

SHARED LESSONS FROM SERVING MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS

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Military and military veteran students enter higher education with a host of challenges related to their military service. As universities and colleges strive to address the needs of military and military student veterans, administrative and educational challenges must be addressed proactively to accommodate the specific needs of student veterans. Student services for military and military veteran students includes providing a veteran advisor, a veteran liaison, military-friendly policies, services, and resources. The authors discuss military-friendly student services supported and implemented through the development of a veteran-specific education track.

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In the wake of recent conflicts around the globe, military-connected students (MCS), which includes active duty, reservists, national guard, and veterans, are boldly marching into our higher education classrooms and e-learning sites in increasing numbers. Assistance for their attendance has been provided with the help of six active veterans education programs available through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Benefits Administration (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 2018). Two crucial legislative bills dramatically increased their post service higher education opportunities for entry. In 2009, the Post-9/11 Government Issue (G.I.) Bill became effective for veterans who served during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars (2001-2014+) (Worley, 2015; VA, 2018). Additional education funding was provided in 2017 when the Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act was passed, more commonly referred to as the Forever G.I. Bill (VA, 2018). The Forever G.I. Bill further extended the length of time to use educational benefits for the MCS, their dependents, previously deployed Reservists/National Guard, as well as incorporated more accessible eligible monthly housing allowances (VA, 2018b). According to the Veterans Benefits Administration, in 2018, 893,725 beneficiaries received education benefits in excess of \$11 billion in payments (VA, 2018).

To prepare for this non-traditional student influx, institutions of higher education need to examine their student service support policies. The authors share how faculty and staff at one Silver Military Friendly[^] designated university (Military Friendly, 2019) located in the nation's second highest veteran populated state (TX) (VA, 2019), proactively anticipated and reactively accommodated some of the educational and administrative challenges to successfully enroll and graduate these unique, skilled undergraduate students. For our discussion, both understanding of military culture and someone with firsthand knowledge of the

military will be used interchangeably.

Military Personnel

No MCSs are alike, regardless of service branch (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard), a Reservist (all branches) or National Guard (Army or Air). They all complete "Basic," a grueling 8-12 weeks of orientation to this distinctive military culture (VeteranAid.org, 2016). During this time military values are demonstrated, instilled, and expected. This culture requires individuals to follow commands without question and demands discipline in body, mind, and spirit (Dyar, 2015). Teamwork, respect for authority, and determination to complete the mission are emphasized, all particular qualities that can enhance success in higher education. Upon reintegration to the civilian sector both gender groups are represented when MCS apply to the university. Of interest, Post-9/11 women veterans, who comprise around 12-14% of the active duty force, are achieving higher levels of education than their male counterparts (VA, 2019). Beginning in 2013 when women were no longer restricted from serving in combat zones (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017), deployed women often shared in the same combat zone experiences, were accountable for the same responsibilities, endured the same injuries, and were often in command positions, as their male counterparts.

Following their initial entry training, military service members all begin individualized journeys regarding their service branch advanced education, assignments, and experiences. If they are on active duty they are assigned a specific military base whereas the Reservist/National Guard personnel return home and participate in military service training one weekend per month and at least two weeks of active duty time per year.

Education is an integral part of the military. When personnel are not on a directed mission (i.e. wars/conflicts, humanitarian efforts, or disaster relief), they are in a constant mode of education, whether on-the-job training, progressive leadership classes,

or sometimes, depending on their military occupation expectations, attending a full time college/university program fulfilling part of their service responsibilities. In addition, opportunities to participate in college/university courses are also available on any down time, so many (61%) complete their general educational requirements, or even attain degrees, usually as online and part-time students, during their military service (American Council on Education (ACE), 2014). The Military Tuition Assistance (TA) program is available to active duty, national guard and reservists to assist with tuition expenses for MCS who seek to further their educational goals. (Military One Source,

2018).

Differences as College Attendees

When compared to traditional undergraduate students, there are differences within MCS such as they possess unique life experiences, as well as distinctive amounts of diversity, family responsibilities, and age (Allen, Armstrong, Saladiner, Hamilton, & Conard, 2014; Dyar, 2015; D'Aoust, Ros-siter, & Clochesy, 2016; VA, 2018c). They are also frequently a first-generation college attendee (62%), with little or no familial support in understanding and navigating a complex educational system (Kees, Risk, Meadowbrooke, Spinner, & Valenstein, 2017; VA Campus Toolkit, 2014). Many are

Table 1

Educational Concerns for M/MVS

- a) Credit for their Joint Services Transcript where military courses and leadership training were acknowledged by the university,
- b) Available innovative educational models regarding the amount of time in which a certificate and/or a college degree could be completed,
- c) Consideration of assessment/recognition for their military experience (Sikes et al., 2018),
- d) Accommodation of a curriculum/programs for full and/or part-time employed students with families, and/or the need to leave abruptly for a deployment.
- e) Well defined and accessible student support services for a smooth transition involving their specific eligibility and/or awards of veteran education and living allowance benefits, and
- f) Ongoing involvement of their university's Veterans' Advisor/Liaison/Coordinators throughout recruitment, enrollment, and educational journey.

married (44%) or divorced (14-20%) and have dependents (52%), so regardless of VA benefits, they are often challenged financially to support their families, applying for financial aid (89%) and working full-time (42%) while attending school (ACE, 2014; VA, 2019). Recent statistics indicate the student veteran applies for and receives an average of \$10,000 in financial aid (ACE, 2014). While serving on active duty, those in the military may have obligations which limit access to some university programs due to the service branch arrangements and orders, often related to their duty requirements. Whereas Reservists and National Guard personnel have more flexibility and options/choices within the civilian sector to use their educational benefits.

Most with military experience enter the university environment with differing cultural values when compared to their traditional college counterparts. They also possess a great deal of anticipation about the variable academia expectations in relationship to their traditional military structured value system (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Transitioning from a structured environment to a more flexible, less regimented one can be difficult for the student veteran, thus "the need to provide retention and graduation-impacting support services is critical" (Kirchner, p.117). The collaborative scrutiny of policies and practices of the university's support services, programs, and learning environment can be assistive for success of the MCS (Allen et al., 2014). This includes an awareness and rapport of the university's key faculty and staff when planning, implementing, and evaluating the milieu for this non-traditional college student (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Sikes et al., 2018). In addition, when these MCS have some innovative ideas, supporting and/or nurturing non-traditional perspectives can be helpful also.

These major differences and concerns for the MCS were summarized and listed as a guide (Table 1) when a new Bachelor of Science in Nursing pathway was designed (Allen et al., 2014).

The following academic program was created to meet the needs and concerns of this non-traditional military oriented student and is provided as an example here to demonstrate the collaborative integration nature of the student services department and a new state and university approved nursing program. Shared lessons of success for the MCS are provided, along with a brief description of the program.

Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing

While every student would like credit for their life experiences, strict adherence to state, federal, and accreditation regulations are important as academic credit cannot be awarded without appropriate justification and compliance. One of the major schools in our university worked to create a unique curriculum design to respond to this concern as well as to the nation's challenge to engage more MCS into the health sciences. The school of nursing was awarded funding* for a Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) program+ that featured and incorporated many of the major perspectives previously listed as MCS university concerns. In this specific veterans' curriculum the MCS are provided an opportunity to demonstrate competencies within specific nursing courses based on their prior military health related education, training, and experiences. These are carefully designed Texas State Board of Nursing approved assessment experiences and documented evaluations of the necessary competencies for experiential credits to be awarded for the VBSN program.

Student Services

According to Ciobanu (2013), the broad description of student services includes divisions and departments which provide supportive services in higher education (p. 170). The overall mission of a student services department within the university is to support an educational environment that cultivates professional and personal growth

through advisement, coordination of activities, dissemination of information and institutional compliance. Student services should be committed to provide institutional oversight in the equity of services across all campuses and to assist in the creation of an environment that fosters and encourages professional and personal growth through student leadership. Specific student services include contracts with community/university/department support for counseling, medical concerns, and disability services. It also provides opportunities for leadership and veteran participation to encourage teamwork with fellow students.

Shared Lessons

Working collaboratively with many support departments, especially the university's student services was essential to helping to make this happen successfully for the MCS. The following descriptions include shared lessons the student services department supported and implemented to provide MCS services to promote military-friendly institutional policies and practices.

Student Services Veteran Advisor

Especially during the first six months of grant funding when the VBSN program was launched, facilitating the MCS for program entry meant timely, effective, and efficient action for VA benefits as grant timing/funding expectations were being continuously reviewed. In addition, when the VBSN assessment/competencies were completed, MCS expected provisions to have been worked out for a smooth process that translated quickly to documented credit hours on their transcripts.

Historically, a student services veteran advisor provided general information to any student when needed and informed any specific MCS on their veteran educational benefits. Thus, while our school was a state approved agency to process and deliver veteran education benefits from the VA, the student services veterans advisor served in the School Certifying Official role as a sec-

ondary responsibility when validating MCS enrollment for tuition, fees, enrollment, and term dates (VA, n.d.). What also became apparent was that student support for the MCS was not just paperwork and certifying official veterans education benefits, but also understanding the MCS emotional concerns/impact that were tied to these benefits.

As more MCS began presenting to the school with their unique needs, it fast became apparent that Veterans Administration education benefits were becoming increasingly complex, requiring an extensive understanding of VA policies and procedures. Most veterans were entitled to receive some form of military education benefits, however, the process to apply and receive them could become cumbersome, challenging, and varied in distribution. Table 2 provides a listing of resources regarding MCS and university attendance benefits.

Our solution was a full-time wholly committed Student Services Veteran Advisor (SSVA) who also was a military veteran to serve as the student veteran advisor and the School Certifying Official. The SSVA now provides dedicated support for MCS access to veterans' education benefits for almost 150 students in the university. The SSVA's knowledge of the military culture has also certainly helped develop a more viable relationship with the students and an increased ability for workable solutions when addressing their needs and issues. If a specific SSVA with prior military service experience is not available, insisting on someone with in-depth knowledge of military culture is an acceptable substitute.

Student services quickly became aware that student veterans required not only equitable support services as provided to the general enrollment but specific services to connect the student veteran to the university culture. The SSVA began developing programs and activities to connect student veterans to the university but more importantly to the whole community. The programs and activities included military/student veteran organizations and participation in Refuge

Services, Team Red, White, & Blue, Inter-professional Military Healthcare Group, and the VetStar/Veterans Resource Coordination Group (VRCG). Student services also began recruiting representation for student senators, university committee positions, and student roundtable discussions as a two-fold purpose: 1) getting the student veteran involved in university discussions affecting students and 2) providing a MCS perspective on student matters.

Finally, providing a welcoming environment for our MCS became a major initiative

of student services. The SSVA advocated for the establishment of a standalone Veterans Resource Center (VRC) located separately from the established student services area to provide comfort and confidentiality (Naphan & Elliott, 2015; ACE, 2018). The VRC consists of two rooms specifically for student use; one for student group meetings or discussions and the other for technology use including accessing and completing veterans' education benefit forms. The office of the SSVA is also located in this area for easier MCS' accessibility. Importantly, it's been

Table 2

Resources for M/MVS and university benefits

Veterans Education Resources	Description	Website
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Education and Training: School Resources	Resources for service members and school personnel related to veterans' education benefits.	https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/school_resources.asp
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Education and Training: School Training & Information Resources	Provides information specifically for schools certifying veterans' education benefits including links to School Official's Handbook, Online school official training, and General school responsibility factsheet.	https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/school_training_resources.asp
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Education and Training: Principles of Excellence	Outlines educational institutions commitment to providing Principles of Excellence criteria, including a link to the GI Bill® Comparison Tool.	https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/principles_of_excellence.asp
U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard	Provides links to compare schools by programs/degrees, location, size, name and links to veteran-specific GI Bill Benefits.	https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/
Best Practices in Veterans Education and Transition to Civilian Life	Resources and activities to support veterans' education through the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs	https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=1993
American Council on Education	Provides military guide, academic research, toolkit for developing Veteran Friendly institutions, transcripts for military personnel link, and resources and recommendations for translating military training into college credits	https://www.ace.edu/higher-education/Pages/Military-Students-and-Veterans.aspx
Joint Services Transcript (JST)	Official site to register and request Joint Services Transcripts for Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps and Navy	https://jst.doded.mil/official.html
State Veterans Affairs Offices	Provides links to state and territory locations for Department of Veterans Affairs office	https://www.va.gov/statedva.htm
State Veterans Commission	Sites specific to state- provides links to veterans' resources in each state. Example provided- Texas Veterans Commission	https://www.tvc.texas.gov/
Student Veterans of America	Student veterans' national organization for members of all branches of the military.	http://studentveterans.org/

noted, the central VRC area serves as an effective communal meeting place where MCS gather and share experiences while enjoying complimentary snacks and coffee. With the significant success of the VRC, a future proposal includes seeking more funding to accommodate more integrated social activities, as well as an opportunity to develop some gender-specific veteran networking initiatives (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015).

University Faculty/Staff Military Awareness

Today, most faculty, staff, and even the traditional college/university students are often not aware of the nuances of military culture and MCS experiences (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Frequently, they assume that reintegrating service members are the same person that initially had been deployed. For the MCS there are many distinctive stressors including role exit from the military while assuming new roles within the civilian sector (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). While the demographics of the university attendees are changing, the majority of attendees are still traditional young college students (ages 18-24) and the curriculum/program activities are often structured around that age group (Institute of Education Services, 2019). The average MCS is 25 years old at the start of their college education (ACE, 2014). MCS often feel misunderstood by faculty and younger peers displaying a limited understanding of military culture and veteran experiences (Morris, Albanesi, & Cassidy, 2019). For a small portion of MCS, additional stressors may include multiple and/or quick deployments, traumatic events, and chronic daily stressors related to physical injuries, mental health concerns, or personal relationship issues with spouses, children, or peers (Elliott, 2015; Niv & Bennett, 2017; Morris et al., 2019). Interventions that have been identified to reduce stressors listed are indicative of the various supports needed to assist MCS in their transition to higher education including faculty education, granting credit for military courses as appropriate,

and creating spaces for military connections (Naphan & Elliott, 2015).

Green Zone Training

The VBSN faculty and staff voiced concern about understanding the non-traditional MCS and wanted (and needed) more structured knowledge of the military culture (D'Aoust et al., 2016; Sikes et al, 2018). In order to learn about the specific needs' student veterans encounter, the elementary start was learning from our faculty experts who were retired veterans. They shared their experiences with the faculty while in school and what needs they wished they would have received.

Our second approach was to investigate a military educational program designed for faculty and staff that advocated for veteran attendance called Green Zone Training (GZT).# It was created for individual tailoring to a specific university and/or community college student population. Besides introducing military culture, the GZT encompassed an overview of the veteran and military student population on campus and potential distinctive stressors including negotiation of military education benefits, transference of military and prior education credits, and unique challenges meeting academic requirements (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Ahern, Foster, & Head, 2015).

Our initial GZT was patterned after our associated university (Texas Tech University) program and it was only offered to our nursing faculty directly teaching in the VBSN program to increase an understanding of their MCS. Six online self-paced learning modules were offered prior to this VBSN program implementation and included a military overview, cultural competence, mental health issues, academic advising, disability services, and military and veterans' benefits. With our GZT training, the faculty became keenly aware that providing information and culture sensitivity about military concerns would be a major initial contributing factor to facilitating and increasing instructional success for the MCS.

Upon completion of the six modules, VBSN faculty were awarded a GZT certificate, encouraged to insert a GZT graphic badge to their university email signature block, and provided a GZT sticker to display in their office (Figure 1).

GZT is now offered to all interested staff, students, and faculty throughout the school of nursing and the university.

Military-Connected Student (MCS) Liaison

Accessing and understanding the inherent nuances of the MCS as they progress within specific educational programs in higher education is also extremely challenging both for the MCS and the faculty, especially the first generation college student. Providing an individual point of contact within the educational program who understands military culture, as well as the

unique requirements of particular education programs is also essential for student success and should not be underestimated. The benefits for MCS to speak directly with someone with firsthand knowledge about how the military works instills a sense of camaraderie while the MCS Liaison can also be realistic about the expectations for the educational demands, discussing the “how” and “why” of the academic requirements. This helps provide MCS identity and initiates an environment of trust and understanding while helping MCS crosswalk the military and/or education terminology to successfully meet the program requirements. Having a single point of contact, the MCS feels a sense of belonging and awareness when a former service member (MCS Liaison) contacts them (American Council on Education, 2018). The concept of employing a MCS Liaison has become a major recommendation

Shared Lessons from Serving Military and Military Veteran Students

Figure 1: Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) students are identified with a unique VBSN patch on their uniform.



by the American Council on Education when working with student veterans (ACE, 2018). For the faculty, the MCS Liaison helped interpret some gender responses. Regarding MCS men for example, nursing faculty found that leaving a male-dominated culture in the military made it difficult when transitioning into a female-dominated culture such as nursing (Dyar, 2015). Whereas faculty found that women MCS, either struggling with PTSD, family reintegration, feeling unrecognized for their valuable roles in combat zones, and/or clinging to masculine values after being in a male dominated military environment also encountered transition issues (Baechtold & Sawal, 2009; Sadler, Mengeling, Fraley & Martin, 2017).

Initially the MCS Liaison was specifically hired as part of the VBSN grant objectives to help guide MCSs from initial contact through graduation within one program in the school of nursing. This position has certainly proved exceptionally successful, while also increasing the amount of our MCS in our program from seven students in 2016 to 29 students in 2019. It became readily apparent that the diligent one-on-one counseling with prospective students, guidance during the admission process, transcript submission, coordination with the Student Services Veteran Advisor, and a relational sense of trust and understanding were extremely important throughout the MCS entire educational journey. Four years later this MCS Veteran Liaison role has now expanded for veterans within all the educational programs in the nursing department.

On-going Military Enculturation

The authors strongly believe instilling military cultural awareness related to MCS unique challenges should not be a one-time event. Developing and attending GZT and obtaining a certificate at the onset of launching a veteran student program can be an excellent beginning, however additional training and ongoing educational opportunities are recommended. As faculty and staff increase their contact with a larger popula-

tion of MCS, ongoing appraisal and discussions should occur (Dyar, 2015). Faculty and staff may change their attitudes regarding veteran and military students based upon personal experiences and historical contact. Re-assessing cultural sensitivity for all unique student populations is recommended to increase further awareness and acceptance.

An outstanding set of free online learning modules for healthcare professionals to stimulate interesting discussions about military culture have been developed by the Veterans Affairs (VA) Mental Health Services and Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP) (2016). Four modules are available to include self-assessment and introduction to military ethos, military organization and roles, stressors and resources, and treatment, resources and tools. Upon completion of each module a certificate is provided with continuing education contact hours (CDP, 2016). PsychArmor® Institute is another excellent resource available to provide education and support for those seeking to gain insights and understanding of MCS through multiple free training lessons ranging from basic introductions to military culture to in-depth discussions of veterans' needs (PsychArmor® Institute, 2019).

Joint Nursing and Student Services Collaboration (JNSSC)

The initial development of one veteran-specific program (nursing) increased awareness and recognition of MCS and their unique needs, leading to multiple positive military-friendly changes (student services). The success of MCS in higher education continues to be supported through multiple efforts and collaboration between educational leaders throughout the university; interdepartmental collaboration is also essential. The changes in attitudes and ultimate policies and procedures were a direct result of the vital leadership support of our chancellor, university presidents, and school deans.

Other efforts included:

- Establishment of a Veterans' Advisory Board inviting active participation by several veteran leaders from the community, region and state.
- Increased publicity and outreach efforts to access veterans when the JNS-SC combined efforts of actively engaged faculty and staff who were military veterans and supporters, jointly attending and recruiting at education fairs hosted by military installations.
- Recognition of veterans and family members on holidays such as Veterans Day through celebrations and invitations to include community veterans' organizations participation.
- Dissemination of a monthly veterans' newsletters highlighting student, faculty, and community engagements, accomplishments, and activities of both JNCCS departments.
- Development of university policies related to military service obligations for the Reserve/National Guard MCS. Two specific policies relate to admissions requirements and military deployment while enrolled in school.
- Accommodation of schedules related to military service responsibilities such as deployment and special training demands. Faculty are encouraged to allow completion of assignments on alternative schedules for individual MCS who are required to serve on weekend drills.
- Incorporation of military cultural awareness in the curriculum. After completing GZT, one faculty member added military culture awareness training in a community health course to emphasize military specific approaches for care.

Summary

MCS do not all have the same military experiences and their needs vary widely. This publication shares a number of unique challenges the MCS often encounter and accommodations that might be needed to be

successful when returning to school. Hiring a Student Services Veteran Advisor and MCS Liaison who are veterans, became an important and critical component for the veteran students' success. They are uniquely qualified to guide veteran students, possessing shared military cultural experiences and values. Collaborative student service efforts and other departmental teams can provide important personnel and supported institutional representation for many activities.

For additional information about Green Zone Training see Aurora Foundation: <http://aurora4vets.org/>

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+For further information about this <https://www.ttuhscc.edu/nursing/undergrad/veteran-to-bsn/default.aspx>

^For additional information about Military Friendly® Schools designations see <http://www.militaryfriendly.com/MFS-Guide/>

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