

Needs Assessment of Student Veterans on an Urban Commuter Campus

IUPUI

Janice Childress, M.S.
Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis
University College, Assessment



Background

With the addition of the post-9/11 G.I. Bill, universities are preparing for admission of more veteran students. As of 2008, there were approximately 1.8 million veterans who served during the Global War on Terrorism and college campuses can expect a 20 to 25% increase in their veteran populations in the near future (Garcia, 2009). All veterans eligible for the post-9/11 G.I. Bill have been on active duty for at least 90 days since September 10, 2001 (“New Post-9/11 G.I. Bill Overview”). Thirty-four percent have seen multiple overseas deployments (Garcia, 2009). Even with the increased funding opportunities, veterans still tend to seek out the lower priced more conveniently located institutions (Field, 2008). Urban commuter campuses can accommodate these needs for lower out-of-pocket cost to students. The availability of local job opportunities and the ability to commute can be a significant attraction for these students. Simultaneously come an array of needs varying from navigating university policies, federal policies with G.I. benefits, and coping with emotional, psychological, and physical issues stemming from their service (Garcia 2009). With these needs and statistics in mind, we researched the issues specific to the veteran population in the hopes of improving service to our student veterans and addressing issues that are lowering the retention of this group of students.

Some research has been done in determining the needs and strengths of this student group. This group of students tends to deal with frequent life transitions and a need to change directions when military orders are given (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). In the academic setting, this can mean dropping classes to prepare for a deployment, then returning and trying to start again (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). Combine that with the issues of combat and operational stress (COS) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as difficulty focusing, confusion, and anxiety, and the academic setting can become very challenging. Smith-Osborne suggests more specialized and intensively supported educational programs tailored to veterans (2009), but exactly what should these programs look like? How as an urban commuter institution should IUPUI address these needs? What needs are specific to our mostly commuting students who have a tendency to work while attending college? How many of our students are separated from the armed services and how many are still serving? How many are in a status that may require them to be deployed again, putting their education temporarily on hold? The answers to these questions need to be found in order to determine how to best serve our students.

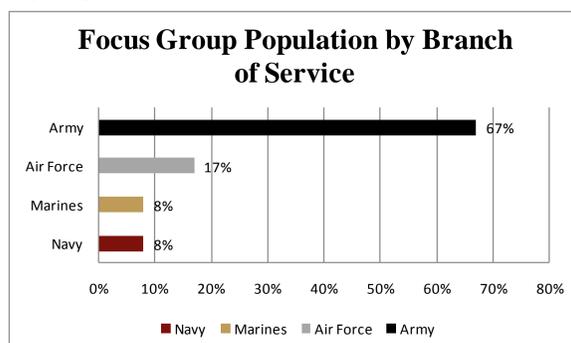
Method

Participants were invited to attend focus groups based on being identified as a veteran in the appropriate student group from the IU data warehouse. These students were enrolled in the spring 2011 semester at IUPUI. The student group code was tied to the G.I. benefits the student was receiving. Care was taken to exclude students receiving benefits because they were a dependent of an eligible vet, limiting the study to those who had served personally in the armed forces. This study is limited to the needs of students who have personally served or are currently serving in the armed forces.

Upon agreeing to participate and arriving at a focus group, participants were given a short online survey to collect basic demographic information. They were then asked a set series of questions concerning how their military and educational experience was working together, their feelings of acceptance at IUPUI, issues concerning deployments and IU policy, and finally issues involving using the G.I. benefits. All data was gathered either through the online survey done with the researcher present or face-to-face discussions during the focus groups. A total of 6 focus groups were conducted with the same prescribed set of questions posed at each group for comparison purposes. Data was recorded electronically and transcribed later to ensure no information was missed. Quantitative data concerning the entire IUPUI undergraduate veteran population was also analyzed to aid the researcher in determining what questions might be pertinent to the discussion. Creswell discusses using a concurrent mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive analysis, allowing both sources of data to inform on the research problem (Creswell, 2003).

Participants

From the pre-focus group survey, data on participants was gathered to provide further insight into the group. Additional quantitative data on IUPUI's veteran population is available in the handout accompanying the poster presentation.



Results



Very satisfied with the Office for Veteran & Military Personnel

“IUPUI has one of the best Veteran Affairs offices I have ever experienced. Other universities make students do all the work. Here they help you.”

“VA messed up some things with my funding. IUPUI's veteran office sorted it out. They went out of their way to help me.”

Somewhat dissatisfied with IUPUI's consideration of military transfer credit

“Military schools are intense. You get very little or generic credits for them, which don't count towards a degree.”

“The school wouldn't accept all the credit I received. There are 25-30 wasted credits that don't apply towards anything.”

Somewhat dissatisfied with credits provided for military duty performed during deployments

“Things I've done in the military far outweigh what I learn here. I am doing graduate work in the military. It doesn't translate well. What you actually learn and what those life experiences equate to nobody gets but another vet.”

“In my first deployment, I wanted to use what I did as internship hours. I had a lot of problems getting the army and the school to communicate. I thought this should count for something and it counted for nothing but life experience.”

“I did 15 months living in Iraq and did cultural training before stepping foot in country. Can IUPUI learn what we do and give credit? They already give credit for semesters abroad.”

Somewhat dissatisfied with awareness of veteran issues for faculty

“There is a misunderstanding of the word veteran. There is an assumption of dysfunction, not function. There is a misunderstanding of how people in the military are socialized and educated.”

“I will sit in the back of the room because of a phobia of people coming up behind me. Professors sometimes want me to move closer but it can make me feel nervous.”

“Professors might want medical waivers for missed classes due to war-related disabilities. I use VA for health coverage. VA appointments take a few weeks to get you in. There is a walk-in clinic, but the wait can be longer than 3 hours.”

Somewhat dissatisfied with student veteran and faculty awareness of policies concerning deployments and benefits

“Bursar, registrar, and students need to know the ins and outs of the process. This element should be part of their orientation – what to do if they deploy.”

{The financial aspects of military benefits}... are a bureaucratic nightmare because of the size of the program. Some students are depending on the monthly housing allowance for their living. They need the money on the day promised. IUPUI can counsel them when they first inquire into the benefit and make sure they are aware that the money may be late from time to time. They should be prepared for this.”

Dissatisfied with the policy that assigns a grade of W for a dropped class due to a military obligation

“I have whole semesters with W's for every class – 2 or 3 semester's worth, because of dropping classes for a deployment. Transcripts look unfairly bad because of these W's.”

“For undergraduates looking to go to graduate school in the future, all W's look bad. It is not always clear that it is due to a deployment.”

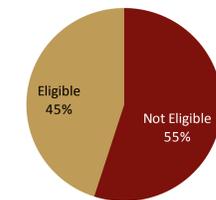
Student deployment habits may be unintentionally lowering retention

“When I was deployed, I knew a year in advance and I had just finished a semester. I just didn't register for the next semester. Then I returned as a transfer student to another campus.”

Participants Continued

Participants included 12 current IUPUI students, including 2 graduate students and 10 undergraduate students. 92% ($N = 11$) were over the age of 25 and 75% ($N = 9$) were male. 33% ($N = 4$) work more than 30 hours a week. 100% live off-campus and 100% are living independently from their parents. One student did not complete the survey.

Focus Group Population by Eligibility for Future Deployments



Recommendations

1. Offer continued support for the Office for Veteran & Military Personnel.
2. Consider reporting to schools the participant's comments concerning credits for specific courses.
3. Further study into the use of military duty as internship, leadership credits, or overseas credits.
4. Explore creating a training session for faculty that includes policy on military deployments and military culture.
5. Explore creating a checklist for deployment readiness concerning a student's academic career. Distribute to continuing veteran students via email and new students at orientation.
6. Consider coding military withdrawals differently on transcripts from other withdrawals.
7. Consider informing the student of the need to report a deployment even if they do not need to withdrawal from all classes.

Further Study

Due to the small number of participants, it is recommended that a survey instrument further explore the areas highlighted earlier to be given to a broad group of student veterans.

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