



THE HSC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The HSC Foundation

Life Beyond War: Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Student Veterans

Executive Summary
October 2013

Authors

Kaye Whitley, EdD

The George Washington University

Paul F. Tschudi, EdS

The George Washington University

Courtney T. Gieber, MPS

The George Washington University

The HSC Foundation

2013 H Street NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20006

Tel: 202-454-1220

www.hscfoundation.org

Life Beyond War: Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Student Veterans

The HSC Foundation and The National Veterans Center partnered with The Graduate School of Education and Human Development's Department of Counseling and Human Development at The George Washington University on a project to identify ways to best support post-9/11 veterans with injuries and disabilities enrolled in higher education programs. Two symposia were conducted between October 2012 and March 2013 with participants representing university and college administrators, student veterans, and veteran advocates. An overarching topic that emerged was the mental health needs of student veterans and the barriers to accessing appropriate services.

The participants identified 12 recommendations for supporting the mental health needs of student veterans, and these findings and recommendations will also serve as the foundation for the development of a webinar training targeted to colleges and universities interested in improving their services for veterans and becoming a model "veteran friendly" campus.

While active military and veteran populations comprise approximately 4 percent of the entire undergraduate population in the United States, veterans account for about 75 percent of that 4 percent and are enrolling in higher education at record rates (O'Herrin, 2011; Radford, 2009). Given the demographic and experiential differences that veterans bring to college campuses, it is not surprising that they need different or additional accommodations. Many of the returning veterans have a physical, emotional, or cognitive disability (Ely, 2008; O'Herrin, 2011). Campuses need to better understand the issues faced in order for veterans to be successful in higher education (American Council on Education, 2008).

The transition from military culture to campus life can be a difficult one for many veterans and those with combat experience may be more at risk as they navigate what can be complicated challenges. These challenges include emotional disabilities, physical disabilities, isolation/interaction with other students, family issues, complications in accessing money for tuition from the GI Bill, and not understanding academic planning and

"The transition from military culture to campus life can be a difficult one for many veterans and those with combat experience may be more at risk as they navigate difficult challenges."

structure. Additionally, the military culture leads to barriers such as not recognizing or accepting the need for help, lack of awareness of available resources, reluctance to take up scarce resources, equating help with failure, the stigma associated with seeking help, and not having counselors who are veterans themselves, or are not trained in working with veterans.

Recommendations

Symposia participants fully recognized that not all colleges and universities serve the same number of veterans and that the individual characteristics of student veterans can differ. Additionally, the resources available to serve student veterans vary widely among institutions. But despite these challenges, experts at the two symposia proposed that colleges and universities can improve the experiences of veterans on their campuses by building on or coordinating existing student services to provide the following support.

1. Develop a Plan to De-stigmatize Support Services.

Veterans must be made aware of available services and be convinced to access them. Veteran service centers and counseling centers need to better understand the culture of veterans and make accessing mental health services more comfortable. Simple steps should be taken to change the labels used in support services, such as avoiding large signs that advertise mental health services and using words with less stigma associated with them, such as “counselor” instead of “therapist.”

2. Provide a Welcoming Environment and “Warm Hand-offs” to Resources.

Offices on campus that serve student veterans should designate a contact person who is well versed in military culture and the specific needs and concerns of the student veteran population. This is especially important for the registrar’s office, student accounts, academic advising, career services, and the counseling center.

3. Hire Learning Specialists.

Many veterans enter college without having studied in years, which can produce a stressful environment. Consequently, they may need access to specialists who can teach them the necessary skills to ensure learning and academic success, such as how to organize work, study for a test, and write a research paper.

“Offices on the campus that serve student veterans should designate a contact person who is well versed in military culture and the specific needs and concerns of the student veteran population.”

4. Provide Adequate Accommodations for Veterans with PTSD. Student veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder symptoms may need specialized accommodations, such as a private room where they can take a test.

5. Hire Experienced and Trained Counselors. Colleges and universities should hire more counselors who are veterans themselves, or counselors who either have training on the unique issues that veterans face or substantial experience working with veterans.

6. Provide Mentors. Schools should consider implementing a formalized peer mentoring system for student veterans. Among other benefits, these mentors can help to diffuse the stigma associated with accessing mental health services.

7. Establish Support Groups. These groups are an efficient way to help multiple student veterans simultaneously, and can also serve as a good entry point for those who might need additional help. The goal is to provide social connections, helping student veterans understand that they are not alone and that others are dealing with the same kinds of issues. Several organizations help schools and universities in setting up and maintaining support groups, including Student Veterans of America (which promotes a peer-to-peer support model) and Vets for Vets.

8. Invest in Hiring and/or Training Support Group Leaders. The success of a support group also depends on having a skilled facilitator who knows how to make others feel welcome and comfortable.

9. Provide a Drop-in Center. Schools should consider having a drop-in center with trained peer counselors. The center can be an unthreatening way for a reluctant veteran to take the first step toward accessing help. This type of informal, peer-to-peer social network may be the best entry point for many veterans to help them recognize that they are not alone and witness firsthand the benefits of being understood by others.

10. Have Multiple Entry Points to Group Resources. Schools need multiple entry points for veterans, including both informal groups and formal groups, because different individuals will feel comfortable in different venues.

“A central information resource can help coordinate the various veteran activities and events and bring together different parts of the school to work collaboratively.”

11. Establish a Central Information Resource. While multiple entry points are needed, there is a need for a central resource to collect information on all veteran-related activities on campus. This central resource can help coordinate and support the various activities and events, thus preventing them from being diluted. It can also help to identify duplicative efforts and bring different parts of the school together to work collaboratively. The veteran service center on most campuses would be a logical place to centralize services.

12. Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Student Veteran Orientation. The orientation could be a full course or an additional session that is tailored specifically for veterans during the regular student orientation. Career support services and student veteran support services, such as those provided by Student Veterans of America chapters and other student veteran organizations, should be fully integrated into orientation for veterans. A student veteran handbook with a list of resources and services is recommended.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in August of 2009, combined with the troop drawdown, contributes to record numbers of veterans entering higher education. Many of these veterans will have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities, and many campuses are ill equipped to accommodate them. In order for veterans to be successful on campuses across the nation, institutions must provide appropriate support and resources.

References

- American Council on Education. (2008). Serving those who serve: Higher education and America's veterans. *Issue Brief: American Council on Education, November*, 1-12.
- Ely, M. (2008). Veterans in college: What advisors should expect. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal, July*.
- O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing Veteran Success in Higher Education. *Peer Review, 13(1)*, 15-18.
- Radford, A. (2009). Military service members and veterans in higher education. *Informed Practice: American Council on Education, July*, 1-44.

Contributors

Matthew Feger, Student Veterans of America

Jessie MacKinnon, The HSC Foundation

Son P. McBride, The HSC Foundation

Editor

Eva R. Fowler, The HSC Foundation

Media Contact

efowler@cscn.org, 202-480-2341



THE HSC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The HSC Foundation

The HSC Foundation is dedicated to improving access to services for individuals who face social and health care barriers due to disability, chronic illness, or other circumstances that present unique needs. The HSC Health Care System is a multi-faceted organization that weaves together a care coordination plan (Health Services for Children with Special Needs, Inc.), pediatric specialty hospital (The HSC Pediatric Center), and home health agency (HSC Home Care, LLC) with a parent organization, The HSC Foundation. Together, the System offers a comprehensive approach to caring, serving, and empowering individuals with disabilities.

www.hscfoundation.org

 /TheHSCFoundation

© The HSC Foundation
