Combat Zone to Campus: Facilitating Effective Transitions

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At end of Fall ‘09–’10 semester, 173,000 veterans in classrooms at 6500 colleges and universities.

New GI Bill (Chapter 33) improved benefits makes pursuit of post-secondary education more attractive, especially in present difficult employment environment.

Veterans often mature, highly motivated, study hard, and have wide-ranging experiences including exposure to other cultures.
Successful campus environment for the Student Veteran

- Elements of successful campus environment
  - Welcoming environment
  - Peer Support
  - Mental and behavioral health services knowledgeable about readjustment problems of student veterans.
  - Readily available assistance for obtaining benefits and services from VA and elsewhere.
Student Veteran- supportive campus

- Interacting with veterans
  - Welcome veteran home, express appreciation for service.
  - O.K. Questions: Where were you stationed? What did you do in the military? How are you doing now?
  - Ill-advised Questions: Did you kill anyone? Did you see anyone die? Do you think we’re winning? Do you think it’s worth the cost?
Interacting with the student veteran

- Avoid
  - Pressing a veteran for information about their military service they might not want to share with you.
  - Minimizing the challenges the student veteran might face.
  - Making assumptions about any veteran’s political or foreign policy views.
  - Singling out a veteran without prior approval.

U. of Minnesota website
Importance of peer contact and peer support:

- Campus locations encouraging veterans to interact.
  - E.g., VETS Center, TTC
- Student Organizations
  - Student Veterans of America (SVA): national coalition of student veteran groups; founded in 2008 as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization to help develop student groups on campuses, connect these groups with resources, and advocate at state and national levels for student veterans. Over 200 member groups.
- Mentoring (“buddy”) practices: established student veterans helping newer student veterans learn the ropes.
American Psychological Association recommendations to Congress regarding student veteran mental and behavioral health care on campus:

- Making resources available for efforts to address mental and behavioral health risks, including suicide risk.
- Providing training to campus mental health professionals regarding deployment and readjustment issues of student veterans and their families.
- Developing mechanisms to outreach to veterans who begin their post-secondary education online while deployed.

Presented 5/19/09 to House Veterans Affairs Health Subcommittee by Jeffrey Pollard, Ph.D., ABPP, Director of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center, George Mason University.
• Recently deployed veterans at increased risk for suicide, especially if readjustment not going well.
• Everyone can be alert for warning signs: talking about death or suicide; depressed mood.
• If underlying condition (e.g., Depression, PTSD, mTBI) is treated effectively, suicide can usually be averted.
• National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK)
  • Veterans press “1” and are routed to VA Crisis Counselor; available 24/7.
  • [Website Link] internet chat with VA Crisis Counselor; available 24/7
Student Veteran: Suicide Programs

- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Suicide Prevention Resource Center grants:
  - Purpose: “provide prevention support, training, and resources to assist organizations and individuals to develop suicide prevention programs, interventions, and policies...”
  - “SAMHSA strongly encourages all applicants to consider the unique needs of returning veterans and their families in developing their proposal project.”
Campus support: veterans’ benefits

- Maintain effective working relationships with DoD, VA and SC County Veterans Affairs. Events such as VA Health Fair on campus can facilitate student veteran’s access to care and better health.

- VA contacts
  - Charleston Vet Center (843) 789-7000
  - VAMC OEF/OIF Care Management Team
    - Pat O’Leary, Transition Patient Advocate (843) 789-6648

- SC County Veterans Affairs
  - Charleston County (843) 974-6360
  - Berkeley County (843) 377-8506
  - Dorchester County (843) 832-0050
Effective campus environment: summary

- Student veteran feels welcome and their military service appreciated. Help is available to transition from the battlefield to the classroom, including counseling services.
- Peer support helps the student veteran make effective transition to new environment.
- Cooperative relationships exist between campus and available VA and DoD resources. Benefits resources are readily accessible with minimal red tape.