

Breaking Barriers to Success: Aligning Program Offerings to Better Serve Student Veterans

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Abstract

This research analyzes the alignment of today's practices with current student needs in higher education. Veterans face unique challenges when transitioning back into civilian culture. When that transition combines with a shift to life on a college campus, these challenges are further exacerbated. Tinto's Model of Student Integration allows the research to account for persistence and withdrawal factors among student veterans and the completion of their education. Based on published recommendations, a "report card" was created to evaluate each institution's current programming, the information gathered from institutional websites, and administrator interviews. Administrators from six New England institutions who work directly with student veterans took part in either an interview or an online survey regarding the expertise of their institution and the needs of the students. Interviews were also conducted with eight current student veterans regarding their personal experiences within higher education. The result of the study is a set of recommendations backed by student views and published data, combining the expertise of administrators whose institutions have active student veteran programs.

Key Terms: Student Veteran - For the purposes of this paper, "student veteran" refers to a current or former member of active duty, retired military, National Guard, or Reserves regardless if they are using education benefits.

Introduction

Student veterans fall outside of the typical vision of a traditional-aged college student yet encompass a vast range of people, including those who enter college later in their life or take classes on an atypical schedule. The "National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)" reports that the vast majority of students in higher education—73 percent—fit under the non-traditional college student umbrella" (Get Educated, n.d.). As the population of traditional students gets proportionally smaller, most schools are looking at ways to capitalize on appealing to non-traditional students, including veterans.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act into law in 1944 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018, p.2). This Act, commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, and later as simply the G.I. Bill, is an education benefit that has been updated several times since its inception to meet the needs of service members as they return to civilian life (Servicemen's Readjustment Act, 1944). The financial benefit of funds awarded included education along with unemployment compensation and home and business loans. The benefit was born out of the fear that millions of veterans would find themselves without a home or job opportunities once they completed their military service. The law was enacted to thwart this crisis among our veterans (Berman, 2015).

This bill soon transformed college campuses across America. Student veterans comprised up to fifty percent of the college population by 1947 (Berman, 2015). Fast-forward to 2017, and you can see the actual effect of this bill, as 28% of all veterans over the age of 25 have a post-secondary degree or credential (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018, p.2).

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to examine the current programs that institutions offer to address veterans' unique challenges. The necessity for this type of programming comes from the unique set of issues that veterans encounter, including mental health problems, failure to assimilate, and being caught between the two worlds of military structure and the freedom of civilian life (Kurzynski, 2014, p. 4). After identifying these challenges and barriers, I created a "report card" for this research based on current best practices published by Student Veterans of America (SVA) and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (V.A.). The Report Card was a litmus test to evaluate the institutions' current offerings to address known challenges and barriers. Interviews with student veterans helped to determine student needs. I will identify the institutions that have implemented programs that address these needs. Institutions that create programs to assist student veterans to degree completion will be determined to have the highest rate of success, knowing that one of the G.I. Bill's primary goals was to make veterans employable in the civilian world.

Research Question

What are the current practices that higher education institutions utilize to support the needs of student veterans?

Literature Review

History of Veteran Enrollment in Higher Education

After World War I, returning service members flooded the job market, and many had trouble making ends meet (History.com Editors, 2010). This pressure and uncertainty made assimilation into civilian life increasingly difficult. Many returning service members had to rely on government assistance, but that was often not adequate. In 1924, Congress passed the Bonus Act to help these veterans by promising them a bonus based on the number of days they served in the military. Although Congress may have had good intentions, it took almost twenty years for the payments from the Bonus Act to be awarded (History.com Editors, 2010).

In June 1944, President Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. When created, the original G.I. Bill of Rights established hospitals, created low-interest mortgages, and awarded stipends covering tuition and expenses for college or trade school for all wartime service members. Between 1944 and 1949, nine million veterans took advantage of this benefit. By 1956, close to \$4 billion had been invested in these individuals (History.com Editors, 2010). The U.S. government has already spent billions on these programs; this research will highlight areas that could improve the success of the investment.

In March 2014, the SVA released preliminary findings on student veteran success in

higher education. These findings from the Million Records Project showed promising results, with a 51.7% completion rate for student veterans (Kurzynski, 2014, p.3). The rate of completion for military students was calculated by the completion of their program or trade school training. This metric is not bound by a time constraint (Kurzynski, 2014, p.5). "Improvements in higher education can increase the success of not only student veterans, but also the American economy, because veteran unemployment rates decrease as their education level increases" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

Veterans from both war and peacetime now enjoy many benefits from the G.I. Bill, including generous education benefits and, in certain situations, housing stipends. In 2019, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics released a survey of the student veteran population in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2009, over 3,600,000 (14.9- 16.7%) veterans per year used educational benefits toward a bachelor's degree, with at least an additional 2,000,000 (7.4- 9.1%) using the benefits for another type of advanced degree (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2019).

Although the G.I. Bill had benefits that were extended to all veterans regardless of race or gender, it has been easier for some to collect than others. For decades the administrators of benefits at both the state and local level were exclusively white males. In a time of rampant racial and gender discrimination, African American and female veterans did not have the same enrollment opportunities due to institutions giving preferential treatment to white males (History.com Editors, 2010).

Challenges for Veterans in Higher Education

Student veterans' not only have to adjust to life outside of the military, but also to the culture of academia. The original goal of the G.I. Bill was to help facilitate this transition for veterans back into civilian life, but it also intended to stimulate the economy. By raising the education level of veterans, the country would see lower unemployment rates and ensure more skilled workers in the workplace. On top of the challenge of moving from a rigorous and regimented life in the military to one of freedom and choices in the civilian world, some decide to take on the additional task of becoming students.

Veterans are essentially moving between two worlds when their service ends; this can be even further complicated if they are in the Reserves or National Guard and are enrolled as a student while still serving. The military is extremely structured, and time is a crucial component to their success. Military units trust that other units will be on time, and during times of conflict, if someone is late lives could be at stake. Among service members there is a saying that "fifteen minutes early is considered late." Additionally, there is an established chain of command with no shortage of people giving instructions on how the Commander wants the mission accomplished. Outside of the service, the world is less regimented: a veteran must figure out their own daily life, create and decide schedules that are self-regulated, and a boss telling them what to do feels more like an open-ended suggestion. Life can become something abstract that the veteran must learn to navigate.

In general, the American public does not recognize how challenging these changes can be for the veteran population, and veterans feel their confusion. In fact, 84% of veterans report that they believe the American public does not understand the difficulties service members face (Kurzynski, 2014). This results in the distrust that many veterans may have towards the general

public and can contribute to the reported strain in family relationships (which 48% report) and how they are able to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (which 37% reported) (Kurzynski, 2014). Also known as “shadow” issues, as they are not ones that can outwardly be seen, but rather can have dramatic effects on a person’s life in and out of an academic setting “Add to these challenges, an adjustment to the academic culture, which emphasizes individual accomplishment, independent organization, and a fairly slow pace, all of which are directly opposite of the military culture” (Hamrick et al., 2013). All of those challenges are navigated with a complicated, strictly regulated system to access V.A. education benefits.

Barriers to assistance with financial issues (personal, V.A. policies, or family-related), having to navigate education benefits, lack of access to physical and mental health services, and general re-orientation into the civilian or academic world cause massive amounts of frustrations for student veterans. It is essential for faculty and administrators to understand the context of the veteran’s frustrations (Kurzynski, 2014).

The way language is used and how some specific words are chosen create a sticking point for many student veterans. It is a source of frustration when these students follow a faculty member’s instructions as if they are orders from their chain of command, only to find out that the instructions and due date are more abstract than hard and fast rules. This frustration can become exacerbated if the faculty member is inexperienced with navigating this type of confrontation.

“The Veterans Affairs office is the central source for all their vital information, and the students can (and do) drop into the office whenever the need arises, or to say “hi” correctly described this strategy as the effective method to help “reduce the bureaucratic obfuscation that may arise by bridging the gap between the structured design of the military and the more amorphous campus environment” (Kurzynski, 2014). Connecting student veterans with their peers in order to discuss both the military and their classwork is an essential component in guaranteeing their return the following semester (Kurzynski, 2014; Military.com, 2019¹).

As Michael Kirchner (2017) notes, \$50 billion is spent annually on building leadership within the military: these service members are walking onto our campus with the ability to lift the rest of the student body, but their leadership abilities are under-utilized. Institutions should also focus on finding ways to utilize the skills of their student veterans.

Guiding Framework

Theoretical Framework

Tinto’s Model of Student Integration (1975 & 1993) allows for the persistence and withdrawal factors between a student and the completion of their education. Student veterans come into institutions of higher education with external factors that can prohibit their ability to transition to college life in a manner that facilitates learning. The ability of student veterans is no different from their classmates: their capacity for completing tasks on time and precisely following directions excels due to their prior training, and their leadership skills can shine when they are given the ability to illustrate these skills. However, the factors that exist before enrollment differentiate student veterans from the majority of classmates that they will encounter during their education. Tinto’s model allows for the measurement of resilience in these students.

Tinto’s model suggests that students come to college with background traits (e.g., race,

secondary school achievement, academic aptitude, family education, and economic contexts). These characteristics lead to initial commitments, both to the goal of graduation from college and to the specific institution attended. Tinto's model is centered around a "diathesis of pre-existing vulnerabilities" and coming off of the center are the different elements effecting a student's decision to withdraw or persist (Arnekrans, 2014). See Appendix A.

Student veterans are at an increased risk of having mental health challenges, including PTSD, thoughts of suicide, and feelings of displacement, all at a rate that far surpasses that of their student counterparts (Factsheets, 2018). These are significant factors that veterans may bring with them to campus which could cause them to drop courses.

Tinto's model is unique because it combines all the factors that students bring with them, both those that will help to persist and those that, without support, will cause a student to decide to drop out. Persistence is theorized to be "dramatically affected" by student peer culture. In an educational setting, persistence has a strong emphasis on a student's ability and willingness to integrate into a campus (Scott, 2000). Using the framework Tinto has laid out, this study aims to evaluate institutional programming that aligns with student needs to help insure persistence and student success.

Fast Facts (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018):

- *62% of student veterans were first-generation:* Tinto's model uses Family Background as one of the starting factors for success.
- *47% of student veterans were parents:* Tinto's model looks at Individual Attributes before a student enters college. Additionally, in the academic system a student's peer group interactions are connected to grade performance; depending on the way the veteran is taking classes, they may be the only parent in a class.
- *Only 15% of student veterans were traditionally aged (18-23):* Tinto's track for following institutional commitment has both Peer-Group Interactions and Social Integration. With only 15% falling in the traditional age range, there may be an added generational gap to a student will have to adjust.
- *The average timeframe out of school is 5 years*
- *38% of veterans enrolled in community colleges*
- *23% of veterans enrolled in private for-profit institutions*
- *The average GPA (in 2016) of a student veteran was 3.35*

Research Participants

The research is a combination of interviews with administrative staff on college campuses about their current veteran programs, analysis of current programs based on established best practices, and interviews with current student veterans to establish their student needs. Each institutions' public website will also be used to collect data about their offerings.

Two populations will be included in the direct research portion: administrators and student veterans. The administrators represent the different segments of higher education—community college, four-year college, university— in the New England area who have established student veteran programs. Also, the administrators at these six institutions work directly with the student veterans at their respective institutions. Student veterans volunteered to

participate when learning of the project and wanted their voices to be considered. Up to five open-ended questions were presented to these volunteers, allowing them to share their experience on campus. Eight student veterans took part in the survey and two of the eight students are female, representing the larger population of veterans on campus.

Research Instrument

Administrators and students were contacted via phone, email, or in person explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation. Ten administrators were contacted, and six of them agreed to participate in the research. These institutions were selected to be representative of different types of educational institutions in New England. The student veterans had a 100% response rate with eight students, six male and two females, participating. The following questions for administrators and student veterans were created for the purpose of this research. See Appendix B for Administrator Questions. See Appendix C for Student Veteran Questions.

Report Card

The report card below was created for this research using a combination of best practices published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.) and Student Veterans of America (SVA). In Appendix D is a copy of the outline created and used to evaluate the institutions based on interviews with their administrators and information available on the institution's public website.

Project Limitations

The limitations of this analysis are mainly due to the scale of the study. Even though the analysis and findings can be applied to institutions across the country, the administrators and student veterans included in this research are based solely in New England. Although sample size was not large enough to break down the institutions into subsections of higher education (i.e., community colleges, private 4-year, and public 4-year), each type of institution is represented in the research.

Findings & Analysis

The purpose of this research is to align best practices as published by national veteran organizations with current student veteran needs. This analysis will be assessing the findings against the report card I created using published best practices. Selected from recommendations of national veterans' organizations such as the V.A. and SVA. Tinto's Model of Student Integration was also used to select which established best practices would have the most significant impact on the persistence and withdrawal factors for the student veterans.

The findings will be used along with established literature to address this project's research question: "What are the current programs that higher education institutions utilize to support the needs of student veterans?" The report cards will then be compared with the responses of student veterans to see if the institutions are addressing their needs and to make recommendations for moving forward.

All six institutions that participated in this study have a separate report card. Note that not all of the students selected were matched with the institutions that responded. Students B, C, D, E, and G are all current students from the institutions represented.

Tinto's Model of Student Integration takes into account students' outside commitments and the overall structure of the academic/social system. Institution A recognizes that student veterans are coming onto campus with barriers that may be beyond what the school can address without support. By reaching out to outside resources like the local V.A. hospital, Institution A is able to address medical and mental health barriers, such as PTSD, impacting student veterans. According to Kurzynski (2014), 37% of student veterans are battling Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Institution A does not currently have a dedicated space for student veterans. The student veterans unanimously shared the importance of having a private space where they can meet with other student veterans.

Prior to attending Institution B, Student C was a college dropout with a ten-year gap in education. Student C expresses the difficulty of fitting in and how they leaned heavily on the "established community" at the institution. Tinto's framework takes into consideration family background; Student C expressed that not only were they a student veteran, but also a first-generation college student.

The administrator and Student C expressed that a 9/11 memorial event was held on campus by the student center, and neither the veterans' affairs office nor the student veterans club was not invited to help coordinate or plan. This example illustrates how isolated student veterans can feel from the rest of the campus community. Student veterans are already at an increased risk of facing mental health challenges and feelings of displacement (Factsheets, 2018).

An established veteran center is one of the best practices mentioned in nearly every piece of literature on the topic. During the interviews, 100% of the student veterans commented about a veteran-specific space. i.e.,

The director and staff in the [Institution B] office made enrolling possible for me as I learned to navigate college once again. I was given credit for as much of my military training as the law would allow. They gave me a chance to be a work study to earn more income. They even went out of their way to assist in resources for me to find a place to live. Needless to say, "fitting in" with the general population was the last of my worries. Instead, I leaned heavily on the established community [Institution B] had waiting for me. Everyone has challenges that could keep them from graduating college. Mine just happen to be due to my military service. (Interview with Student C)

Maintaining a welcoming veteran-specific space on an institution's campus allows student veterans to have a place to gather. Student veterans use a functional, established veteran center to build camaraderie while in school, receive assistance for their unique needs, gather internal and external resource information, and have social events (Fishback, 2015; Kirchner, 2017; Kurzynski, 2014; Military.com, 2019).

Institution C has a dedicated room, but it is not utilized in a way that creates this type of community. Peer-group interactions are a key component in Tinto's model (1975), and maintaining positive peer-group and faculty interactions are two key components of social

integration into an institution. Institution D does not have a dedicated veteran space; it is plausible this is due to the small size of the institution as a whole.

Additionally, the way in which civilians and veterans use language can be a conflict in the classroom, and assumptions can be made about student veterans due to their military background. "One incident I had was with a professor at the end of my first semester. She accused me of having an issue with black women in charge. She also made a comment earlier in the semester insinuating that military members enjoyed life on a base because of the alcohol" (Student B). The way that student veterans speak, and address authority is firm and respectful; these students like to have information and due dates clarified so they understand expectations placed on them. In the military time is an integral part of success, which is in direct contradiction to the more relaxed attitudes on college/university campuses. Student veterans expressed being frustrated with last-minute changes with assignments, class schedules, and expectations. There is a tendency for civilian students and faculty to debate expectations in class, which goes against years of training for student veterans. Having a communication conflict can be disruptive to the academic and social integration for a student (Tinto, 1975).

When an institution prioritizes the retention of student veterans, you will see programming like the kind that Institution E has implemented. Three out of the eight administrators included in this survey have a dedicated advisor or priority registration among their "wish list" items. Institution E stands alone in its current ability to give veteran students this level of attention. Student C, Student D, and Student F spoke of student veterans benefiting from additional assistance in navigating courses, advising, and registration. Student veterans have diverse backgrounds and could be attempting to balance education with family responsibilities, a career, mental illness, financial troubles, or even continued military duty.

Finances for many military members and their families are often a struggle. Some student veterans depend on their educational benefits to pay for part or all of their tuition and help them maintain a stable housing situation. Half of all administrators and students interviewed highlighted financial struggles as a barrier to the completion of a program for student veterans. When worrying about basic needs for themselves and their families, it can be difficult for student veterans to concentrate on their education. Institution E takes part in the Yellow Ribbon program: in order to help student veterans cover the cost of education without the need for additional loans. The institution covers whatever tuition balance remains on their program after 100% of their post-9/11 benefit has been used. For many student veterans, the ability to attend school, receive a housing allowance, and not have to incur additional financial burdens is crucial for completing their academic programs successfully.

Creating a community and programming in an institution takes time, which at Institution F was started when the current administrator received a grant. Here is another good example of an institution addressing student veteran needs. Administrators and students both highlighted access to community support and being able to communicate issues as major retention factors for student veterans. For over thirty years the administrator at Institution F has been developing and using faculty and staff training to create positive interactions among institutional professionals, faculty, and student veterans.

The dedication to these programs shows an institutional commitment to the success of student veterans, which is the connection between commitments and the academic and social system within Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975). The programs available to address

student veteran needs were evaluated using the “Report Card” based on published best practices, the information provided by the administrators, and the student interviews. The “Report Card” was created and successfully utilized during this evaluation process.

Recommendations

After synthesizing the research findings based on the interviews with administrators and students and reflecting on previously established best practices, I make the following recommendations to assist the student veteran population in higher education.

Create a central point of contact on campus for veterans (administrative)

A central point of contact on the college campus allows student veterans to get information based on their unique needs. This recommendation is based on administrators’ experience with student veterans who become frustrated with the lack of clarity during their first experiences with the campus. By having a central point of contact it removes the need to find multiple offices or speak to numerous people before a problem is addressed.

Provide a dedicated advisor for the veteran population

The administrator(s) dedicated to veterans would have resources about their specific needs, knowledge of the different educational benefits they might be dealing with, experience with the V.A. certifying system, and connections to community resources for addressing problems like mental health, housing needs, or other issues. Based on the analysis, 50% of the students and administrators believed that this would improve services on campus.

Access to mental health services

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and thoughts of suicide are more prevalent among the student veteran community than their civilian student classmates (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, 1944). Due to these shadow factors, it is vital that mental health services on campus and in the community are easily accessible and well-communicated to student veterans.

Establish a community of veterans, for veterans (center)

The student veterans expressed the importance in having an established sense of belonging and community on campus. Our analysis showed that administrators who are able to create this on their campus have a higher percentage of student veterans who attend that institution.

Staff and faculty training

Addressing the communication and use of language will change the quality of the conversations that administrators, faculty, and civilian students have with student veterans. By providing the community with the knowledge of how and why student veterans respond to directions, frustrations on both sides can be eliminated.

Extended policies regarding transferable credit and credit for prior learning

Student veterans often receive training while in the military and may take single classes at a few

institutions based on where they are located. Understanding that these students are trying to piece together a degree while serving in the military should be considered when an institution decides how many transfer credits to accept. Half of the institutions noted that for student veterans, they accept up to thirty additional credits over what is accepted for traditional students.

Specific tutor(s) who are experienced in on-campus and virtual classrooms

Student veterans often do not like to ask for help. By having a designated tutor in the veteran space, institutions will increase the likelihood that these students will do so. It would be beneficial if this person was military themselves and had experience with learning in different formats or spaces.

Internal annual institutional review of veteran-specific services

Institutions must show a commitment to the continued success of their student veterans. One way to do this would be to conduct an internal review process on an annual basis, in order to evaluate the changing needs of students as well as what programs are successful at the institution, and which need to be reassessed. This could be done by using the “report card” created for this research, since it is based on published best practices.

Veteran specific orientation

A specific orientation for student veterans would be able to cover the benefits and programs offered at the institution for those students. This would also be the ideal time to introduce the peer mentoring program and tour the veteran center on campus. Student veterans would then be able to meet peers who might have similar life experiences and allow them to begin to establish a community on the campus.

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Appendix A

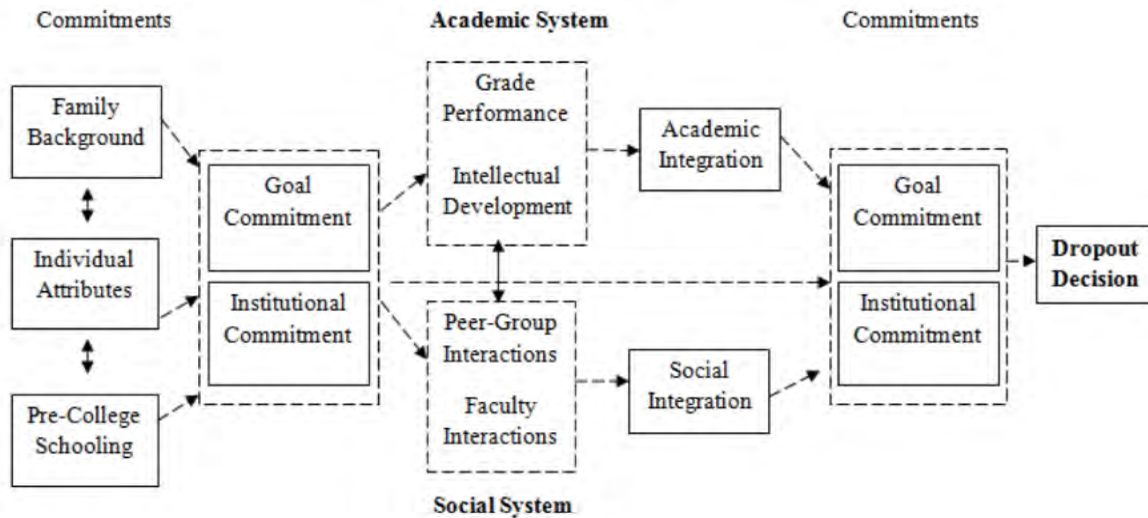


Figure 1 Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975). Adapted from "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), pp.89-125.

[Image Description: flowchart of Tinto's Student Integration Model]

Appendix B

Questions for administrators working with student veterans:

1. Name and Email
2. Title
3. Institution
4. What is the percentage of student veterans on your campus? Are the majority using V.A. educational benefits?
5. From your experience, please share some unique characteristics of student veterans.
6. Which student veteran needs is your institution currently addressing?
7. Which needs still have to be addressed?
8. Is there a current mentor program for student veterans? If yes, please explain.
9. Many student veterans experience frustration when it comes to communication on campus. Please share the communication policy or any training/programs that exist to facilitate a positive interaction with these students.
10. Please share resources that are currently available for student veterans within your institution.
11. If money and policy restrictions were not a factor, what trainings or programs would you institute to improve the student veteran experience and why?

Appendix C

Questions for interviews with student veterans:

1. Email, institution, program of study.
2. What were you looking for in an institution when looking to apply?
 - a. Anticipated answers would be along the lines of advancement or change career fields, experience something new, networking, etc.
3. Follow up question: What are your goals and objectives with education and after completion?
4. To your level of comfort, please share your experience and any challenges that have arisen.
 - a. Anticipated answers will be along the lines of institutional blocks and social conflicts between other students/faculty members.
5. Is there anything else you feel is important for civilian administrators/faculty to know when working with student veterans?

Appendix D

Report card given to institutions.

Report Card: Institution	(X= not available, U= campus has but is not meeting recommended standards, S= satisfactory, E= excelling)	Comments
Central point of contact on campus for veterans		
Dedicated advisor (registration)		
Veteran-specific space		
Ability to identify student veterans		
Student veteran organization		
Staff and faculty training		
Opening lines of communication		
Academic preparation (veteran		

orientation)		
Academic tutoring		
Veteran to veteran mentoring		
Mental health services		
Engaging student veterans		
Expanded housing options		
Yellow ribbon		
Campus and community support		
Transferable credits for military training		
Principles of excellence participant (list of schools in agreement with the V.A., available online)		
Percentage of veterans who graduate		
Streamline disability and veteran services		

Alternative Text:

The list of best practices are as follows. An answer of X means it is not available, U means the campus has it but is not meeting recommended standards, S means it is satisfactory, and E means excelling.

- Central point of contact on campus for veterans
- Dedicated advisor (registration)
- Veteran-specific space
- Ability to identify student veterans
- Student veteran organization
- Staff and faculty training
- Opening lines of communication

- Academic preparation (veteran orientation)
- Academic tutoring
- Veteran to veteran mentoring
- Mental health services
- Engaging student veterans
- Expanded housing options
- Yellow ribbon
- Campus and community support
- Transferable credits for military training
- Principles of excellence participant (list of schools in agreement with the V.A., available online)
- Percentage of veterans who graduate
- Streamline disability and veteran services