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Special Opportunities in Veteran Academic Liaison Organization Requisition

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Introduction

Student Veterans are a growing population within post-secondary education institutions throughout the United States. According to the American Council on Education, the United States has reintegrated more than 2 million troops into civilian life following their service in Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Taylor et.al 47). Proportionately to the increasing student veteran population, there is a similarly growing need for the creation or re-evaluation of resources and support structures on the campuses to ensure the academic success of our heroes. Student veterans struggle to succeed in modern academic settings for a myriad of reasons that manifest themselves with great complexity. It is the obligation of the institution, faculty and the administration to take a step back and re-assess the effectiveness of their tools for success.

The purpose of the following research is to survey the dynamics within growing population of student veterans transitioning from military service into higher education in correlation to specific resources available to them on campuses nationwide. This study intends to provide insight on the characteristics of the student veteran demographic itself, its interdependent relationship with faculty and administration, as well as examine the subsequent successes/obstacles of the support structures promoting academic success. The analysis of both qualitative and quantitative research on the student veteran populations matriculating at American colleges and universities will illustrate that the many complex idiosyncrasies attached to each individual veteran warrants the need for much closer attention, greater flexibility and even greater commitments at the faculty, administrative and institutional levels. The goal is to acknowledge the fundamental components essential to constructing an impactful and sustainable

multifaceted support model. One that can be tailored to benefit both the needs of the students & institution it serves.

Thesis Statement and Research Questions

Thesis

Student veterans struggle to succeed in modern academic settings for a myriad of reasons that manifest themselves with great complexity. It is the sole obligation of the institution, faculty and the administration to take a step back and re-assess the effectiveness of their tools for success.

Research Questions

- (1) Who is the Student Veteran?
- (2) What challenges face the Student Veteran population while attending post-secondary education degree programs that contribute to academic attrition? Further, what obstacles do the students themselves present to the academic institution that may hinder effective advocacy and impactful mentorship.
- (3) What resources are available to offer adequate support for both the student veteran and faculty members to develop a symbiotic relationship conducive toward successfully navigating a course of study until degree completion?

Methodology

Throughout the course of this research, several scholarly sources collected to address three primary research questions or objectives. (1) Who is the Student Veteran? The research journal entries and articles collected effectively characterize the full embodiment of the identity of the Student Veteran while placing emphasis on the demographic's historical relationship

between the military and academia at an institutional level. (2) What challenges face the Student Veteran population while attending post-secondary education degree programs that contribute to academic attrition, as well as the systemic obstacles presented to the academic institution by the student themselves hindering effective advocacy and impactful mentorship. (3) What resources are available to offer adequate support for both the student veteran and faculty members to develop a symbiotic relationship conducive toward successfully navigating a course of study until degree completion. Answering these three questions will provide a greater perspective and understanding of the complexities of the student veteran identity as well as the complexities of the challenges facing the student veteran as well as the personnel/systems set in place to support them. The purpose of the following research is to acknowledge the fundamental components essential to constructing an impactful and sustainable multifaceted support model for student veterans enrolled in higher educational institutions.

This research paper utilized a non-experimental, explanatory cross-sectional design. The collective research was primarily gathered through the SUNY Purchase Library scholarly search engine utilizing keywords such as “student veterans”, “transitioning soldiers” and “service-related mental disorders in higher education” among other examples. However, some statistical information regarding census related topics such as student veteran failure/dropout rates, substance abuse, and service-related mental illnesses was gathered from Google search results presented by the Military Times or from data analysis conducted by the Veterans Association from the website va.gov.

From the information acquired, a secondary data analysis approach was deployed when examining each source for both qualitative and quantitative significance to support the research papers main argument that implicates that the complications influencing student veteran

academic attrition is multi-faceted and warrants a model with much greater flexibility and continuity within the collaborative efforts of the student veteran, faculty, administration and other related institutions. Reasons for choosing this method of analysis was due to the vast complexities of variables and problems offered by each component within the resource models, ranging from (but not limited to) the lack of veteran self-assessment at the student level, preliminary measurement of self-advocacy at the administrative level, and inadequate student veteran acclimation training among faculty coordinated between the institution and government/privately ran veteran services.

The contributing issues resulting in student veteran academic attrition is as controversial as it is pervasive. Though a growing demographic, and despite the documented history of the military, its veterans and higher education, very little consistency in substantive research surrounding this highly sophisticated phenomena can be found. These limitations are partly due to the high levels of academic interruptions and/or complete abandonment of degree pursuits and partially due to the lack of dedicated resources on campuses available to collect the necessary data to observe the progress/evolution of this issue over time.

Review of Literature

The Student Veteran Demographic

Throughout United States history, documented as early as the Post Civil War Era, there has existed a relationship between U.S. military and institutions of higher education. Government interest has posited great importance in the integration of militarism in academia and vice-versa as a strategy to fortify the infrastructure its growing nation. In the journal entitled, “Student Veterans in Higher Education: A Conversation Six Decades in the Making,” author

Shane Hammond illustrates the relationships progression from early iterations such as the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, the establishment of the Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) of 1920, to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (presently known as the GI BILL). Presently, it is estimated over 1 million Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans are utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill. This bill's main provisions, enacted in Congress in 2008, was to include funding for 100 percent of a four-year undergraduate education, including tuition and other expenses (Norman et al. 701). Following each major conflict in American history, the government has offered subsidized educational benefits to its servicemembers to entice new enlistment and preserve retention thus solidifying the symbiotic relationship of the pen and sword.

Following the large withdrawal of American military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, more veterans separating from the military are taking advantage of their Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits and campuses across America are now seeing a steady rise of prior service members among their student body ("Veteran-Friendly Institution" 181). Each student veteran will bring a multitude of unique personal characteristics attained from their time in service that will either improve or inhibit their chances at academic success (Falkey 27).

Challenges & Obstacles

Today's "traditional" college students (recent high school graduates, ages 18-24) will face many difficult challenges transitioning into the professional adult version of themselves both inside of the classroom and out ("Veteran Friendly Institution" 182). With today's modern job market being extremely competitive, obtaining employment with a suitable salary to sustain an average lifestyle has elicited a greater demand for post graduate degree holding candidates.

Thus, intensifying the stresses of academic achievement for students within post-secondary education institutions (Calonge and Shah 67).

Veterans who enroll in post-secondary education represent a much smaller subset within the subcategory of “non-traditional” college students. A group that is identified as students with ages equal or greater than 25 years old, often with dependents and fulltime employment among other characteristics (Alexander et al. 58). In terms of academic success, Alexander et.al, would state that student veterans and other non-traditional students may find themselves at a disadvantage because they are older, financially independent, and have life experiences and perspectives that differ from those of college-age students (58). In the academic journal “Understanding Student Veterans in Transition,” author Kevin C. Jones conveys that “student veterans are undergoing a constant dynamic tension as they transition from a previous state (servicemember), to several simultaneous current states (college student, civilian, employee), all while creating their individual identities along the way” (12). In addition to those stressors, veterans often deal with the struggles related to the comorbidity of mental health issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury as a result of their service. Which tragically compounds themselves into a student identity of extraordinarily unique circumstances. To further support that claim, Jones states, “The way in which veterans created meaning for their life in the military is often different than the way they create meaning as students on campus. This dichotomy is a key challenge for student veterans transitioning to higher education” (1).

Many diverse challenges and obstacle face both the student veteran and post-secondary education institution in facilitating all the necessary means to ensure an effective and sustainable support system for scholastic achievement. Student veteran assimilation finds itself at the forefront of the major issues. Despite the monetary assistance provided, benefits alone are not

enough for this group to succeed in higher education. Falkey would argue, “During times of high unemployment, and a less-than-robust economy, education plays a major part in helping veterans assimilate into society...The V.A. is responsible for providing military-related services and benefits and the institution is responsible for helping the student/veteran acclimate to the academic environment” (29). However, those measures can only get the student veteran so far. “Student veterans with disabilities must understand the impairments they are experiencing, and how those impairments interact with demands of classroom activities or environmental characteristics to create barriers to academic success. Despite concrete efforts made by an increasing number of colleges and universities to help veterans make the transition...many veterans feel isolated due to the lack of military cultural competency among faculty and staff” (“Student Veteran Success” 122). Dillard and Yu would also state that “The loss of identity associated with the military-to-academic transition so extreme that student veterans require the highest degree of institutional support...achieved through organizational development workshops and programs aimed at socializing faculty and staff to the difficulties experienced by student veterans” (124).

Today’s Veterans drawing Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits are enrolling at increased rates and subsequently are twice as likely to experience a disability when compared to their non-veteran counterparts. “Student veterans demonstrate elevated rates of mental health symptoms such as PTSD, TBI & depression associated with cognitive and emotional impairments that contribute to maladaptive academic behaviors which explain why student veterans experience lower levels of academic performance” (Kinney and Eakman 346). The investigation of these multi-factorial relationships of mental health related concerns among the student veteran population can provide a statistical analysis on their direct results on student veteran success measured by GPA and

instances of academic disruptions (Shackleford et al. 37). The manifestation of these combat related mental health consequences can further exacerbate behavioral issues influencing self-medicating and impulsive tendencies. “Many OEF/OIF veterans have experienced combat-related stressors...increasing their risk for post-deployment stress and alcohol misuse” (Grossbard et al. 30).

Resources for the Student Veteran

To adequately meet the needs of the student veteran population, both colleges and universities must evaluate their services and understanding of veterans to determine if existing resources are adequate and particularly when assessing support for a disability (Lange et al. 278). Incorporating a comprehensive professional staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans enables those otherwise unfamiliar with military culture to empathize and understand the difficulties of recently separated Veterans. The effectiveness of professional development sessions for faculty and staff and the development of intervention strategies hinges upon proactive staff and faculty involvement (“Student Veteran Success” 124).

Once colleges and universities acknowledge the need for veteran sensitivity and acclimation training, it is imperative that an emphasis is placed on preliminary screenings of veterans, consistency in continued advocacy and frequent interactions. Veterans must first be evaluated to determine the accommodations they require. Accommodations are made available to college students with disabilities to provide opportunities for success in this environment, but in order to receive these accommodations it is essential that the student discloses their disability and informs the institution. Therefore, the organization must understand that student veteran’s self-advocacy skills must be identified and further training would be critical toward influencing their academic success (Kinney and Eakman 345). Institutions must first understand that need, then

approach their support as a holistically focused scholastic resource. “Four core service areas are recommended for student veterans to ease their transition from military to academic life. They are: (1) Academic Services, (2) Career Services, (3) Disability Services and (4) Veteran and Family Services” (Lange et al. 278).

Analysis

As stated in the review of literature, the student veteran population within post-secondary education institutions continues to rapidly grow. Proportionately, there grows a greater need for the establishment or re-evaluation of veteran related campus support systems and resources as high levels of academic attrition continues to plague student veterans in their pursuit towards earning a college degree. Research on this issue has presented several articles that credit the resulting failures primarily to the shortcomings of the faculty and institution, citing that there is a general lack of understanding of the student veteran demographic which ultimately creates a less than accommodating atmosphere for student veteran success. True as that may be in most cases, additional research has noted that the student veteran themselves play an equally responsible role in the prevention of their own achievements. What is important to recognize is that this issue not simple, but rather a multi-faceted and highly complex combination of variables warranting further research and continuous re-evaluation at the student, faculty/administrative, government and community agency levels. For resources and support systems to be meaningful, impactful and sustainable a collaborative effort between all groups is required.

One measure needed to be addressed by the student as well as the institution, is the shared responsibility to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities that make up the student veteran identity. At the student level, student veterans must be completely aware and fully accountable of every aspect of their personal identity and further must be willing to disclose

relative information to the college or university. Kinney and Eakman would outline this as a “knowledge of self,” an integral part in measuring self-advocacy skills (346). Accommodations may be offered by the institution; however the student veteran must disclose information about themselves to ensure that their individual needs are met. This is often problematic for veterans as they frequently mistake pride for self-sufficiency and rarely seek or even admit the need for support concerning issues such as academic struggles, mental health related stress and/or substance abuse.

Publications within scientific journals such as *The Journal of Academic Administration in Higher Education* addresses the need to understand the nuances of being a student veteran in modern society at the institutional level. Falkey’s research states that it is imperative for the institution to understand that each veteran will bring a multitude of unique personal characteristics attained from their time in service that will either improve or inhibit their chances at academic success (Falkey 27). Student veterans will simultaneously juggle their academic work load as well as greater issues concerning combat related mental health disorders and pressures stemming from financial, professional and familial obligations (Jones 12). Each individual stressor alone can cause academic performance to plummet. However, in combination these variables can take a much greater toll on the student beyond the classroom and it would behoove the institution to be knowledgeably trained and prepared to face what obstacles may come as a result. Research suggests that faculty and administration must receive training in military culture and ethos to offer accessible and potent resources for the student veteran. Therefore, it is vital for academic institutions to partner their services in conjunction with government and private Veteran Affairs organizations.

Once a firm grasp of student veteran identity is established both by the student and college/university, expectations can be set to align with both groups capabilities to develop and implement a dedicated resource support model that is tailored to best suit the needs of this symbiotic relationship. A publication by the Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability would argue that the effectiveness of any student veteran support model can be measured by the successful incorporation of four core areas of service provided. Lange et. al's research would state that these core areas should include (1) Academic, (2) Career, (3) Disability and (4) Veteran and Family Services. This model emphasizes a more holistic approach to cultivating academic success that addresses all the internal and external factors that often pose obstacles for the student veteran. These support services and personnel should ideally be exclusively for veterans. Partly, to encourage veterans to find comfort in a familiar sense of comradery and partly to ensure that a similar rapport and modicum of trust is made with the people tasked to help them. However, these veteran resources and organizations should not isolate themselves but encourage frequent integration into campus culture with other non-veteran groups to temper the student veteran's submersion into the greater student body.

At its core, the general mission and framework to create any impactful support system on any campus, should be constructed with the understanding that both the successes or failures of any support model will be equally measured by the continuous re-evaluation of mutual commitments established between student, faculty and institution alike. It is critical for all parties to be highly informed of every strength and weakness present to ensure that there is complete transparency and accountability within these co-dependent relationships. Therefore, every challenge that is to be inevitably faced, should be met with a staunch pursuit toward

obtaining all the necessary data and information to ensure consistently improved metrics of scholastic achievement.

As most of the research suggests, there are many notable pitfalls inhibiting the creation of a modularly turn key model for student veteran support. However, what seems to be consistent across all studies researched, is that most unresolved concerns stem from the lack of continuous data collected on the topic and from the apparent disconnect from vital information on how to locate available resources. If academic institutions exhibit patience, fortitude and accept the fact that resolution warrants continuous renewals of commitment, they may help quell initial struggles faced as they navigate their way to create a system that works in accordance their unique set of circumstances. There are various resources available for all parties involved if they are inclined to seek them out.

Conclusion

In summation, student veterans continue struggling to succeed in modern academic settings for a myriad of reasons that manifest themselves with great complexity. Contrary to the initial assumptions within the thesis of this paper, research has determined that it is not in fact the sole obligation of the institution, faculty or administration to take a step back and re-assess the effectiveness of their tools for success. Rather, it is a collaborative effort that includes the student themselves long with other external resources. The consensus of the scholarly studies reviewed, offered a broader perspective on the general scope of responsibility that dictates academic success or failure among the student veteran population. Prior to this scholastic endeavor, the focus driving the thesis of this research suffered from a narrowminded perspective shrouded in personal biases and naivety. Despite, those surprising revelations, the total experience itself offered one notable takeaway. The creation of an effective, impactful and sustainable support

model to support student veterans within academic institutions demands a similar code of ethics found within the fabric of the military ethos. It ironically is a nod to the military “esprit de corps” that indoctrinates that all those involved must become accountable for the strengths and weaknesses of one another. Though there is no one formula, there are some basic principles that if built upon, can render remarkable results. The embodiment of this can be best summarized within the content of President Obama’s August 13th, 2013 address to the Disabled American Veterans National Convention. There, the president outlined the following basic rubric which he explained to be the “8 Keys to Success” on campus.

- (1) Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
- (2) Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
- (3) Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
- (4) Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
- (5) Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
- (6) Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.
- (7) Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
- (8) Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

If academic institutions were to place each of these 8 steps into foundation of their student veteran support systems, they can continue to preserve hope and honor our nation's heroes by affording them the second chance at a life they postponed to ensure the safety of our right to live freely in the pursuit of happiness as Americans.

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