

Quality Approaches in Higher Education



Establishing quality engagement for student veterans by building program support at all levels.

Promising Practices for Engaging Student Veterans

Michael J. Kirchner, Lia Coryell, and Susan M. Yelich Biniacki

Abstract

Service members transitioning into post-secondary schooling face a new, unfamiliar challenge from previous battles. Student veteran graduation rates are being questioned as are their education benefits. Across the country, student veteran organizations and resource centers are being established, though their contribution on campus for military-students needs to be explored. At the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, two graduate students, with support from their academic advisor, began a grassroots operation that led to the formation of a student veteran organization, a military and veterans' resource center, and professional development opportunities for academic staff and faculty to learn more about student veterans on campus. As this paper suggests, the more engaged student veterans are in their campus, the higher the quality of their education experience, thus making them more likely to be retained and earn degrees.

Keywords

Student Support, Career Development

Introduction

For veterans entering or returning to postsecondary schooling, the enrollment process is the first of many obstacles they will face as students. The transition from the close camaraderie of military service and into the civilian world represents a challenging and serious investment for student veterans (Abel, Bright, & Cooper, 2013). Feelings of exclusion, neglect, and extreme frustration are frequently cited by student veterans, many who will eventually drop out of school (Abel et al., 2013). The authors of this article include a combat veteran, a disabled veteran, and a professor in higher education with experience teaching military and veteran students. Based on our practitioner perspectives and experiences, this paper addresses the need for the quality engagement of student veterans on college campuses, the role military and veteran organizations play at universities, our approach to building program support, and the successes and challenges we faced at our Midwestern, urban university while developing a more veteran-friendly learning institution.

Need for Engagement

Since the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy and subsequent troop deployments, withdrawals, and downsizing efforts in the military, thousands of service members are returning to school ready to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits (Abel et al., 2013). According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), more than three-quarters of a million veterans have used their earned benefits to enroll in postsecondary courses (Kim & Cole, 2013). Rumann and Hamrick (2009) add that more than 80% of colleges have enrolled veteran students who have withdrawn from the military. Universities across the country are recognizing the significant amount of veteran students struggling with their transition as two thirds of schools have implemented policies regarding tuition refunds or academic transition provisions (Woo, 2006). Evidence is limited regarding which factors impact academic success for student veterans or the role institutions play in supporting this group. In fact, only a small number of colleges claim to understand the primary attrition causes of student veterans as Bain, Kim, Cook, and Sneed (2012) argue only one out of four schools understand why veterans drop out of school. Nationally, graduation data is spotty at best as MSNBC reported 88% dropout rates (Fain, 2013) while the Student Veterans of America

reported 68% graduation rates; based on the VA's 2010 National Survey of Veterans (Horton, 2013).

Student veterans are a unique population of college students. Sixty-two percent of student veterans are first-generation college students (Kim & Cole, 2013). They average 33 years of age, spend more time working off campus, and are more likely to be married with families (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, MacDermin, & Wadsworth, 2013). Many student veterans have already entered or completed a first career, been exposed to diverse cultures, and lived in dangerous environments. When compared to traditional students, they struggle more with academic preparedness, social acculturation, work/life balance, understanding of learning, and emotional/health issues (Fain, 2012). Still, student veterans reported placing greater emphasis on academic areas that they felt were important for academic progress than on campus life and activities (Kim, 2013). This data is important to understand when establishing quality engagement programming for military and student veterans on college campuses.

Importance of Quality Engagement

Quality in higher education relates to the development of a “standards framework” of the educational process for students on college campuses (Shah, Lewis, & Fitzgerald, 2011; Newton, 2006). Barkley (2010) defines student engagement as “a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning” (p. 8). Beyond the college classroom, engagement through participation in campus activities, organizations, and with other students is an important part of the college experience. Students who are engaged on campus are more successful with their education attainment (Schlossberg, 1989). Additionally, social and academic engagement in a new environment contributes to a sense of purpose and self-awareness for student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The bond soldiers develop while serving is lost as service members transition to an environment where autonomy is favored over a shared foundation. When returning to civilian life and college, the interdependency and cohesiveness created and nurtured in the military unit become less prevalent and can create a sense of loss and an identity crisis for returning military and student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The challenge of this transition may become the most significant barrier student veterans face and impacts the quality of education received.

We believe quality engagement includes assisting student veterans in developing post-military identities and easing the transition process from military service to postsecondary schooling. In the past, veterans have downplayed [or neglected] their military status to avoid rejection or stigmatization from civilian students (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Quality engagement for veterans must include

meaningful, population-specific opportunities to participate in the culture of higher education in a manner that meets the unique needs of the student and their families. These opportunities provide a manner in which the student can develop his/her new sense of self while maintaining an important component of his/her character.

Universities have immense room for growth in the area of quality engagement. For example, Cook and Kim (2009) note that only 4% of institutions of higher education provide a veteran-specific orientation while many student veterans report frustrations with the enrollment process and other higher education systems (Cate, Gerber, & Holmes, 2010). Military and veteran student organizations and campus support centers are a critical safety net for the transition process soldiers undergo while adjusting to student and civilian life. By engaging in campus activities the student veteran is enabled to re-establish his/her sense of purpose and worth.

Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering describes how feelings of mattering are important to student success because mattering helps them to feel more connected to others and the institution (Schlossberg, 1989). During their enlistment, members of the military have a clear purpose and meaning in both their unit and mission. They understand the overall impact when not performing their job swiftly and accurately. When a student veteran transitions to a college environment, he may feel that he does not matter. When an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, such as a student veteran entering or returning to college, the potential for feeling marginal arises (Schlossberg, 1989). The need to increase support during the transitioning phase is exacerbated by the lack of knowledge veterans have regarding the postsecondary education system.

Building Program Support

We found that the process of building support for student veterans was critical at all levels of the organization, including administration and faculty, as well with both student veterans and the general student population. Program planning approaches for adult learners (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013) as well as a systems approach to engagement (Senge, 2006) were important frameworks we considered. Our aim was to approach the planning table strategically and transparently (Cervero & Wilson, 2006). Although all stakeholders were important in moving ideas forward, after reflecting on the process, we view support from upper administration and student veterans themselves as important cornerstones for the engagement effort.

Middle administration was not against the idea of additional support for student veteran initiatives, but in the era of scarce resources; budget cuts; and pressures for time, space, and resources, the student veteran initiatives did not immediately rise up the priority list in 2011. Schnoebelen (2013) lists the appointment

of a senior administrator to lead support programming for student veterans in her best practices. Traditionally, involving upper administration is not considered for this level of initiative at our university; however, we asked to meet with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs to discuss our concerns from a student perspective. In meeting face to face with the Vice Chancellor we were able to humanize the student veteran population. We emphasized our current volunteer peer mentorship roles for the hundreds of military and student veterans at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). The Vice Chancellor's support initiated a domino effect. Once upper administration became involved, mid-level administrators and department directors began allocating time to meet with student veteran representatives and respond to their concerns.

Obtaining support from the administration was important in gaining stakeholder support, but gaining trust from the student veterans was even more critical. Student veterans were instrumental in pushing for an increase in student veteran support on campus and a more military-friendly climate. Marketing and outreach programming as well as the constant presence of student veteran leaders on campus helped develop a level of trust, which we argue is important for military students.

We began by requesting a welcome and information table at every new student orientation program, 21 total in the first year. In addition, we created a military- and veteran-specific welcome packet that every student veteran received in the mail from the admissions department prior to the start of the semester. The student veteran organization hosted an open house at the Military and Veterans Resource Center (MAVRC). Our presence and the persistence in the marketing of these initiatives were important for visibility, outreach education, and the symbolism of peer veteran leadership. Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and other events throughout the year also presented opportunities for student veteran programming and recognition. Later in the development of the initiative, student military and veteran organization functions also served as platforms for building support and outreach.

Establishing and Strengthening Student Military and Veteran Organizations

Once we gained initial commitment from campus administration for military and veteran student initiatives, we began to explore ways to establish and strengthen student military and veteran support structures. Two growing options for supportive military and veteran student services are student organizations and campus resource centers specifically identified for military and student veterans, which we view as important connectors for quality engagement. Each entity offers opportunities for students to engage on campus and build support networks. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) note more than 80% of colleges have enrolled

veteran students who have withdrawn from the military. Universities across the country are recognizing the significant amount of veteran students struggling with the transition as two thirds of schools have implemented policies regarding tuition refunds or academic transition provisions (Woo, 2006).

Student Veterans of America

Military and student veterans have the opportunity to engage in campus life as a member of their university's student veteran organization, likely a Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter. As Summerlot, Green, and Parker (2009) suggest, many of these organizations are created because of student veterans taking action in response to their need to identify with others like them and to enhance their overall college experience. Today, with more than 950 SVA chapters spanning all 50 states (Student Veterans of America, n.d.), many student veterans have the opportunity to connect with and support other military-affiliated classmates. Additionally, military and student veterans involved with these chapters have scholarship opportunities, employment assistance, and are part of a national organization with government support (Student Veterans of America, n.d.). SVA chapters offer veterans a chance to recreate the camaraderie they had while they served and ease the transition process through peer support and education. We recognized the lack of cohesiveness student veterans had on campus and the importance of connectedness that soldiers share (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) and believe SVA student organizations are contributing to an increase in enrollment, retention, and college completion rates. Thus, in February 2012, we registered our SVA chapter as a student organization at UWM. Within months, the organization grew to more than 50 enrolled members and quickly became the largest student organization on campus.

As part of the development process, we created a plan of action within a graduate-level program planning class. First, a needs assessment survey began fostering a sense of community and togetherness by engaging student veterans in the program development process (Merriam & Daffron, 2013). The interdependence nurtured in the military remains an important cultural aspect for student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) as we received quality feedback from a significant number of respondents. The survey was emailed to 1,024 students and had a 17% response rate. As veterans are a protected class, we were limited to students using military education benefits. The challenges and needs identified from the survey became the foundation for our SVA chapter's mission statement and goals. Of the 175 respondents, 57% claimed balancing other responsibilities with school was one of their three largest issues in school, while 46% admitted that connecting with other students was one of their three biggest

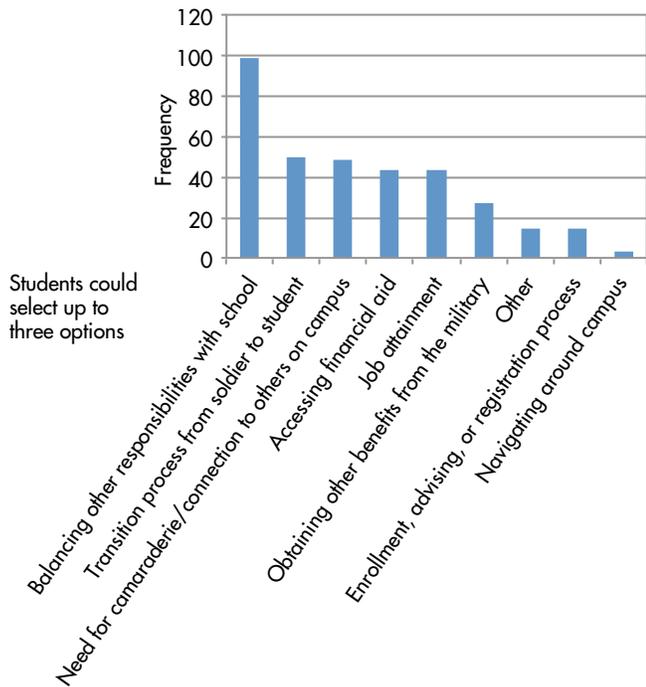


Figure 1: Biggest Challenges Identified by Student Veterans

challenges in the classroom. Figure 1 articulates the variety of challenges expressed by student veterans. These responses helped inform our entry points to building student veteran engagement.

We realized a need to change our marketing angle for the new organization and focused on the cost-benefit value of participating in our initiative to engage students. Our efforts emphasized “How can we help you?” rather than “How you can help us?” The survey included information about a portion of our students struggling and perhaps motivated respondents through problem-centered engagement (Knowles, 1980). Respondents felt shared ownership by our acknowledgement that survey results would be used to guide support for UWM student veterans in the immediate future. As Knowles (1980) argued, adults are most interested in participating in learning when there is an immediate relevance to their work or personal lives. The inclusive approach and explanation for the purpose of the survey likely enhanced response rates. Lastly, we were familiar with the use of recognition in military culture. Ribbons, awards, ceremonies, and challenge coins are some of the ways that the military recognizes a service member’s worth and contribution. Graduates of the fall 2013 class received “honor cords” and were acknowledged during the ceremony. Immediate response from both student veterans and campus administrators has been favorable. Recognition continues to be a great motivator for engaging military and student veterans in meaningful activities and services on campus.

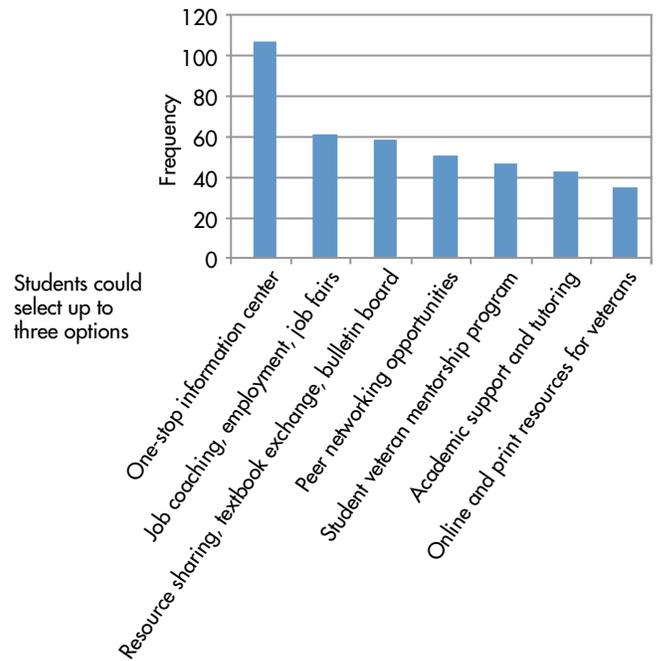


Figure 2: Most Beneficial Services and Programs From a Potential Veterans Resource Center

In the first year alone, SVA at UWM was recognized as Student Organization of the Year by Student Affairs, and student veteran leaders were recognized with certificates for their contributions toward enhancing student life and campus leadership. SVA student leaders and administrators were invited to Washington, D.C. to be recognized as one of the first institutions to sign a pledge vowing to support veteran-friendly campus initiatives. While the organization has a mix of new and returning chapter leaders, the rapid growth exemplifies student veterans’ need and desire to be actively engaged and accepted on campus.

Military and Veteran Resource Centers

Our Military and Veterans Resource Center (MAVRC) serves as another critical point of engagement for students. The purpose of MAVRC is to advocate for student veterans, identify internal and community support services, increase campus awareness of needs and issues facing student veterans, increase enrollment, and improve retention and graduation rates through support services (Abel et al., 2013). As seen in Figure 2, student veterans identified an array of needs. MAVRC serves as a connector for the needs identified as well as facilitates engagement.

Centers provide a bridge for both civilians and soldiers to better understand the dynamics of college and military service. Civilians can visit the center to have questions answered about the students they are working with or to volunteer to help

veterans address professional or classroom issues. Service members have a meeting area throughout the day to engage with their peers who understand the issues and challenges that stem from transitioning from combat to the classroom. The center offers a chance for student veterans to experience again the bond they shared with other service members when serving.

While the needs assessment we distributed did not ask why a resource center was important, it seems reasonable to expect that respondents recognized the significance of having a safe place to go and connect with other military and veteran students. The request for a resource center was validated once it opened at UWM during the summer of 2012. In the first year of tracking visits, more than 4,000 walk-throughs were documented. David Tucek, a student veteran work study mentor, believes MAVRC is important because it is the only place on campus with a consistently high population of military and student veterans who are readily available to help and support each other (D. Tucek, personal communication, June 4, 2013). Being able to identify with a peer group while attending school can influence and bolster academic success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). MAVRC further supports veterans by hosting speakers, outreach programming, study sessions, and peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities. Veterans can participate in job coaching, receive counseling services, and become connected to trained campus liaisons who can better address their unique needs.

Challenges

Progress toward creating an inclusive, welcoming campus for student veterans has not been without obstacles. Our experiences point to potential quality practices; still, we recognize each institution of higher education operates within a unique context and successful engagement initiatives for student veterans will vary. Our conceptualization of quality continues to develop as we learn from our military and student veterans.

In an interview, Wendy Lang, director of Operation College Promise, cautions about the lack of a one-size-fits-all response for the challenges student veterans face (Schnoebelen, 2013). Many student veterans who participated in the needs assessment at our institution expressed frustration about the difficulty of making connections with other students. However, their personal lives and responsibilities impede their efforts to engage in extracurricular activities on campus. The needs assessment supports the notion that veterans, throughout their post-secondary schooling, receive less peer support than their civilian counterparts (Whiteman et al., 2013). Whiteman et al., (2013) indicates that civilian students receive more emotional support, which leads to reductions in psychological distress. Anecdotally we have found that consistent peer support increases student veterans' trust and comfort level while engaging in activities on campus. Campus

support systems have the potential to reduce the gap in emotional support veterans currently face as compared to civilian students, although further research is needed to gauge impact.

We have encountered unexpected cultural challenges with roots based in military culture. Part of the transition process to civilian culture is learning to engage in language and discussion topics that are sensitive and appropriate to anyone who may enter the center. Many accepted environments in the military can be boisterous and ones in which language and storytelling are not monitored or restricted. Redirecting inappropriate language and discussion topics is an ongoing task for MAVRC staff. We want our student veterans to feel comfortable interacting with others in a familiar way while maintaining a welcoming and safe environment for all. We have found that using the military code of conduct as a guide has helped address this sensitive issue in terms that are familiar and trusted.

Conclusion

While work to become a truly veteran-friendly campus continues at UWM, steps taken have generated momentum toward meeting the needs and challenges of our student veterans. Graduation remains a common goal for both veterans and the universities serving this population. To develop the support services that student veterans require in order to achieve success, more research is needed on ways to engage the military community. Table 1 provides a

Table 1: Proposed Standard Operating Procedures for Student Veteran Engagement in Higher Education

Issue	Strategies and Recommendations
Generating support	Identify and connect student veterans, faculty, staff, and senior leaders willing to partner.
Outreach and marketing	Establish continuous presence and visibility through orientations, flyer displays, pamphlet distribution, and social media.
Identifying needs	Develop a survey with student veterans and program planner, offer incentives, and explain the purpose and importance to participants.
Military and veteran specific programming	Partner with departments, student groups, and community organizations.
Establishing a Student Veterans Organization	Identify an advisor with a vested interest in supporting veterans.
Opening a Veterans Resource Center	Identify and support a director who is an expert on veteran's issues; establish full-time center hours.

summary of recommendations for standard operating procedures focusing on fostering student veteran engagement.

Our efforts to increase the quality of student veteran engagement opportunities at UWM will be measured and assessed by monitoring retention rates and grade point averages, tracking the number of students utilizing MAVRC services as well as the number and types of MAVRC supportive programming offered, and increases in enrollment rates of student veterans. In fact, institutions that purposefully plan for and address the challenges student veterans face attract larger numbers of veterans (Abel et al., 2013). While some colleges have taken great strides to be more veteran-friendly, research and increased awareness are necessary before campus administrators can feel confident about their ability to serve this population.

Military and student veterans bring valuable experiences to the classroom and the campus as a result of their experiences in foreign countries and cultural immersion (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsey, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010). The opportunity to learn from this population enhances the quality of the campus culture and diversity that universities strive to achieve; therefore, the quality engagement of student veterans may impact the quality engagement in higher education for other student populations. With greater understanding and quality practices, universities will be able to better attract and retain student veterans, and, in turn, increase revenue dollars from military education benefits, a point that speaks to the bottom line when working with administration pressured to meet very real budget deficits.

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Michael Kirchner

Michael J. Kirchner, B.S. is director of the Military and Veterans Resource Center (MAVRC) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). Previously, Kirchner served six years in the Army National Guard, including one year in Baghdad, Iraq. He is co-founder of the Student Veterans of America: UW-Milwaukee chapter and has a master's degree in Administrative Leadership. Kirchner is currently a doctoral student in the Urban Education Program at UWM with interests in leadership and leader development. Contact him via email at kirchne3@uwm.edu.



Lia Coryell

Lia Coryell, B.S. is a United States Army veteran and co-founder of the Student Veterans of America (SVA): UW-Milwaukee chapter. Prior to her involvement in SVA, Coryell taught for more than 20 years as a middle school teacher. Her

work includes developing a program to assist veterans transitioning out of service and mentoring students struggling with the post-secondary education experience. Coryell has bachelor's degrees in both Recreation and Secondary Education, as well as graduate work in Library Science Research and Adult Education. She is an active member of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and is a top bow-shooter with the Paralympic Military Sports Program. She can be reached at lcoryell@uwm.edu.

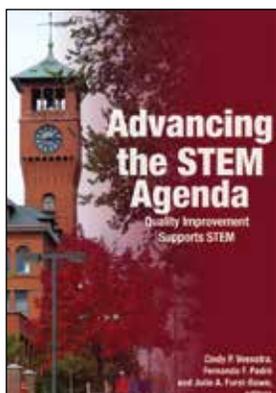


Susan M. Yelich Biniiecki

Susan M. Yelich Biniiecki, Ph.D. currently serves as assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University (KSU). Yelich Biniiecki earned her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Urban Education with concentration on adult and continuing education. She has over 20 years experience as an adult educator, program planner, and administrator with organizations such as the Institute of World Affairs, the U.S. Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Military of the Republic of Poland. As part of her current responsibilities, Yelich Biniiecki teaches adult education courses for military officers and spouses enrolled in the KSU adult and continuing education master's program at Fort Leavenworth. She can be reached at: susanyb@k-state.edu.

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