

A high-contrast, black and white photograph. In the upper portion, a person's profile is visible on the left, looking towards a small American flag that is illuminated and positioned in the center-right. The background is dark and grainy. The overall mood is contemplative and focused.

From Soldier To Student

New Study Highlights Programs, Services Targeted to Veterans

On the Battlefield

My interest in this population was stimulated when I participated in a civilian program sponsored by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in June 2004. As one of a select group of 40 civilians chosen from approximately 400 applicants, I traveled for five days in one of the command centers of the U. S. military as part of the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference program.

During a whirlwind tour of the European command, I talked with men and women serving in Germany, Bosnia, Azerbaijan, and Spain. Some had been college students; some were reservists still in shock to find themselves on a tour of duty. I talked with a young reservist from Indiana who had worked in construction following high school. His hope was to begin college when his tour of duty ended, even though he knew he would be older than his peers who went directly from high school to college. His military experience had helped him recognize that he wanted more from life than what he perceived was attainable without a college education.

I spoke with young men and women who, often on guard in the middle of a field with no one in sight for miles, had lots of time to think about what they wanted to do when they returned. Walking with these soldiers on patrol, sharing long bus rides through dangerous territory, and standing guard with them in open fields fully exposed to snipers brought me closer to their world and gave me an opportunity to learn about their fears, hopes, and dreams.

It is difficult to escape the constant media attention on the transition issues facing military personnel and veterans. They will be unique learners, bringing vastly different experiences to campus than their peers. Many veterans will be returning from war with serious injuries that would have been fatal in earlier wars. The great strides in scientific research and medical innovations have made miraculous physical prosthetics and reconstructions possible for injured service members.

Miracles notwithstanding, the re-entry for these veterans is not going to be easy, as described by one female amputee in the 2006 article in *The Washington Post* titled "Limbs Lost to Enemy Fire, Women Forge a New Reality": "When you're in Walter Reed [Army Medical Center], you're in a bubble. I could walk around with my arm off. It's acceptable. Everyone there knows . . . but when you walk out the gate, it's a whole different world. No one knows what I've been through, no one probably cares, and to avoid all that, I never come out without my [prosthetic] arm. Never."

Are We Ready?

We are still learning how to accommodate and serve those veterans and others who suffer from TBI (traumatic brain injury) and other brain injuries and the legions of veterans who have symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other emotional concerns that could adversely affect their learning capabilities. On the long flight back from the European Command, I was consumed with how these service men and women were ready for college, yet U.S. colleges and universities were not ready for them. I immediately conducted some telephone interviews with student affairs professionals

to assess available veterans' services on their campuses. Some had not seen an increase in the number of returning vets while others were overwhelmed. Initially, the focus was getting veterans the financial aid they needed to begin school. The biggest concern was a lack of communication between the Veterans Administration, the veteran, and higher education institutions. Based on a few interviews, I created a short, unsophisticated survey, and sent it to select student affairs professionals to get a sense of the number of returning military personnel; their college experiences; and programs that were working and not working for them.

In response to my question about the most important preparation colleges needed to make, one respondent noted, "We need a better understanding of the frustrations [veterans] experience upon return and how we might better support them." Senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) must be sure the campus community understands that those same individuals who are adapting to loss of limbs and compromised physical and mental abilities were in their physical prime prior to their injuries. Most of these individuals had never thought about or had to navigate an incredibly complex web of supports and services, now

made even more complicated by their injuries. When I spoke with veterans at The Pennsylvania State University in spring 2009, the term "reintegration" was used frequently. SSAOs must focus on easing the transition for veterans and helping them reintegrate. We must help them take the first steps on the road to success and help them view their campuses as places of support. In the words of one veteran with whom I spoke, "The military provides all the support you need while you're in the military, but when you leave, the services are no longer there. In other words, vets have to paddle the boat for themselves; before the military paddled the boat for them."

From Soldier to Student

In an effort to get a more comprehensive sense of the assistance available in "paddling the boat," NASPA collaborated with the American Council on Education (ACE), the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) to develop the recently published report titled "From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus." The report offers a first-of-its-kind national snapshot of the programs, services, and policies in place on U.S. campuses to serve veterans and military personnel, and identifies those areas where additional progress is needed.

Based on data from 723 institutions of higher education, the report finds that 57 percent of responding institutions currently provide programs and services specifically for military personnel and veterans. "Our findings suggest that institutions are increasingly aware of the complex needs of veterans and military personnel pursuing postsecondary education programs and are concerned with how best to meet those needs," says SOC Consortium President Kathy M. Snead. "The fact that 60 percent of responding institutions view veterans programs and services as part of their long-term strategic plans



speaks volumes about higher education's receptivity and commitment to our service members and veterans."

While we know campuses are increasingly aware of this unique student population, the survey also confirms the results of my earlier informal survey and my gut reaction in returning from the European Command: In many ways, colleges and universities still are not ready to serve returning veterans and service members. While many campuses have a liaison for veterans, more training is needed to prepare faculty and staff for interacting with this population.

Access the Report

To view the full report *From Soldier to Student*, access www.naspa.org/vets.pdf. The report provides a benchmark for institutions to measure their progress to date in this area.

Meeting the Needs

According to the report, higher education is meeting the needs of military students in the following areas:

- **Recognizing prior military experience.** Eighty-one percent of institutions with services for military personnel and veterans award college credit for military training.
- **Assisting military students with finding appropriate counseling services.** Eighty-five percent of campus counseling centers at institutions with services for military students coordinate and refer students to off-campus services when necessary.
- **Providing financial accommodations for military students who are called to active duty.** Seventy-nine percent of colleges and universities with military services have an established policy for refunding tuition for military activations and deployments.
- **Assisting military veterans with their education benefits.** Eighty-two percent of postsecondary institutions provide counseling on Department of Veterans Affairs education benefits for military students.

Room for Improvement

Areas in which higher education can improve its efforts to serve military students include the following:

- **Assisting military students with their transition to the college environment.** Only 22 percent of postsecondary institutions with services for military students and veterans provide transition assistance.
- **Providing professional development for faculty and staff on the transitional needs of military students.** Approximately two of five schools that serve military students and veterans provide training opportunities for faculty and staff to better assist these students with their transitional issues.
- **Training staff to meet the needs of military students with brain injuries and other disabilities.** Twenty-three percent of colleges and universities that serve military students and veterans have staff who are trained to assist veterans with brain injuries, and 33 percent have staff trained to assist veterans with other physical disabilities.
- **Streamlining campus administrative procedures for veterans returning from military deployments.** Only 22 percent of institutions with programs and services for military personnel have developed an expedited re-enrollment process to help students restart their academic efforts.
- **Providing opportunities for veterans to connect with their peers.** Only 32 percent of institutions with services for veterans and military personnel have clubs or other organizations for these students.

Join the Conversation

Let us know what your campus is doing to serve veterans and returning service members. Share areas of concern and the kind of professional development you'd like NASPA to provide to better prepare you and your colleagues to work with this unique student population. Log on to the Members-only section of the NASPA website at www.naspa.org, and post your comments to the "Hot Topics" discussion board. ☐

Gwendolyn Jordan Dundy is executive director of NASPA.

Policies and Programs Accessible to Veterans

By Ron Herron

Veterans find a warm, supportive, hospitable community at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU), thanks to the special attention and range of services they receive from its Office of Veterans Affairs. For 34 years, the office has provided continuous support to returning veterans—recruiting them into the university's degree programs, ushering them through the admission and financial aid applications process, advising them in course and program selection, and guiding them to graduation.

The director of the Office of Veterans Affairs advises student veterans in all areas of university and academic life and acts as their personal advocate in accessing such services as counseling, disability resources, computer laboratories, and financial aid and scholarships. The director provides individual academic advisement, counseling, and GI Bill and Connecticut War Veterans /National Guard Tuition Waiver Certification. In addition to assisting student veterans and their families before, during, and after deployments, the director also ensures that SCSU follows its institutional policy for veterans. The policy gives activated veterans, national guardsmen, and reservists a full refund of tuition, books, and fees if they are called to active duty during a semester, and awards the grades they earned at the time of activation. SCSU is committed to giving all veterans the best possible chances for academic success.

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Building a Veteran-friendly Campus

By Victoria Hernandez, John Segoria, and Dilcie Perez

Across the country, veterans and active-duty personnel are pursuing postsecondary education in growing numbers. This trend can be largely attributed to the concerted efforts of many higher education systems and institutions to market themselves as "veteran friendly." What is a veteran-friendly campus and what are some steps that can be taken to achieve that status?

California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), one of 23 campuses that comprise the California State University (CSU) system, has quickly become one of the system's standouts for developing programs and services to better serve veterans and active-duty personnel.

CSUSM is located within easy driving distance of numerous military installations, including the largest Marine base in the United States at Camp Pendleton and several other large Navy bases in San Diego. While the university has attracted students who wish to pursue postsecondary degrees utilizing their Montgomery GI Bill, which provides up to 36 months of education benefits to eligible veterans, many potential students still do not consider college a viable option.

To meet the needs of all veterans and active-duty personnel, the university established a Veterans and Active Duty Educational Steering Committee. Committee members advocate for issues to enhance educational opportunities for veterans and active-duty personnel and develop programs and services to support veterans. The committee includes staff from student affairs and academic affairs, community members from off campus, and students with military backgrounds.

A considerable amount of time and energy has been devoted to fostering effective working relationships with educational services officers at Camp Pendleton and at the local Marine Corps Recruiting Depot. Strong relationships with base educational services officers are absolutely critical to providing on-base educational programs and attracting active-duty personnel. Thanks to a strong working relationship with the educational services officer at Camp Pendleton, the university is offering a kinesiology program on base through its Office of Extended Learning. In addition, the campus was the first and only institution in the CSU system to receive SOC-MAR (Servicemembers Opportunity College degree program for the Marine Corps) status to help students maintain credits as they transition from base to base.

A Holistic Approach

CSUSM has also established a strong working relationship with the local Department of Veterans Affairs offices, specifically the San Marcos Vet Center, the VA Vista Clinic, and the Veterans Administration Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., where university staff held a comprehensive on-site workshop on postsecondary opportunities and available support services for veterans. Additionally, the local San Marcos Vet Center staff provided in-service training for campus counseling professionals to make

them fully aware of mental health services available through the Veterans Administration.

The Student Veterans Organization focuses on veterans, active-duty personnel, and their dependents. Leaders from this student group routinely meet with campus dignitaries, participate in media interviews, and provide outreach to potential students.

In November 2008, a Veterans Center opened on campus, and it has been well utilized by veterans and active duty personnel. Equipped with a computer, coffee maker, comfortable furniture, and pictures of students and friends serving our country, the center sponsors co-curricular programming with the Student Veterans Organization to foster greater awareness of the military. The campus director of disabled student services and the veterans coordinator have worked on many collaborative projects, sponsoring workshops for faculty and staff on expectations of military students returning to the classroom and attending veteran-related events throughout San Diego.

Social events are regularly provided on campus. Early each fall, a Veterans Welcome Reception is held for both student veterans and active-duty personnel to answer questions regarding available programs and services. Additional events include the annual Veterans Day and Memorial Day celebrations, allowing the campus community to re-affirm its support of the military communities.

With the Post 9/11 GI Bill in effect, many military service men and women want to return or start school full time. Under the new GI Bill, veterans attending CSUSM have their fees paid (equivalent to \$1,989 per term), and receive a books and supplies allowance up to \$1,000 per academic year and a monthly stipend of \$2,018. Dependents also receive this benefit based on criteria determined by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration.

This fall, CSUSM has seen an increase in the number of students using their GI Bill benefit as well as veterans eager to start school. The veterans coordinator at CSUSM provides pre-admission evaluations for students to assess what they need to enroll at the university.

It takes a team effort to create a veteran-friendly campus, with a strong commitment from senior management. Excellent collaboration between on-campus staff and off-campus partners directly supports veterans and military personnel and is a critical component for success.

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