Serving Those Who Have Served: How Educators from a Non-Traditional Institution are Best Supporting Undergraduate Online Military Students

Dr. Anant Deshpande[1]

Abstract

Military students are a critical subpopulation of adult students. Military students seek higher education to develop meaningful careers and financial independence. Evidence suggests that military students face numerous challenges during their academic endeavors and need a great deal of support to achieve academic success. The goal of the research is to investigate how faculty in a non-traditional US institution best support the needs of military students and help them be successful.

Keywords: Military and Veteran Students, Non-Traditional Institution

1. Background and Objectives

Literature has widely documented the challenges military students face in transitioning to academic settings (Bonar, 2016; Brown & Gross, 2011; McBain, Kim, Cook & Snead, 2012; Machuca, Torres, Morris & Whitley, 2014; Sans one & Segura, 2020). Some of the specific challenges faced by military students include: lack of clarity on benefits, perceived feelings of anxiety over successful transition to academic settings, feelings of isolation on campus and connecting socially with civilians, to name a few (Fusch, 2012; Lang & Powers, 2011;Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013). It is imperative that institutions and faculty serving military student adopt strategic rather than adhoc approaches to better assist the needs of this unique population of students. Faculty play a major role in the success of students and particularly military students. The role of supportive faculty is highlighted in the development of military students (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Elliott, Chargualaf & Patterson, 2019). There is a need to systematically understand how faculty engages and work with military students. Specifically, it is also important to understand the type of best practices used by faculty to support this group of students. Meeting the educational needs of the military students' is vital for retention (Kuh, Curce, Shoup, Kinzie &Gonyea, 2008). Overall, it is expected that the findings of the research will serve as a blueprint for the faculty, staff and administrators in augmenting the understanding of the unique needs for these students and finding ways to help them succeed in the online academic environment. Based on the above the specific research questions are as follows:

- What are the best practices used by faculty to support the online military students?

2. The study setting: SUNY empire state college

Empire State College (ESC) is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system (SUNY ESC, 2020). It is the only non-traditional institution within SUNY. It caters mainly to adult students between 25 and 55 years old who are working. The college is designed to help learners create individualized degree programs within twelve broad areas which suit their academic and professional goals (SUNY ESC, 2020). The college values learning gained at workplace and follow a clear process for awarding college level credits for learning at workplace (SUNY ESC, 2020). The college serves adult students across 33 locations in New York and abroad (SUNY ESC, 2020). The learners are in charge of their learning and decide on the modality they wish to pursue. For instance, online, face to face, blended and/or residency-based learning. The college offers both undergraduate as well as graduate programs. Many students at ESC serve in the military. Online modality is very popular with ESC military students.

[1] SUNY Empire State College. Division of Business,113 West Avenue, Saratoga Springs, NY, 12118, USA
Email: 1Anant.Deshpande@esc.edu

Based on the headcount data from 2011- 2015 on the ESC's decision support website, it can be seen that majority of ESC military students prefer the online modality (ESC Decision Support, 2020).In order to serve this population of student effectively, the researcher felt that it was important to understand the practices are used by faculty across the college to support the military students.

3. Research design

First, we reviewed the literature and held informal conversations with ESC faculty, and the online undergraduate military and veteran students related with this topic. To answer the research question proposed in the study, a qualitative approach was used. The qualitative approach provided an in-depth understanding of support practices used by faculty, to help students successfully navigate through the online degree programs. Based on the literature, a survey questionnaire was developed to interview faculty members.   Secondly, before collecting any data, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought from ESC. After receiving an IRB approval, the ESC faculty members who may have mentored and/or taught active duty military and veteran students were invited to participate in the study via an invitation email. This invitation email included the purpose of the study, what we wished to accomplish and the reasons for selecting the faculty mentors as potential participants of the study. Also, it was clearly mentioned that the faculty participation was voluntary, and that the faculty could choose to withdraw anytime. ESC has a total of 34 locations across NY State. I travelled to the various ESC locations across the NY State for data collection. In addition, the interviews were also sought via Skype for Business.

4. Findings

8 ESC faculty members were interviewed face to face and their responses recorded. Five of the faculty members were females and 3 of the faculty members were males. All but one faculty members interviewed were working full time at ESC. When asked about the key best practices used by them to support the active duty military and/or veteran students' majority of the respondents indicated that being flexible with the military students was very important to help them succeed. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that "*Flexibility in instruction is the key! As active duty they are married to US army so that comes first!! This needs to be understood by our college faculty. We need to be open and yet maintain academic standards.*" Other respondent indicated that "*To be willing to understanding that no two students are the same! But with military they might be deployed and there is a need to maintain flexibility!*" Another respondent indicated that "*I also tend to use a flexible approach and not push them too much! If the student is not able to finish the requirements of the independent study, I work with the student and provide an "Incomplete" for the study if required.*"Another best practice that was highlighted by the respondents was to maintain one on one communication and treat each military student in aunique manner. For instance, one of the comments received as follows "*It is important to realize that every student is unique and the way we handle students depends on student to student.*"Other respondent indicated that "*Each student should be treated individually! I am very careful with military students as they might have Post Traumatic Disorder (PTSD). I tend to take my cues from them and then strategize my approach towards educational planning with them.*" Another best practice that was commonly used by respondents was to modify the content to specifically cater to the needs of this group of students. For one of the comments received was as follows "*When teaching f 2 face I might modify assignments depending on the needs of the students! Do more one on one with students! When teaching f2f I sometimes make special modifications in the room! For instance, some military students like to move around. I provide opportunity to do this! Also, sometimes some military students may have challenges with comprehending the online discussions in class. I would rephrase and reform some of the statements to frame the learning (Need to be patient while working and devote one on one time).*"Other respondent indicated that "*I also get military students that are non-native English speakers. I tend to work very closely with such students! For instance, we have an active duty student who is Chinese and needs more time with English. I see her each week and help her with her assignments.*"

When asked about what can be done to help active duty military and/or veteran students overcome "barriers" to success in their educational journey at ESC, majority of respondents indicated that it was important for an instructor to really work closely with this group of students and help them get access to a variety of resources. For instance, one respondent indicated that "*If you are an instructor, be willing to work with the students. Some classes have specific timelines and due dates. It is important with military and/or veterans that if they are out to a shift they can't get to a computer.*" Another respondent indicated that "*In my observations, they are very motivated! Where they may need more help is to access their benefits so I guide them to appropriate channels. This is something which we can always try and find more ways to improve.*" In addition, it was also mentioned by the respondents that it was important to modify the existing college curriculum to better suit the needs of the military students. For instance, one respondent indicated that "*As a suggestion, the college must try and expand our 8-week offerings or accelerated course opportunities for our students.*"

If done well, these courses provide our military/veteran students (and other categories of students!) with an opportunity to work their courses in a period of time that is short enough so if they are deployed or relocated they have time to finish the course. These condensed courses help them plan their college curriculum."

When asked about the unique and specific practices used by the faculty to improve the educational experience of the active duty military and/or veteran students' majority of respondents highlighted the important role played by specific college locations in addition to the overall college wide activities. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that "*The College has the online orientations that students need to take. Further to supplement these efforts, some of the things we do are location-based orientation sessions that are face to face and one on one for our military/active duty students! We have a professional academic advisor and a coordinator at the location that is of great value and support! We can orient soldiers to both the academic and financial aid opportunities at our location. The location based professional staff provide advice on financial aid programs and options available to students.*" Another respondent indicated that "*We hold educational workshops in the evening so we can have food and build on the relationships with the incoming as well as interested students.*"

When asked about specific suggestions as to what can be done to ensure active duty military and/or veteran student success at ESC majority of the faculty highlighted the need to be flexible with the military students and the need of curriculum individualization to fit the needs of the students. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that "*As faculty, we must always be on the lookout for learning activities that we can and try and individualize our curriculum as possible!*". Another respondent indicated that *"Learning contract for independent studies should be vetted (if they are really independent!) Because often there are studies that are not truly independent. "*

5. Conclusion and future research

Military students form a unique student population due to uniqueness of their careers. It is important for educators across the world to understand the unique set of challenges associated with this student population. Overall, the project has informed several different aspects of our ongoing work with military students. This project has provided us with an opportunity to understand the approaches used by faculty to support military and veteran students. The research highlighted the need for institutions to work towards being open to modifying the course materials to fit the needs of individual students. Particularly, from an online context, it may not be always easy for military students to have internet connection when they are deployed. It is incumbent upon faculty to understand the need to be flexible with students and handle student situations as they arise. Institutionally, it is also important that universities offer support practices to better assist the military and veteran students in their educational journey. The study has two major limitations. First, the study involved participants from a single college in the United States, thereby limiting the generalize ability of the findings. Second, the primary respondents of the study were faculty mentors teaching undergraduate military and/or veteran students and it will be interesting to conduct the study with faculty teaching graduate students. It will be interesting to replicate the study in other university settings and different undergraduate and graduate programs to investigate the patterns of faculty approaches to teach students. Future research could investigate how specifically the online curriculum can be modified to better assist military and veteran student learners relate their on-field experiences with education. Also, more research is needed on how educational institutions can partner with various entities in the military to facilitate the educational transition of the military students.

References

Bonar, T. C. (2016). Mental Health and Military-Connected Students on Campus: Culture, Challenges, and Success. *New Directions for Student Services, 156,* 41-51. doi:10.1002/ss.20190

Brown, P.A., & Gross, C.(2011). Serving those Who have Served: Managing Veteran and Military Best practices. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(1), 45-49.

Elliott, B., Chargualaf, K. A., & Patterson, B. (2019). Committing to my mission: Faculty experiences with student veterans in baccalaureate nursing education. *Nursing Forum, 54*(4), 619–628. https://doi-org.library.esc.edu/10.1111/nuf.12386

ESC Decision Support (2020).*2014-15 Fact Book: Military Students*. Retrieved Aug4th from https://www8.esc.edu/escnet/decision-support/fact-books/annual-fact-books/2014-2015-fact-book/military-students/

Fusch,D.(2012). Helping Veterans succeed. Higher Ed Impact (Electronic Publication). Retrieved 5th March, 2018 from : https://www.academicimpressions.com/helping-veteran-students-succeed/

Holley, L.C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on Classroom Environment. *Journal of Social Work Education, 41*, 49-64.

Kuh,G., Curce, T., Shoup,R., Kinzie,J., &Gonyea, R.(2008).Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 79*, 540-563.

Lang, W.A., & Powers, J.T. (2011). *Completing the Mission: A Pilot Study of Veteran Students Progress toward Degree Attainment in the post 9/11 era.* Pat Tillman Foundation. Retrieved 5th March 2018 from:
    www.pattillmanfoundation.org.

Machuca,A., Torres, K.,Morris, P., & Whitley, W.(2014). Challenges Faced by Undergraduate Military Students at American Public University System. *International Journal of E-Learning, 13*(4),441-450.

McBain, L., Kim, Y.M., Cook, B.J., & Snead, K.S. (2012). From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Sansone, V. A., & Segura, J. S. T. (2020). Exploring Factors Contributing to College Success among Student Veteran Transfers at a Four-Year University. *Review of Higher Education*, *43*(3), 887–915.
    https://doi-org.library.esc.edu/10.1353/rhe.2020.0011.

SUNY ESC. (2020). About SUNY Empire State College. Retrieved June 13th https://www.esc.edu/about/

Whiteman, S. D., Barry, A. E., Mroczek, D. K., &MacDermid Wadsworth, S. (2013). The development and implications of peer emotional support for student service members/veterans and civilian college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 60*, 265 – 278.