Veteran Ally: Practical Strategies for Closing the Military-Civilian Gap on Campus

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Veterans often have difficulty transitioning to higher education. Through focus groups and interviews, this study examines what changes universities and colleges can make to lessen transitional challenges for student veterans.

- Several factors can hinder the academic and social success of student veterans. These factors include the student veterans' perceived lack of connection to the university, military culture, and student veterans being viewed as unstable or potentially dangerous. Many student veterans expressed that they struggled to ask for help from campus personnel and administration after transitioning from a military culture that encourages self-sufficiency and resourcefulness. Furthermore, many student veterans felt disconnected from traditional college students and the university setting - due to their experience & responsibilities in the military. For others, negative perceptions of veterans by peers and professors led some veterans to hide their status.

- Universities can take a step toward removing these hindrances by utilizing a Veteran Ally program and implementing campus-wide student veteran discussion panels. Veterans Ally programs are useful to student veterans because they offer support networks of university faculty and staff who can identify resources on campus and within the community that might be of use to student veterans.

AUTHORS: Nicholas J. Osborne, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT:

"Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was enacted in 2009, student veteran populations have nearly doubled while services that support their transition to higher education have dramatically increased. Despite a surge in resources, however, institutions are deficient in training faculty and staff about veterans' issues, consequently leaving student veterans susceptible to inaccurate perceptions about their service and wellbeing. In an effort to provide an inclusive environment for service members, this article discusses findings from two focus groups and 14 interviews with student veterans. Recommendations for training faculty and staff and enhancing the visibility of veterans' issues through Veteran Ally training and student veteran discussion panels are discussed."

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

One of the ways student veterans can ease the transition from military service to academia is by becoming active in student veteran organizations (SVOs) on their respective college campus. Through building relationships with other student veterans and student veteran supporters, incoming student veterans could potentially feel more connected to the student body and the university. SVOs should work with university administrators to design programming for faculty, staff, and students aimed at reducing negative perceptions of student veterans. The programming should inform attendees of the unique contributions student veterans add to higher education and society. Universities and colleges should help ease the initial transition into student life for student veterans by connecting them with other student veterans, offering veteran specific orientations, student veteran newsletters, and recognition ceremonies. Universities and colleges should create veteran advisory committees to establish a forum for diverse perspectives and collaborative opportunities that integrate student veterans and community veterans into university policy decisions. Universities and colleges should continue creating veteran-friendly locations on campus.

FOR POLICY

DoD and VA administrators might work with college campuses to provide training resources for educators and university officials on how to best address concerns and issues student veterans commonly have upon their arrival to campus and throughout their academic career. These training resources might limit exposure to stereotypes that focus on violence and mental illness, and instead introduce some of the potential contributions student veterans could make to the campus due to their unique experiences and training in the military. The training might also introduce some of the similarities student veterans have with traditional students. Policymakers at the university, state, and national level might designate additional funds and instructional resources to programs designed to inform university faculty and staff on the diverse needs and issues of student veterans, and the most effective ways to address these needs and issues. Funds could also be used to implement Veterans Ally programs at universities and colleges across the country. Policymakers might also develop multicultural awareness programming.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Nicholas J. Osborne, Ed.D.
Assistant Dean of Students &
Director of Veterans Programs
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
nosborne@illinois.edu

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was restricted to one large university located in the Midwest region of the United States; further research is needed to determine if these results are geographically generalizable among different populations of student veterans. Forthcoming studies should include a larger sample size and collect quantitative data to determine the effectiveness of existing programs on the transition into student life for veterans. Future researchers should analyze different veteran programming that has been implemented across the United States to determine more university best practices to ease the transition of becoming a student veteran. Future researchers should assess the impact veteran-specific training of university faculty and staff has on the long-term academic success of student veterans. Future researchers should also study which applied practices of professional development training for educators and other initiatives have been successful. More studies are needed on the short- and long-term effects of Veterans Ally programs on student veterans and campus populations.