Needs Assessment of Student Veterans on an Urban Commuter Campus

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 (Garica, 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 (Garica, 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 costs 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 (Garica 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 is 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

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 student receiving benefits because they were a dependent of an eligible vet, limiting the study to those who had personally served 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 of questions concerning how their military and educational experiences were working together, their feelings of acceptance at IPU’s, benefits of using benefits and IU policy, and issues involving the use of 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 determine 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).

Results

Participants Continued

Focus Group Population by Branch of Service

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Eligible</th>
<th>Not Eligible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
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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.”

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.

Somewhat dissatisfied with credits provided for military duty performed during deployments

"Things I’ve done in the military outweigh what I learn here. I am doing graduate work in the military. I don’t translate well. What you actually learn and what those life experiences equate to probably get but another vet.”

Somewhat dissatisfied with awareness of veteran issues for future service

“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.”

Somehow satisfied with student veteran and faculty awareness of concerns pertaining to benefits and policies

"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 encounter a financial issue.

Disatisfied 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.

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.”

References


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Focus Group Population by Eligibility for Future Deployments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligible</th>
<th>Not Eligible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
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Focus Group Population by Eligibility

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 be given to a broad group of student veterans.

Focus Group Population by Eligibility

Participants included 12 current IUPUI students, including 2 graduate students and 10 undergraduate students. 92.5% (N = 11) were over the age of 25 and 75% (N = 9) were male. 33% (N = 4) worked more than 30 hours a week. 100% live off-campus and 106% are living independently from their parents. Not one student did complete the survey.