

Issues Facing Student Veterans



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Veterans Are Students

- Just as we have many unique students in our classes, the student veteran is unique as well with a myriad of issues that they bring to the classroom. The student veteran is no different from any other student in that he or she must earn his or her grade and must meet all the requirements for our classes. However, there may be circumstances when a student veteran may request consideration for a special circumstance.
- For example, a reserve student may be called up for active duty or deployment. Being called up is out of his or her control, they must report. Another example, a veteran may be advised that he or she must make a visit to a VA hospital. The VA appointment is given to veterans, usually without the veterans' input. If they do not make their appointment they may wait up to six months to a year before they get another one. In these cases you may consider giving an extra assignment just as you would for an inclement weather day or if you, as an instructor, need to miss a class. Make sure you check with your department chair on college policy.
- The bottom line, however, is that the student veteran, just like any student, must meet the requirements of the class.

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Victoria Breaud (former SGT US Army and CFCC Student veteran) presents CFCC President Dr. Frank Sells with a Plaque designating CFCC as a Military Friendly School for the second year in a row.

Veterans Are Abundant

- There are over 1.4 million Americans serving on active duty in the military - Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard.
- Another 800,000 are in the active reserves.
- About 14% of all active duty military members are women.
- There are over 27 million veterans in the United States today.
- At Cape Fear Community College we have 570 student veterans receiving benefits (Fall 2012) and several hundred more not receiving benefits.

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Student Veterans at Cape Fear Community College

Veterans Are Coming to College

The new GI Bill makes it possible for many veterans to attend college. Unlike the past GI Bill, the new post 9/11 GI Bill provides an allowance for housing and for books. We are seeing many more veterans in our classes. Our society increasingly values education and the community college is responsible for delivering that education. The returning veteran wants to further his or her education and to learn skills to gain employment.

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Student Veterans Center at CFCC

Veterans Are a Resource

- The post WW2 GI bill was an instrument of change for this country. It expanded higher education opportunities for millions of Americans. We anticipate the post 9/11 GI Bill will have that same impact on our society.
- The men and women who have served tend to be mature, dedicated and responsible. They are serious about their education. American military people serve in 135 countries around the world. Certainly many are in the combat regions but many more are serving in places around the world and have diverse responsibilities such as being military aides to ambassadors or providing humanitarian assistance in remote regions. They have seen and experienced many cultures around the world and those experiences can enrich your classroom. The veteran experience can be an asset to our classes.

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**CFCC's Veterans Center provides a place to study
between classes**

Veterans May Be Non-Combat Military Personnel

- Not all military people are involved in combat, in fact most are not. However they are, compared to the average American citizen, working and living in unusual circumstances. Many are serving long deployments away from home. They all need to readjust to living a more normal existence. They face major transitions as they re-enter civilian society.

Issues Facing Student Veterans

What are the transition issues?

There are many transition issues, veterans face upon returning home. These may include:

- *Confidence:* Many have been out of college or school for a long time. It is a new environment and they approach it warily. Once they get started, they are for the most part, fine.

- *Community:* They were members of a very close knit military community and may feel a sense of withdrawal or even alienation as they re-enter civilian society. They could be wary of their fellow students and instructors as they may think no one can understand their experience or they may experience prejudice because of their service.
- *Family:* They need to re-establish their family relationships. The veteran, who has been deployed, and his or her family will need to get used to being a traditional family again. Some may be returning with physical and or emotional disabilities.

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CFCC Student Veterans were treated to a kayak adventure

How about the veteran returning from combat?

In our Cape Fear Community College student veteran community we have students that have returned from combat, sometimes from multiple combat deployments. Some have grave physical injuries, some have deep emotional scars. They have been asked to do difficult things and they probably do not want to talk much about these experiences. They are proud of their service and want to fit in but sometimes have difficulties. If you observe a student veteran having difficulties ask him or her if they would like to talk with someone about it. At Cape Fear Community College the Veterans Affairs office is available for students and the Student Development office has counselors with different areas of expertise.

Don't the services take care of the soldier or sailor before they leave the service?

The services do a great job of preparing young men and women for their jobs while in the service. But they are not so good at helping with the transition back to civilian life. These students are our sons, daughters, brothers and sisters and in some cases moms and dads. Our college prides itself on being the “Cape Fear Family College” and we reach out to all students. Our student veterans hope to be welcomed and want a chance to learn.

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Susan Hance, Speech Language Pathologist and a volunteer with expertise on TBI and Memory issues meets with student veterans at CFCC's Veteran Center

What about PTSD/Combat-related stress reactions?

Much research has been done about the effects of PTSD and related combat stress on veterans transitioning back into society. Experiences, medication interactions, and daily stresses can all cause issues for the student veteran. As educators, we need to be aware of the possibility of these stressors impacting how the student veteran reacts to and interacts within the classroom environment.

What can we do?

***This following information is adapted from presentations given by Minnesota Army National Guard Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel John Morris, with additional information from other military members and veterans.*

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CFCC's Veterans Center is a place where veterans can meet, study, get assistance and be with other student veterans

Some Ideas:

Veterans Center

- Reserved for student veterans
- Computers and printer
- Fax service
- VA Certifying official
- Assistance with registration and advising
- Coffee
- Networking opportunities

Veteran to Veteran mentor and tutor

- Veterans volunteer to tutor and mentor each other in areas such as math, for example.

“Veteran Friendly”

- Veteran Friendly sticker on Faculty and Staff doors
- Student veterans select those offices that are “veteran friendly”
- Veteran Coordinator provides information to interested faculty/staff
- Veterans Day Celebration

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CFCC Honors WWII Veterans at Veterans Day Ceremony

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CFCC Student Sean Deboise participates in the Wounded Warrior Ride.

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Participants in the Wounded Warrior Ride Gather in CFCC's Courtyard to be honored and thanked for their service

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VA Changes: Frustration the “Big Three” effective fall 2011

- Residency – VA no longer pays out of state tuition
- VA will not pay for Hybrid remedial classes
- BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing) ... student Veterans under the post 911 GI Bill will no longer receive BAH when classes are not in session

Welcoming returning veterans

Community support is invaluable when it comes to assisting veterans with the successful transition from military to student life. Below are some things to consider as you welcome veterans back to campus or to your campus for the first time.

Some simple ways to create a welcoming environment include:

- Welcoming military personnel home
- Expressing your appreciation of their service
- Offering to help with college application paperwork
- Being supportive by being patient and listening
- Understanding that returning to normal can take time

Some questions are better than others.

Good ways to start a conversation include:

- What did you do and where did you go while you were in the military? (Don't assume all veterans served in Iraq/Afghanistan.)
- How are you and your family doing?

You should avoid:

- Pressuring a veteran regarding specifics about their service they choose not to share with you
- Minimizing the challenges a veteran might face
- Making assumptions about any veteran's political or foreign policy views
- Singling out a veteran in class without prior approval

Inappropriate questions:

- Did you kill anyone?
- Did you see anyone die?
- Are you glad you're back?
- Did you miss your family?
- Do you have to go back?
- Do you think we are winning over there?
- Is it all worth it?

Advice for the Student Veteran TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- If you are experiencing some of these symptoms and are concerned that these symptoms are interfering with your daily life or are limiting your ability to perform well academically or personally, you should consider seeking help. Talking with peer or visiting a counselor can be beneficial.

You can also help their adjustment to civilian and college life by implementing or suggesting:

- Limit your schedule to what is reasonable. Don't overload;
- In class, take notes using a good note taking system (Cornell Note Taking System) to keep focus and concentration sharp;
- Follow a daily schedule to keep yourself organized;
- Get involved with campus activities that interest you and become involved with your fellow students;
- Use the college services offered such as academic tutoring and counseling services;

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- Talk to your on campus Veteran Affairs representative and take advantage of available benefits for veterans;
- Limit exposure to things that upset you (television, news broadcasts, newspapers);
- Talk with peers and counselors;
- Be aware that others may not understand or agree with your service in the military;
- Get the proper amount of sleep and rest, eat a good balanced diet and establish a good physical workout routine;
- Decrease unhealthy behaviors such as use of alcohol, nicotine and illegal substances;

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- Take part in healthy, fun activities;
- Give back to the campus and community by doing volunteer work. Helping others takes the focus off of you;
- Pay attention to how you react to things and learn to recognize the physical and emotional signs of stress and/or PTSD;
- Visit the University Counseling Center and talk with a professional mental health person;
- Seek spiritual fulfillment through prayer, meditation and fellowship;
- Set reasonable boundaries for yourself

*(Texas A&M Corpus Christi University Counseling Center (2009, December 9).
For Armed Services Veterans Returning to College. Retrieved from
<http://counseling.tamucc.edu/?n=Information.Veterans>)*

For Armed Services Veterans Returning to College

- Returning to college after Armed Services deployment can be a stressful and highly frustrating experience for some Veterans (11 to 17%). Veterans coming out of extremely stressful combat conditions may find the transition to college life and academic demands a difficult personal challenge.
- Quite often combat veterans have signs of combat stress and PTSD before they are discharged from the Armed Service. They frequently avoid seeking help for combat-related stress and/or PTSD symptoms telling themselves they will handle their problems alone or at a more convenient time.

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- When Veterans return home and re-enter the academic/college life arena, they often question “How will I adjust?”, “Can what I’ve experienced interfere with me doing my best? “How do I deal with the problem(s) I’m experiencing?”
- Each returning Veteran will contend with their symptoms in either a constructive or destructive fashion. Those veterans suffering from combat-related stress and/or PTSD may experience symptoms such as:

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- Boredom stemming from missing the adrenaline rush of combat;
- Anger, frustration concerning lost time while on deployment;
- Inability to focus and concentrate on academic assignments/tests;
- Anxiety, hypersensitivity and startle reactions;
- Problems with developing relationships with fellow students that have not experienced what veterans have gone through;
- Concerns and worries about being redeployed;
- Anger and rage control problems;
- Depression and paranoia;
- Troubling dreams, nightmares thoughts and memories;

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- Grief and sadness;
- Isolation, social retraction and alienation from others;
- Low tolerance for stress and others' views of the Armed Services;
- Guilt because of acts committed during combat situations, events witnessed and from being a survivor while others were not;
- Seeking relief from emotional pain by abusing alcohol and other drugs;
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities;
- Low self esteem issues;
- Problems with authority;
- Difficulty going and staying asleep;
- Difficulty trusting others; and
- PTSD/Combat-related stress reactions.

(Texas A&M Corpus Christi University Counseling Center (2009, December 9). For Armed Services Veterans Returning to College. Retrieved from <http://counseling.tamucc.edu/?n=Information.Veterans>)

POV: Veterans Returning To College Aren't Victims, They're Assets

By Peter Katopes, Community College Week, March 23, 2009

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The "Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008," or the "New GI Bill," will result in more and more veterans entering colleges and universities. Driven by concerns about these larger numbers of veterans returning home with serious psychological and emotional issues resulting from the prolonged stress of combat and dislocation, and with the memories of tragedies such as Virginia Tech still fresh, colleges, and especially community colleges, are scrambling to ensure that their campuses will have services that are adequate to the needs of these young men and women.

However, if we consider these returning veterans merely as "problems" and "victims" rather than as valuable resources, we will risk losing an opportunity to help them to transform our institutions to better meet the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world.

Because there has not been a requirement for military service in the United States for more than 35 years, relatively few faculty and administrators under the age of sixty have first-hand knowledge of the military. And what they do know — or think they know — has been influenced by the general anti-military attitudes and mistaken assumptions of the baby boom generation, which for the most part managed to avoid military service during the Vietnam Conflict. Descriptions like "half-crazed Vietnam vet" or "ticking time bombs," were not uncommon characterizations of military veterans during the 60s, 70s, and 80s, popping up not only in newspaper stories and but in casual conversations as well.

Another damaging idea that is a memento of the Vietnam Era is that of veteran as victim. Because so many upper- and middle-class baby boomers avoided the draft, it was generally understood that anyone who actually did serve in the military was either not very smart or a member of a relatively powerless and ill-defined underclass. However, regarding our current generation of veterans, as one young Army colonel recently told me: "Don't call us victims: We volunteered!"

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As we move into a new era of understanding regarding returning soldiers, we must leave behind the old labels and prejudices and take a clear look at the realities of military service and what the new veteran brings to the classroom. Doing so will enable us to see that veterans not only already possess many of the skills that we want all our students to have, but also the values and habits of intellect that should be the hallmarks of academic success.

Certainly one goal we as educators have is to instill in our students a “global perspective.”

There are seemingly dozens of conferences every year devoted to this topic, but the solutions seem to involve the same bland options: require every student to take a foreign language; make a “global” course part of every curriculum; provide enhanced study abroad opportunities and so on. While none of these ideas are necessarily harmful to students, they will often not give them a practical and experiential exposure to foreign cultures.

Because many military personnel are stationed in other countries — both in combat and non-combat environments — they frequently have a first-hand understanding of culture as it is lived day-to-day, and an often intimate relationship with people very different from themselves.

In order to accomplish their mission, military personnel ignore cultural realities at their peril. As a former Air Force officer, now a provost at a community college, once said to me: “The greatest internationalizing force in our history has been the U.S. military.”

Another goal we have for our students is that they engage in community service. It is important that we take seriously President Obama’s specific recognition of military service as honorable public service during his inaugural address. It is not easy to be a soldier. It is a profession that requires daily personal sacrifice in pursuit of higher ideals and the common good. And how about our desire to instill in our students the educational goals of collaborative learning and cooperation? It is a cardinal principle of military reality that individuals come together to achieve common goals. Although our military is currently an all-volunteer enterprise, it still is composed of men and women of varied experiences, backgrounds, ethnicities, religions and beliefs, who willingly work together and subordinate their individual needs for the common good and common purpose. This is a skill that we wish our students would learn. For our veterans, it’s second nature.

“Don’t soldiers just do whatever they’re told?” a non-veteran baby boomer colleague recently asked me, somewhat innocently, reflecting the common 60s canard that soldiers are brainless automata. This led to what I hope was for him an enlightening discussion about the difference between mindless obedience and informed discipline.

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Discipline should not be construed as a synonym for either blind acquiescence or uncritical agreement. In a military environment, discipline most often implies focus, commitment and drive, all qualities necessary to completion of mission. In the classroom, you can bet that returning veterans will ask hard questions and welcome honest discussion, but they will also do the reading and hand in assignments on time. At many meetings and conferences I attend, I hear colleagues say that we must give students the “skills” to be creative and innovative and to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

While “adapt or die” might seem to have somewhat extreme applications and consequences in a military context, the fact is that the American military has always encouraged initiative and innovation in its soldiers at all levels.

“Field expediency” was an expression that took on real meaning for me when I served in Vietnam and saw so many of my comrades — enlisted troops and officers alike — find creative means of completing our mission even though supplies were delayed or we encountered terrain or other situations we had not anticipated. Certainly one characteristic of the United States military that has made it generally successful is that everyone is expected to lead if the situation requires it.

The veterans who will return to our classrooms will be, for the most part, mature and accomplished young women and men ready to embark on the next phase of their lives.

They will bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience and a depth of character which is worthy of our deep regard.

That some will have problems adjusting, we of course need to recognize and we must be prepared to assist them — as we would any of our students.

However, to treat them as victims is to disrespect not only their service to our country, but also to dishonor them as fellow citizens. Rather we must view them, without irony, as truly being our best and brightest.

*Peter Katopes is Vice President for Academic Affairs,
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(Katopes, P. (2009, March 23). [POV: Veterans Returning to College Aren't Victims, They're Assets](#). Retrieved from

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