

Advising Student Veterans: The Role of Advisors in Fostering Success

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Student veterans have been an integral part of college campuses since the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill. Higher education saw a resurgence of student veterans following the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, or the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, the most significant investment in veterans' education since the original G.I. Bill (McCready, 2010). Student veterans have always been non-traditional students due to their age and experiences, as well as being more likely to be married, have children, and be employed (Olsen et al., 2014). Student veterans face unique challenges compared to their traditional counterparts (Kirchner, 2015), but they also bring myriad strengths to the college campus. The need for

veteran-specific advising is considerable given the number of student veterans who have entered higher education in the past decade (Miller, 2015). Student veterans have different needs regarding their academic advising. They may require specially designed services related to several critical areas including pre-enrollment advising, financial aid, academic support, and graduate and professional school (Molina & Ang, 2017). This article aims to provide advisors with the following: (1) an overview of student veterans and their transition to higher education; (2) a theory to guide practice in advising; and (3) practical implications and best practices for advising student veterans.

Student Veteran Transition Experiences in Higher Education

The profile of student veterans has not changed dramatically since the first veterans entered higher education following World War II. Student veterans account for only 3–4% of college students in the United States (Kelley et al., 2013) but are a very diverse student population. Student veterans are non-traditional based on their age alone, as most veterans enrolled in higher education are between the ages of 24 and 40 (The Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2020), with only 15% of student veterans being traditionally aged 18 to 23 years old (PNPI, 2020). Student veterans are more likely to be married, parents, and first-generation college students (PNPI, 2020). They also have diverse experiences from their time in the military and real-world work experience. Student Veterans of America (2017) calls the current generation of student veterans "a valuable asset to higher education," with today's student veterans pursuing rigorous degrees in business, STEM, and health professions. Student veterans, overall, have a 72% success rate in college (Student Veterans of America, 2014). Since 2009, student veterans have earned over 450,000 post-secondary degrees or certificates using the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Student Veterans of America, 2017).

In addition to their academic success, student veterans bring numerous strengths to the campus and classroom. They possess maturity, discipline, work ethic, and leadership skills learned in the military. They are also focused on achievement and success and are mission oriented. Furthermore, with the U.S. military being such a diverse organization (Barroso, 2019), student veterans are comfortable with the rich diversity on a college campus. Despite the inherent values gained through military service, student veterans also face challenges associated with the military-to-academic transition (Dillard & Yu, 2016).

Veterans may face some of the same barriers to higher education as their traditional peers, such as the need for remediation, financial issues, and the challenges of balancing academics with other aspects of life (Jenner, 2017). However, student veterans also face unique barriers, including mental health issues, lack of information about veteran education benefits (such as the G.I. Bill), and the additional challenge

of transitioning from military to civilian life (Jenner, 2017). Ryan et al. (2011) share that colleges and universities must be properly prepared to assist student veterans as they transition into and matriculate through higher education. Academic advisors play a critical role in that they will likely have increased contact with student veterans compared to other institutional representatives. Schlossberg's transition theory has been applied numerous times to the student veteran transition and can help advisors connect student veterans within the framework of the 4 Ss of the model. Additionally, applying the Schlossberg model to student veterans highlights the unique features of the student veteran transition, along with aspects of general life transitions (Ryan et al., 2011).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg and her collaborators provided a framework for understanding adults in transition that focused on the significant transitional issues individuals face (DiRamio et al., 2008). Schlossberg's model has been used numerous times to explain the transition veterans make as they exit military service and enter civilian life. This model also applies to student veterans as they separate from the military and enter higher education, as this is a significant life transition where the military provided a highly structured environment compared to higher education with its lack of clear rules and chains of command (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Ackerman, DiRamio, and Garza Mitchell (2009) found that starting college was the most challenging transition experience out of the military for student veterans. Personnel, policies, resources, and programs are needed for this specific student population.

According to the transition framework developed by Schlossberg and her colleagues, multiple forces influence an individual's ability to manage transition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). A transition can be defined as any event or nonevent that results in change, impacting relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

The first piece of the framework includes understanding where students are in their transitions—are they *moving in*, *moving through*, or *moving out* of the transition (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). It is also helpful to understand the nature or type of the transition when working with students. Transitions can be described as *anticipated*, *unanticipated*, or *nonevents*. The 4 S system for coping with transitions is designed to help understand the process of transition (Killam & Degges-White, 2017; Schlossberg, 2011) and consists of four domains:

1. Situation: the situation at the time of the transition
2. Support: the people and assets that strengthen and encourage the student
3. Self: the student's identity, their level of optimism, and dealing with ambiguity
4. Strategies: ways and functions of coping

By employing the Schlossberg model in advising, students can achieve personal and academic successes by having a greater sense of control about making academic transitions; developing motivation, identity, and academic skills; creating support networks; and implementing effective coping strategies (Ryan et al., 2011).

Veteran-Specific Advising Principles

Academic and career advising are key to helping student veterans overcome barriers they may face in their transition from military to civilian/student life. Advising and a positive relationship with an advisor may even lend support to students who are struggling with barriers such as academic difficulties and uncertainty about education plans or career paths. Colleges and universities can support the success of

student veterans by having robust advising services tailored to their specific needs and being responsive to the concerns of this student population (Sherman & Cahill, 2015). This could be a designated advisor in each department who is knowledgeable about the unique needs of student veterans and serves as the liaison to the community.

In addition to providing more general support practices, higher education institutions must also provide support in several critical areas for student veterans: pre-enrollment advising, financial aid, academic support, and post-baccalaureate degree advising (Molina & Ang, 2017). An exclusive veteran seminar course is one way to support student veterans holistically in these critical areas. During the semester, pre-enrollment advising is offered by an academic advisor; financial aid advisors discuss veteran education benefits and the FAFSA; academic coaches offer support on topics such as time management; and graduate school admissions advisors provide perspective on the application process. The unique strengths and challenges of student veterans can be addressed through a network of advising in which students, advisors, administrators, and faculty work collaboratively to support the student through their transition to, through, and beyond higher education. Advisors cannot be expected to develop expertise in every area a student veteran may face a barrier; however, forging relationships with other institutional departments will positively position the advisor to support student veterans (Sherman & Cahill, 2015).

Conclusion

Advisors play a key role in the success of student veterans as they transition to higher education. The support provided to student veterans during their time at the institution is critical to their academic and personal success. Advisors must understand student veterans and their transitions as they separate from military service, re-enter civilian life, and become college students. It is also imperative that advisors comprehend the strengths of student veterans and the barriers they may face in higher education. A familiarity with Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a framework for supporting student veterans in their transition to, through, and beyond the higher education institution. As student veterans continue to seek out higher education opportunities, now is the time for advisors to arm themselves with the knowledge to support this student population for success.

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