the literature for this generation of OEF and OIF student veterans (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Soldiers returning from OEF and OIF exhibit unique post-combat symptoms and distinct educational challenges; thus, programming for this population should reflect their unique needs.

The characteristics of student populations are changing with the arrival of student veterans. The influx of non-traditional students such as student veterans is in contrast to the usual pattern of primarily 18-22 year old, full-time students who proceed directly to college after high school graduation (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008). This shifting profile of student populations is expected to continue to change as more of this generation of veterans enters higher education. The U.S. Department of Education expects a rise of 19% in higher education enrollments of people 25 and over during the next 7 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Researchers have also noted that

when the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect in August 2009, educational benefits for many veterans increased, thus raising higher education enrollment of this population as well (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Veterans from OEF and OIF are certain to impact the demographics of university student bodies, as projections for future enrollments indicate that not only will more veterans enter college, but with benefits now being transferable to military dependents, the number of family members will increase as well.

Veterans returning from OEF and OIF to higher education are one population of non-traditional students likely to require adjustment and support services (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Student affairs personnel in higher education institutions already attempt to meet the needs of other unique student populations such as first generation college students and foster care students as a means of retaining these groups (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Non-traditional students, including student veterans, face unique educational and personal challenges not experienced by the typical 18-year-old college freshman (Bowl, 2001). Bauman (2009) indicates that it is important to understand the student veteran's experience and encourages higher education professionals to lessen administrative challenges for student veterans in order to ease their transition into an unknown and often bureaucratic university environment. Veterans' chances of educational success can be improved by appropriate support services, suitable policies, and focused programs built on an understanding of their needs.

Student veterans often have ongoing military duties as well as childcare, family, employment, financial, and community responsibilities not experienced by the average freshman college student (Bowl, 2001). This student population must adjust to higher education while balancing the roles and responsibilities of military personnel and college students. Sometimes this balance includes transitioning back and forth from the military and higher education. The difficulty of repeated transitions results in significant related admissions and academic challenges. Often the student veteran who is called up to duty unexpectedly after entry into the university faces disrupt-

tions to academic and life routines and also to personal and campus relationships (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Support and assistance are vital to the adjustment and educational success of these students. One higher education institution found that educational disruptions from military activations during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991 and during the peace-keeping mission in Bosnia in 1996 were extremely difficult and discouraging to students who were military personnel (Johnson, 2009). National Guard and Reserve forces are attracted to postsecondary educational benefits but can be deterred from completing a degree by the difficulties associated with being called up while seeking a degree. Campus administrators can serve these student veterans by offering programs and policies that ease admissions challenges associated with deployments during education (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). A university near several military installations in the southern United States reported that the pressures of deployments on military personnel often affect their education (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009).

Studies have also indicated that it is important that higher education institutions have policies and services that address the unique adjustment needs of non-traditional student veterans (Bowl, 2001; Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Richardson & King, 1998;). Bauman (2009) has noted that being unaware of student veteran issues often results in being unprepared to help this population meet their academic challenges. Students do not find well developed, functioning veteran support programs at many campuses. Research from Ford, Northrup, & Wiley (2009) found one university with a student population of 30% active-duty personnel, reservists, veterans, and their spouses or dependents concluded “the needs of military college students today and in the future can be met” (p. 68); however, without Veteran specific programs and services “it is unlikely that campus efforts will be as successful as they need to be to help repay these students for their service” (p. 68). Although the importance of understanding veteran specific needs and program development is growing, universities with budget shortfalls and a lack of military-

familiar staff often find it difficult to respond to these challenges (Selber, 2009).

Background

Administrators at higher education institutions are continuing to learn more about student veteran needs and how to assess effective student veteran services and policies. The present study addresses the efforts of one four-year university with an active military-friendly initiative to examine the continued needs of its veteran population. At the time of the study, the university, with a population of 32,000 students, has over 1,300 student veterans. The campus has a long history of supporting military-friendly policies with two large ROTC units on campus. Located geographically in Texas, which has 16 military institutions, the university has one of the larger overall veteran populations among four year colleges nationally. In late 2008 the university created a Veterans Advisory Council (VAC) consisting of staff and faculty from key university departments, including the student veteran organization. The Council’s mission is to identify and create a veteran-friendly environment on campus and to assist student veterans in successfully completing their degrees and making the transition to the civilian work world. The university has in a short time period created an active veteran-friendly initiative including such elements as: staff and faculty training workshops on veteran issues; an orientation program for veterans; a veteran-only course for freshmen and transfers to help transition veterans to campus; a counseling center with veteran services; monthly events to honor veterans; and active student organizations for both veterans and family and friends of troops and veterans. The VAC approach is to keep the student veterans’ needs as the focal point for their changes and programs. After benchmarking other universities’ student veteran programs and conducting focus groups and individual interviews with student veterans, the Council decided to conduct an online survey to further examine student veterans’ needs and potential gaps in service development.

Methods

An electronic needs assessment survey instrument was designed collaboratively through a partnership among Veterans Advisory Council members. The primary research team, and authors of this article, included a graduate social work student working in the role of both graduate research assistant and intern and a social work faculty member who also served on the Veterans Advisory Council. The Council integrated the cooperation of interdisciplinary staff and faculty members representing the offices of Veterans Affairs, Registrar, Retention Management and Planning, Student Affairs, Financial Aid, Disability Services, Career Services, Counseling, Social Work, Undergraduate Admissions, Graduate Admissions, Multicultural Affairs, and Advising. The student veteran organization was also represented and helped conduct the pilot of the instrument. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study.

A review of the literature included examining surveys used by other universities to solicit feedback from student veterans and surveys used by military personnel and community entities in doing needs assessments of returning troops (Central Lakes College, 2008; Goldstein & Malley, 2008; Maricopa, 2009; University of Minnesota, 2006). The present survey instrument did not include questions on the consumer satisfaction of campus services that typifies most university surveys in this field. This decision was made in order to examine student veteran needs in a more extensive manner. The survey also attempted to avoid in-depth personal questions often found in surveys of troops returning from deployment. Since veterans are sensitive to asking for help or revealing problems due to a perceived stigma, the researchers considered that finding a balance between understanding more and too much self disclosure was critical to participation and candidness.

The voluntary student veteran needs assessment survey was conducted in the spring of 2010. The survey link was sent via e-mail to all students who were using U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) educational benefits at the universi-

ty. The request to participate was sent out under the Veterans Affairs office e-mail distribution list, and the e-mail addresses remained confidential. The e-mail contained a cover letter explaining the purpose and importance of the survey and a hyperlink to the online instrument. The research team decided that active outreach to student veterans to participate both before and during the survey launch was important, since veterans are both busy and often reluctant to participate in surveys. A variety of activities were used to engage the student veterans including: publicizing the survey two weeks prior to its release with an information booth and free lunch in a busy outdoor campus corridor; e-mail reminders from the Veterans Affairs Office; a second information event in an outdoor campus location after the opening of the survey that provided mini laptops on which veterans could complete the online survey; Facebook event announcements; a student veteran organization Web site notice; reminders at a luncheon for student veterans; and a press release in the university newspaper. The 56 question instrument was constructed using Web-based survey software and was open to participants for 21 days. The survey was designed to measure items along six domains, including the adjustment, educational, financial, career/employment, support services, and health needs of student veterans.

Results and Discussion

Demographics of Respondents

The campus Veterans Affairs Office sent the survey link to 1,252 students, and the response rate was 26.92% (n=337). The ethnicity of the sample was similar to that of the campus population, including 65.2% of the respondents identified as "Caucasian," 24.6 % identified as "Hispanic," 6.4% identified as "African American," and 3.9% identified with another ethnic or racial group (N=313). The mean age of the participants was around 27 years with an age range of 19-67 years (N=321). A majority (79.2%) of the students were undergraduates with almost two-thirds (61.2%) of those respondents being upperclassmen in their junior or senior year (N=322). About one fifth of the respondents (20.8%) were

graduate students. The data on the respondent group suggest that there are a slightly disproportionately higher number of upperclassmen and graduate students who responded to the survey.

These non-traditional student veterans have responsibilities that complicate their educational careers. Understanding their ongoing military duties, schedule conflicts, financial strains, and family obligations helps higher education institutions better serve this growing student population. More than one third (38.6%) of the student veterans in the survey were married, but a low number of the sample (12%) were divorced (N=334). The number of years reported in their relationship ranged in length from 1 to 41 years. Of the veterans who described their relationship status (N=333), 16% were in a 1-2 year relationship, 23% reported a 3-5 year relationship, 24% were involved in a 6-10 year relationship, 19% reported an 11-20 year relationship, and 14% indicated being in a relationship for more than 20 years. These data reflect the respondents' tendency to be involved in longer-term relationships. This trend can be seen as an area of strength and support and must also be recognized as a commitment not shared by many undergraduate higher education students.

The respondents also reported a not surprisingly higher than average number of children compared to younger, more traditional students. More than a quarter (29.4%) of the sample reported having 1 to 2 children or step-children, while 11.9% had 3 or more (N=325). Having young children is typical of many active duty military personnel. Data from other studies show that over half (52.4%) of active duty personnel's children are seven years of age or younger, and that 41.0% of minor dependents are between birth and five years of age (U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). The time and energy required of student veterans who care for children while attending an institution of higher education cannot be underestimated. Many participants noted the challenges of managing family responsibilities and attending school. One veteran stated one barrier to transitioning into higher education was "working 40+ hours [per week], [being a] full time dad and husband, full time school load and drilling reservist" (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). This

statement offers a glimpse of the complex balancing of military, personal, and educational responsibilities required by many student veterans.

Of those who responded to an employment status question, 31.7% of student veterans reported working 30 or more hours per week. One third of the respondents reported not working, while almost half of all participants (48.2%) reported working 20 or more hours per week (N=316). Coordinating work and educational responsibilities can be difficult for many students; this challenge is exacerbated for the student veteran population who may also exhibit transitional difficulties. One veteran described this challenge by stating that his "major obstacle has been having to manage a full-time job as well as a full-time college course load in order to accommodate my financial need" (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). Although the new GI Bill provides more generous benefits than for past generations, the student veterans still must work to make ends meet.

In summary, the respondent sample was comparable to the overall student veteran campus population in terms of ethnicity. Participants were more likely to be upperclassmen and graduate students, nearly half of whom worked more than 20 hours per week. Almost one third of the participants were parents and over one third were married, although less than the national average was divorced. Generally the sample group tended to be older, more likely to be married and have children, worked more hours, and were in longer relationships with significant others than the traditional student population.

Military Background

A large majority (91%) of the participants had been active duty military personnel. In addition, 42.6% of the student veteran respondents cited serving in the Army, 18.2% in the Navy, 17.9% in the Marines, and 19.8% in the Air Force (N=324). Of the 79.8% of student veterans who reported being deployed (n=229), one third were deployed once, 38% were deployed two or three times, and 8.6% were deployed four or more times. Of the number of veterans responding to the question about Afghanistan and Iraq deploy-

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ments, 94.3% marked Iraq as a location of operations and 17.7% marked Afghanistan (N=177). When asked to list other deployments, such locations as Kuwait, Bosnia, Germany, and Saudi Arabia were among the top locations named. These data illustrate the high number of troops returning from OEF and OIF who are on campus. In addition, 46.8% of the respondents strongly or somewhat agreed “I went on combat patrols or missions,” and 60.7% strongly or somewhat agreed that they “witnessed someone from [their] unit being seriously wounded or killed” (N=295). The impact of such experiences will forever change our veterans and must be considered when addressing academic challenges as they transition from military to higher education.

Adjustment

One question asked student veterans what, if any, barriers or obstacles the participant had faced while transitioning to higher education. A number of trends were revealed in this open-ended question. One trend was the paperwork and administrative issues related to admissions and course credit transfer. For example, one veteran said, “None of the paperwork or ‘natural’ college hurdles make any room for the exceptional cases and circumstances common to Veterans...” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). It is important that institutions create policies to aid soldiers’ transition to and from campus and combat. Another trend noted was stress in balancing multiple roles. One student veteran summed up this trend by saying, “Finding child care while in class. Having enough money to pay bills and take care of my son while being a full time student” were barriers to transitioning (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). The theme of stress related to balancing financial, familial, and educational responsibilities reoccurred over several survey domains. A third trend of problems adjusting to crowded classrooms was also noted. One participant’s statement sums this up by stating, “I don’t do well in groups of people and miss classes often because I’m too nervous to go in and don’t want to disturb the classmates” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). A need for help with understanding and accessing Veterans Administration benefits

in a timely manner was also a repeated theme. Some veterans returning from OEF and OIF have exhibited Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms such as difficulty in groups that impact their ability to function on campuses. These students--often with invisible wounds--need administrative, faculty, and staff support as they transition. More than two-thirds (62.3%) of the participants answered they had heard of the student veteran organization on campus, but only 10.9% had attended any of the student veteran organization’s meetings (N=332). When asked, “What is your academic status,” one student wrote “transfer student with a lot of non-applicable credits” in the text box labeled “Other” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). This illustrates a recurring theme reported by students of concerns around military education credits transferring to institutions.

When asked to share comments regarding their experiences since enrolling in the university, several themes were revealed. One theme was that student veterans appreciated the university trying to do more for veterans. For example, one student veteran said, “I like that [the university] is making an effort to better serve Veterans” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010), indicating a trend of approval of veteran-friendly campus initiatives. Another described a common desire for peer-assisted services declaring, “The ...office could use a Veteran to help incoming veteran students” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). One student veteran noted challenges including “... listening to the freshmen kids who talk in class. I get really angry when I’m in class and hear them cause they are just so spoiled it seems to me. But I have found myself getting angry at little things like that, so I have had to calm myself down about non-consequential things like that sometimes” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). Anger and frustration with non-veteran students who were perceived as disrespectful was a reoccurring theme across survey domains.

Educational

A substantial number of student veterans were deployed during college, with 17.1% of the respondents confirming being deployed at some time during their college career (N=310). De-

ploying during a school semester represents an added difficulty. The administrative challenges of dropping courses can be facilitated by policies developed to specifically support students called back to duty who are present on campus. In addition, administrative procedures should be in place to support these policies. Some of the educational challenges that were recorded as areas of moderate or major levels of concern by respondents included: “navigating the admission process” (38%); “difficulty paying other educational costs (even with tuition assistance)” (45.8%); “managing GI benefits paperwork” (36.4%); “feeling upset when something reminded me of a stressful military experience” (17.2%); “non-Veteran students who are disrespectful” (27.6%); and “finding myself unexplainably angry during class” (14.8%) (N=337). While many students have financial stress during higher education, military service members often have increased financial responsibilities of family and household expenses while trying to also heal from combat experiences in their recent past. Challenges distinctive to student veterans include difficulty interfacing with younger student populations, unexplainable anger, trouble sitting for extended periods of time, problems with concentration, and poor study habits, all of which need to be understood by faculty. Training on how to recognize, understand, and successfully deal with these unique student veteran issues helps create a more veteran-friendly campus and better serve the student.

Financial

Students reported multiple sources of educational financial assistance (N=333). Over 87% of the respondents reported the new GI Bill as their main source of university funding. Student veterans also reported utilizing employment earnings (42.1%), student loans or grants (41.2%), and family contributions (7.4%) to fund university attendance (N=337). Moderate or major concern was noted by 38.7% of respondents in relation to “bills piling up,” and 22.2% indicated a moderate or major concern or need related to “managing money” (N=333). Respondents rated their current personal finances as “disappointing” (21.6%), “fair” (53.5%), and “outstanding” (4.8%). As can

be seen, this section indicates a clear majority of student veterans were using the GI Bill in addition to other funding sources and were still experiencing financial stress.

Career/Employment

Respondents indicated having moderate to major levels of concern with the following employment challenges: “sustaining certainty in my career plans” (55.1%); “finding a job” (63.7%); “being happy with my job” (60.8%); “being concerned about the transition back into the civilian workforce” (31.1%); and “worrying about future job satisfaction” (57.5%) (N=332). In the recent economic downturn, career certainty is a concern for many; however, the stress related to that anxiety is compounded by other transitional challenges of student veterans such as recent absence from the civilian workforce and translating military experience into non-combat employment skills. It is important to help military personnel translate service experience and training to non-combat situations. Educating student veterans on work-study and campus employment opportunities in veteran-friendly settings can ease their transition back into the civilian workforce. At the same time, institutions of higher education can benefit by gaining experienced staff. In addition, these data point to the importance of working with student veterans on career transition activities. With data showing unemployment among veterans in the workforce rising to as high as 14.7%, findings reveal that student veterans are concerned about their transitions not only through the university but out into their civilian careers (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association, 2010). In addition, student veterans often see a university degree differently from traditional freshman. The average freshman usually seeks a college degree to enhance personal development while the veteran is more focused on career development. Veterans have had one successful career; they seek a college degree to move into another career. This focus is reflected in the concern over career issues demonstrated in the survey.

Support Services

Respondents were asked how likely they would

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be to use student support services. Participants indicated that they would be most likely to use: “one-stop services (e.g., apply for Veterans benefits and financial aid, receive advisement, and register for courses in one location)” (73.8%) and “assistance with appropriate course selection to ensure compliance with Veterans Affairs and degree requirements” (61.9%). A clear majority (87.9%) of the student veterans had visited the Veterans Affairs office on campus, and 78.5% visited once per semester, while 6.7% reported visiting once per month (N=330). This was the most utilized resource and offers enormous opportunity to engage student veterans and as a point of contact for assessing their distinctive higher education needs.

Findings also revealed that 21.2% of respondents were currently experiencing difficulties that may cause them to stop attending the university, including financial, educational, health, and personal difficulties (N=330). Thus about one of every five veterans stated that they had considered dropping out of college due to difficulties that they were experiencing. This is a troublesome statistic since it gives an indication of the level of challenges that these student veterans are experiencing. It is crucial that administrators address the issues that can erode the confidence that this group has in being able to finish their degrees. Many students face challenges with finishing degree programs, but not all students face the level of challenges faced by student veterans in transitioning from combat. Although this group of students has overcome many challenges in combat, the university must work to reduce barriers and obstacles if student veterans are to reach the outcome of graduation.

When asked what assistance they have used or would use to address difficulties that may cause them to stop attending the university, respondents noted: “I have spoken with my academic counselor several times as well as instructors that I feel comfortable with” and “I have also signed up for group counseling with a veterans group but, so far, have not attended due to being uncomfortable in admitting problems in a group setting” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010).

Qualitative analysis of the results shows stu-

dents have challenges accessing services offered for personal and logistical reasons. One participant wrote, “I have not used any resources yet due to the lack of time between class and work” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). The findings also show that 54.0% of the participants thought they had insufficient information of the Disability Services offered by the university (N=315). However, 72.8% indicated that they were likely or somewhat likely to use or recommend the campus Disability Services (N=276). These results show a gap in delivery between what services student veterans report needing and those that are being utilized. Among respondents, 66.1% expressed a willingness to attend monthly luncheons or presentations regarding topics such as veterans benefits, veterans employment, financial aid, or health care (N=330). Reaching student veterans at such events can allow institutions to assess needs and services and deliver valuable information to the students that may increase their use of services, retention, and opportunities for academic success.

Respondents were asked what areas they would like to see addressed further by the university. Among respondents, 61.4% marked “veterans resource center,” 56.8% marked “financial guidance/resources,” 48.9% marked “medical services/benefits,” 97% marked “veterans newsletter,” 27.7% marked “veterans support groups,” and 26.5% marked “seminars and trainings (staff, faculty, students)” (N=264).

When given an opportunity to indicate an area to be addressed other than the options listed, one student wrote: “It would be nice to see a block of time designated for veterans during initial orientation to campus. During my orientation, this past summer, there were several vets (myself included) that had to run around campus on our own to file important VA paperwork. Most of the orientation was centered around first time college students right out of high school” (Anonymous Respondent, 2010).

Many other participants expressed a desire for campus orientation programs geared directly toward the non-traditional adult student veteran. Another veteran conveyed “transitional stress coping skills” as an area to address (Anonymous

Respondent, 2010). The findings also show that participants are interested in help with study skills, counseling services, health care, and financial aid.

Of the student veterans answering the survey, 89.0% noted that they use the state Veterans Commission for information about student veteran services and benefits off campus, while 18.5% said they access that information from the County Veterans Service Officer (N=146). When given an opportunity to indicate a resource other than the options listed, one student wrote, "None, they are not as friendly as on campus," while many answered "va.gov" or other online resources (Anonymous Respondent, 2010). Of the student veterans answering the survey, 8.2% noted that they go to the student veterans organization Web page about student veteran services and benefits on campus, while 96.1% said they access that information from the Office of Veterans Affairs (N=282). Again, the findings indicate that veterans are accessing services from the Veterans Affairs Office on campus more than elsewhere; an effort to coordinate other campus veterans' services can be made from this service-delivery location. When given an opportunity to indicate a campus resource other than the two options listed, one student stated "other Vets," while another replied "email" (Anonymous Respondent, 2010).

Health

Veterans indicated having challenges with the following unmet health care needs: medical (32.1%); dental (47.3%); psychological/emotional (23.6%); sleep (trouble sleeping) (40.5%); and needs from exposure to concussive events (such as Improvised Explosive Devices) (6.6%) (N=334). Of participants, 41.2% reported being wounded, injured, or otherwise physically hurt during their military career, and 44.9% indicated still having trouble related to this wound or injury (N=328). In addition, 39.6% somewhat or strongly agreed that, "I or members of my unit were exposed to an Improvised Explosive Device, explosion, or concussive event" (N=295). Students recovering from such health and psychological challenges and extreme trauma experiences require unique services to ensure opportunities for

academic success. Cognition abilities resulting from mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI) and PTSD symptoms such as hyper-vigilance dramatically affect the classroom and study habits of student veterans. They often have difficulty sitting still for long periods, concentrating in crowded areas, and being in large groups.

In response to questions about the participants' beliefs regarding mental health care, an average of 21.62% answered "not applicable" to all mental health care-related questions. This may indicate a caution about using services or a reluctance to reveal this in a survey. Moreover, strong evidence indicates that these at-risk veterans are not accessing mental health care as needed, even though the campus has excellent vet-staffed counseling resources. Many report not being sure how to access mental health resources on campus (46%) or off campus (34%). Also, veterans report it would be too embarrassing to use mental health care (32%), it might harm their career (42%), and that they might be seen as weak if they seek mental health services (32%). These findings support previous literature suggesting a military culture of underutilized mental health services related to stigma associated with mental illness (Rand, 2008). Peer-to-peer services have been effective with military service men and women. The survey findings demonstrate military personnel's preference to receive mental health care from fellow veterans.

Recommendations and Implications

The Post-9/11 GI Bill will continue to increase the number of military personnel pursuing higher education as troops transition out of the military and take advantage of the federal investment in their futures that they have earned through their service. Over 2 million troops have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (Kaufmann, 2010). Because of the increased educational benefits offered to veterans and their dependents, higher education institutions have an opportunity to enroll students from the military population and help this population secure their futures. These veterans will greatly impact the higher educational institution and change its face in coming years, as did the

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veterans who entered colleges after WWII. Without specific services, programs, and policies aimed at ensuring the successful adjustment from combat to classroom, these student veterans are at risk. Indeed, some preliminary studies indicate that student veterans drop out in higher numbers than traditional college students. Reports indicate that in Texas about 60 of every 100 Texas veterans go to college, and of those only two actually finish their degrees within a six-year timeframe (Military.com, 2008). Retention rates and academic success can be improved by strategically placed administrative policies and student services geared toward the unique needs of the non-traditional student transitioning from the military to higher education.

The state university where this student veteran needs assessment survey was conducted already has adjustment and transition services and policies in place for student veterans. Student veterans who participated in the survey indicated that although they access services and programs developed for their particular educational needs, they also suggested improvements to the current services and programs offered. While this survey intentionally did not ask respondents to rate their satisfaction with campus services, the research did allow student veterans to voice their needs and concerns. Following the analysis of the data, it is apparent that this campus could better serve its student veteran population by providing more financial support services. The participants also indicated that they would be interested in attending monthly luncheons or speakers regarding topics such as veteran benefits, veterans' employment, financial aid, and health care information.

The respondents also indicated a need for more veteran-friendly policies and services. One example offered by a respondent suggested that the campus ensure a specific orientation solely for veterans and that the veterans not be forced to attend a standardized incoming student orientation that is geared toward a younger population. Action about this need has already been implemented. Another need identified was for a Veterans Resource Center where student veterans can find an appropriate study environment and information and other resources that meet their unique demands. Such peer support exemplified in a lounge

area is a common request among veterans who want to build relationships with their peers—other student veterans. Just as in combat where their buddies “had their backs,” student veterans are excellent resources for each other.

While veterans are recognized as being less likely to embrace mental health services, the results of this survey indicate that student veterans recognize a need for psychological/emotional health care. Higher education institutions can develop peer-to-peer counseling programs in preparation for the influx of student veterans and their unique mental health care needs. By recognizing and acknowledging student veterans, training faculty and staff about this population's needs, and developing appropriate services and programs that will ensure opportunities for educational success, higher education institutions have the opportunity to repay military students for their service to the country.

This survey represents a unique study of a population that is not routinely examined on college campuses. However, there were limitations to the study that can be addressed in the future. Although the study had great success in terms of reaching a larger percentage of student veterans than is commonly found in other studies, a larger sample size in future research would more completely reveal the challenges and needs of student veterans. The study has limited generalizability due to a smaller sample size. Future research studies could use campus media outlets such as print, Internet, and radio resources to augment an information campaign aimed to make student veterans aware of the opportunity to give feedback and influence programs and policies through such methods as needs assessment surveys and focus groups. Articles in campus newspapers, electronic announcements, and use of more social media might also enhance participation. Mixed research methods that reveal both quantitative and qualitative data will be most useful in determining how to best serve this population. Further studies are recommended to continue critical analysis of the unique policies, programs, and services needed by student veterans. Also, adding questions that include identifying military dependent respondents would help reach out to this population and sort out the type of needs

of veterans and dependents.

Institutions of higher education should improve upon existing programs and services or develop specific veteran-related assistance to serve the unique needs of this rapidly increasing student population. Training on student veteran needs and how to interface most effectively with student veterans can be a benefit for faculty and staff. Campus departments and offices can become identified after such training as veteran-friendly, and thus raise awareness for the need to be more veteran-friendly. Institutions should consider alternate orientation programs for non-traditional student veterans focusing on transitioning from combat to campus. Student veterans' feedback and previous research suggest that campuses consider developing Veteran Resource Centers that support the unique educational needs of this population. Critical analysis of campus policies, programs, and services can increase the retention and academic success of those who served our country.

Helping veterans transition back to families and communities is one of the most pressing public health challenges of the next decade and beyond (Selber, 2009). This challenge is also inclusive of universities as troops transition from warrior to student veteran and civilian worker. Universities must get on the path to engaging in this challenge with enthusiasm and commitment. Our returning troops and veterans are deserving of our understanding and best practices, which begin by examining their needs and responding. They deserve nothing less.

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