The Challenge

Helping troops make a successful transition from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan to the classroom is a welcomed challenge for universities and specifically our Texas State campus. With over 2 million military personnel returning from the war, the fall 2009 semester will witness a likely uptick in the student veteran population as the much anticipated Post 9/11 “new G.I.” Bill takes effect.

This legislation that provides considerably more benefits to our returning troops promises to fuel a substantial increase in student veteran enrollment. However, it will require more than increased educational benefits to help ensure that our student veterans are successful in making this transition and succeeding on campus. What universities need is an innovative, comprehensive plan for coordinating campus services around student veteran identified needs.

This Generation of Veterans
To be successful universities must understand who our student veterans are and where they have been. Helping soldiers turn their hearts toward home and make a successful transition back to their lives with their families and communities and, in this case, into a new university community is one of the most important challenges facing us today. The soldiers’ long journey has taken them from the home front to a place down range where they are asked to make physical, emotional, and spiritual sacrifices, all while exposed to multiple stressors unlike anything seen in recent conflicts (1). This experience has changed the soldier and his or her family forever.
Our student veterans are much like other “non-traditional” students—they are entering college after a work-related delay, many have families, many are older than most entering freshman---yet their differences are notable. They have come from combat situations. Indeed, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have required our volunteer military to endure long deployments, to engage with a ruthless enemy, and to reach a level of preparedness that has affected the entire military community—its soldiers and their families. To date, over 1.64 million troops have been deployed in these operations and over half a million have been released from active duty after deployment requiring transition services; over 30,700 soldiers have been wounded in action, many with multiple traumatic injuries requiring interdisciplinary treatment; and over 4000 have been killed. Each individual case involves a family caring about the soldier and affected by the deployment and its results. Geographic mobility and separations, multiple and long deployments, and signature injuries such as Minimal and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) from incidents of improvised explosive devices (IED) contribute to difficulties in the soldier transitioning home. The hallmark Rand study found that among the 17% of returning soldiers identified with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, many reported being concerned that seeking services would possibly stigmatize them and this continues to be a challenge.

We have a lot at stake in Texas as our state ranks 3rd in military personnel serving in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Approximately 62,000 troops have returned to reside in Texas after deployments to the war. The high number of military bases in the Central Texas region alone makes our region particularly in need of service innovations and this includes our college campuses. A growing number of families and returning troops and veterans live between Ft. Hood in Killeen and Ft. Sam Houston and Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. The Texas contribution to the war effort is impressive. For example, no installation in the nation has had, or now has, more members deployed in support of the war than Ft. Hood. Almost every major active unit at Ft. Hood has been in the fight at least twice and some now are on a third or fourth rotation. In addition our Texas Guard and Reserve now serve a large numbers and many reside in our geographical area.

Getting It Right
What can universities including Texas State do to support our student veterans? What programmatic initiatives are needed and how do we get there? Research across the country is now beginning to emerge about what helps make a university campus “student veteran-friendly” (5). Although efforts are just now underway in Texas in developing these campus programs, we can benefit from some of the lessons that have been learned across the nation.

Campus Climate
One challenge is to foster a climate of respect and appreciation for our student veterans. Celebrations of Veterans’ Day and other special occasions that reflect our traditions will be a challenge.

Below are are current Texas State Student veterans.

Grant Martin
Major/Minor: Mass Communications Major, Coaching Athletics Minor
Military Experience: 4 years 10 months in the United States Navy as a Mechanic stationed in Mayport, Florida as a member of Squadron HSL-44 (SH-60’s)/Aviation Warfare Specialist.

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? I’d like Texas State Students to know that Texas State icon, Lyndon Baines Johnson was a veteran himself, serving in the United States Navy and achieving the rank of Commander, before becoming our 36th President.

Michael K. Florer
Major/Minor: Political Science with a minor in Geography
Military Experience: Aviation Ordnance Technician F/A-18 VMFA 312 and VMFA 251, Deployed to Kuwait for Beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Deployed to Japan, Thailand, Korea

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? I want veterans to A) Know about the different student organizations on campus, B) Know what impact veterans can have on this campus’ direction now and in the future

Amanda Lewis
Major/Minor: Pre-Social Work
Experience in the service: Air Force Sra computer administrator stationed in Germany for four years, deployed to Kuwait and Iraq. Currently in the Texas ANG.

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? We come from different walks of life and we all have different military experiences.

Joseph Nunez
Major/Minor: Dual Major BBA in Accounting and Finance
Military Experience: I served in the Navy and Retired as a Avionics Technician 1st Class Air Warfare. My eleven years took me around the world while serving on four classes of ships from frigates to the newest class of guided missile destroyers. I have watched as Tomahawk missiles were launched into Iraq at the beginning of the second Iraq war and I have participated in many disaster relief efforts around the world.

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? I would like the students of Texas State to know that a career in the armed services is noble, exciting, and at the very least an adventure.

Justin McNut
Major/Minor: International Studies w/ European Studies Focus

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What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? I would like the students to be aware of how many amongst them have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Joshua Brenner
Major/Minor: Psychology
Military Experience: Petty Officer 3rd class US Navy (4 years) Combat Medic US Army (2 years) USS Hawes (FFG 53) Mark 92 Mod 6 weapon system. Norfolk, VA. Participated in NATO Exercise STRONG RESOLVE 02 in the Baltic Sea, deployed to the Mediterranean Sea with the HARRY S. TRUMAN Carrier Strike Group, where HAWES served as the U.S. representative to Standing Naval Forces Mediterranean during Operations Active Endeavor and Iraqi Freedom. Fort Lewis, Washington 3rd BDE, 2nd INF DIV. Iraq

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? I'd like students to remember the blessing that it is to be able to attend Texas State University, or to attend any college right out of high school. It’s easy to forget how trivial college life/issues can be in comparison to what our brothers and sisters are enduring overseas.

Christopher M. Willis
Major/Minor: Criminal Justice/ Forensic Psychology
Military Experience: Army Airborne Infantry Mortarman: Served with Iron Troop 3rd Squadron 2nd Armored Calvary Regiment in Bosnia and Croatia. Trained for two years at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). It’s the US Army’s premier training center for light infantry and special operations units. Also received the highest proficiency level on every weapon the Army trained me on.

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? There aren’t just male veterans attending Texas State. There are many hard working and experienced female veterans attending classes that earned the same recognition as male veterans.

Michael Hendrickson
Major: Exercise and Sports Science w/ emphasis on physical therapy

What do you want other Texas State students to know about student veterans that they may not know? Vets have a lot more to offer to the University other than military/combat experience.

appreciation for their service and sacrifice go a long way in creating a welcoming home for them. A supportive environment where student veterans have input into the services offered is equally important. This also means developing an understanding among all university stakeholders—students, staff, and faculty—about who these student veterans are and what challenges they face on campus. Training our university community to understand where these veterans have been and what that might mean for their transition to campus is essential.

Peers Support and Leader
Student veterans have much to share and have developed impressive leadership skills that other students can benefit from. Our newly created and student veteran led Bobcat Veterans continues the team spirit that student veterans are accustomed to in the military. Team building is not new to these students and indeed has kept them alive while in combat. Student veterans need a place to meet, plan, and build a sense of community among each other. They are indeed a band of brothers and this is a strength that can be the foundation for their success on campus. Just as they helped each other on the battlefield, student veterans want to help each other succeed in the university as well. They need to only be supported in a new environment to put these leadership skills to work.

Access to Tailored Information
From the beginning of the application process, to class information, to mentoring and degree requirements, a student veteran-friendly campus shapes its information and access to it to meet the needs of its veterans. This includes campus orientations, advising, written materials and web-based information. This generation of veterans like other students are technologically savvy and want to access information on-line and 24/7. Future student veterans need information when they are still on active duty so they can plan for their transition. Universities must make access easy, seamless, and visible. Universities need to also go upstream in the process and communicate with Veteran Centers and do outreach to educate this student group before they apply. Many active duty military do not have the information about university policies nor how to use their new educational benefits.

Coordination of Services
Universities have many services across myriad departments—Financial Aid, Counseling, the Career Center, Housing, Admissions, and the Registrar just to name a few. Student veteran-friendly campuses appoint a single point of contact for information so that questions can be directed to an office and person responsible for problem solving, planning, and identifying where coordination needs to happen. Universities report that a one-stop student veteran center is helpful in preventing student veterans from falling through the cracks in the system.

Developing Partnerships
Reaching out to external partners in the community can help ease the transition as well. Many state, federal, and non-profit services are available in the community and a focus on developing those networks among health services, potential employers, and VA outreach centers for example can be beneficial to the university and the student veterans. Student veterans have families and these families also need services so that their veteran can remain in the university and be successful. Providing information to student veterans about on-going changes in benefits and other external services can be helpful to the whole family. Partnerships in the university across departments are also helpful and can support veteran-friendly mentoring activities and smoother access to services.

Tracking Progress
Regular communication and checking on student veterans’ progress toward degrees is essential in keeping our student veterans engaged in campus life and on track. Collecting timely information on veteran status at admission, degree progress and their on-going needs is crucial to developing programs that work for them.
Commitment to Developing a Model. The Texas State campus is uniquely situated to become a leader in this veteran-friendly movement on college campuses. Due to its close proximity to military installations and a history of a supportive military environment with two large ROTC units on campus, Texas State will likely see many of these veterans as students as they seek to use their new educational benefits. This is an opportunity for us to lead the state and become not just a veteran-friendly campus but a model program that sets the standard of excellence in Texas and the nation. We can get it right and support the veterans who have done so much for us. Our Texas State campus is on the path to engaging in this challenge with enthusiasm and commitment. Our returning heroes deserve nothing less.

Dr. Selber is a Professor in the School of Social Work, College of Health Professions. She has worked in the field of troop support for five years earning a Presidential Service Award for her work supporting troops and their families. She is a military family member and has a son in the Air Force who commissioned from the ROTC unit on campus in 2004. He has served two tours of duty—in Baghdad and Afghanistan.

References

Veterans Affairs

The Office of Veterans Affairs at Texas State assists veterans in pursuing their educational objectives. We are available to answer questions concerning veterans’ educational benefits, to certify enrollments for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and monitor students’ academic progress.

Although our office works to ensure that Department of Veterans Affairs’ regulations are satisfied, we are a division of the Texas State University – San Marcos Registrar’s Office. We have no authority to make judgments regarding benefit eligibility or status. Only the Department of Veterans Affairs may determine the eligibility of individuals for educational benefits and to approve payment thereof.

In Support of Student Veterans Organization

The Texas State Office of Veterans Affairs will strive to keep the student organization informed about the status of federal and state GI Bill legislation. Also, we will monitor the status of changes to the Texas Hazlewood Exemption Act and report forthwith to the student organization leadership.

The Veterans Affairs Department is located in JCK, room 111; 245-2641 and on the web http://www.va.txstate.edu/ email: veteransaffairs@txstate.edu.

If you are a student veteran and need help/guidance with on-campus resources, then contact Sheila Bustillos Reynolds, Coordinator for Retention Management and Planning at 512.245.2152 or sr35@txstate.edu.