RECOGNIZING MILITARY TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE:
Ensuring service member and veteran access to higher learning

Thousands of military members leave service every year, and due to the benefits made available by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, military downsizing and a challenging economy, many recent veterans are choosing to pursue higher education. What are student service members and veterans looking for in higher education? Are colleges and universities equipped to integrate them? How do postsecondary schools address the complex nature and demands of military life? Do they recognize specialized training and service? Are support systems in place to handle their unique situations and issues? Those are some of the questions the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University sought to answer through its *Landscape in Higher Education* series.

Who are military and veteran students and what challenges do they face?

The unique skills and experiences that student service members and veterans acquire over their military career distinguish them from other students, and higher education institutions vary in their readiness for this population. Concerns of student military members and veterans as they return to campus include the following (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; NSSE, 2010; Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010):

» access to educational benefits;

» acknowledgment of extensive mastery-based training;

» recognition of multiple commitments and obligations;

» appreciation of the realities of military service; and

» availability of support for hidden and visible disability.

Student veterans are more likely to be male, older than 24, first generation college students, enrolled part-time, transfer students, distance learners, married with children, and work full- or part-time than other students (NSSE, 2010). One in five also has at least one service-related disability (iCasualties, 2012).

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

MFRI
Military Family Research Institute
at Purdue University

The purpose of this report series

During the past five years, MFRI has assisted almost 100 colleges and universities as they worked to support military personnel and veterans enrolled at their institutions. Our education initiative, called Operation Diploma, provided a variety of forms of assistance, including grants, to two- and four-year public and private institutions. These grants, and their proceeds, improved the lives of more than 6,000 student service members and veterans. As institutions designed and implemented new policies, programs and practices, we monitored their progress and learned from their experiences. This report documents results from our studies of institutions' progress regarding specific actions on behalf of student service members and veterans.

Armed with input from members of both military and civilian communities, available research, and student veterans themselves, we created a set of questions to ask both staff and administrators that focused on areas of the institution that affect student service members and veterans. The goals of the *Landscape in Higher Education* series were to:

» collect information for benchmarking and program improvement;

» assess awareness of the student veteran population in colleges and universities;

» determine what supports and services existed;

» increase awareness of the needs of this group of students; and

» identify promising practices.

Who we contacted

Given our location at Purdue University, we focused our project on Indiana, contacting all of Indiana's postsecondary institutions. Similar to many states across the country, Indiana has no active duty military bases and few active duty service members, but is home to several higher learning institutions and large contingents of National Guard and Reserve members. The data reported below come from 75 institutions (80 percent of the total) that were diverse in size, sector (public/private), category (not-for-profit/for-profit), and degrees offered (undergraduate/graduate). We also contacted 25 benchmark institutions from the list "Best for Vets" institutions published by the Military Times Edge (2011) that were particularly friendly to student service members and veterans — these schools also were diverse in terms of size, focus, public or private, and profit or nonprofit status. Data reported here were collected in 2010 and 2012.

How we did it

We used a "secret shopper" method, whereby calls were made by student service members or veterans to frontline university staff. To compare responses from staff and administrators, the information obtained for each institution was compiled and mailed to a senior administrator at each college or university for confirmation or correction.

We also collected information about the number and duration of calls, how many times callers were transferred, and how helpful schools were when responding to inquiries about military programs. On average, callers made a total of two 11 minute inquiries to obtain information about all interview questions, and were transferred three times during each of the two calls. The student callers rated their agreement with the statement "I believed there was a genuine attempt to provide the requested information" on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The average rating improved from 3.06 in 2010 to 4.14 in 2012.

In this report we focus on how the schools recognize military training and experience, asking schools:

» Do you award credit for military experience or courses taken while in the military?

» Does your institution follow American Council on Education (ACE) recommendations for transfer of military credit?

» Are you a member of Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), recently redesignated as the SOC Degree Network System (SOC DNS)?

What we learned

Awarding course credit for military training and experience

Military service requires considerable training, including a series of core requirements and continued branch and occupational specialty education. At each rank and job level, additional training and professional development are required. Programs vary in content, length and intensity, but are part of both active and reserve components, and typically include classroom and performance-based applied learning.

Evaluating military training and experience for academic credit can be complicated for a number of reasons including variations in military occupation and course coding systems across service branches and limited background knowledge about military educational standards by postsecondary administrators (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Interpretation of recommendations often remains at the discretion of academic units, further contributing to a patchwork of policies and procedures.

In 2010, staff members and administrators gave significantly different responses, with 77 percent of staff, but only 62 percent of administrators, reporting that credit might or would be given for military experience or coursework. This suggests a possible disconnect between staff and administrative knowledge of policy. By 2012, more than 80 percent of both reported that credit might or would be given in 2012. Administrators appeared to become more knowledgeable: While almost one-fourth (25 percent) responded "don't know," in 2010, that number fell to 7 percent in 2012, becoming more similar to staff responses.

ACE guidelines for evaluation and transfer of credit

To evaluate military experience and training, colleges and universities across the U.S. have often used the American Council on Education (ACE) Military Guide (http://www.militaryguides.acenet.edu) to award transfer credit. In cooperation with the Department of Defense (DoD) and postsecondary institutions throughout the country, ACE has established recommendations for awarding specific credit for military coursework, training and experience.

A growing number of state legislatures encourage recognition of military training and experiences, but many postsecondary institutions are either not within those states, not covered by the legislation, or struggle to implement the recommendations. As a result, student service members and veterans have reported that credit transfer is inefficient, lacks transparency and often leads to a frustratingly small number of transfer credits (Cook & Kim, 2009).

In 2010, over 53 percent of staff members and administrators reported that their institution followed ACE recommendations for transfer of military credit, but by 2012, the proportion among staff had fallen to 40 percent. The percentage of both staff members and administrators reporting "don't know" responses grew from 2010 to 2012 (staff: 16 to 24 percent; administrators: 16 to 18 percent), suggesting that when first asked, their "yes" responses may have actually reflected lack of in-depth familiarity with ACE guidelines.

Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges membership

Created in 1972, the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) includes over 1,900 campuses committed to helping service members, veterans and family members attain higher education. The SOC Consortium is currently consolidating into the SOC Degree Network System (SOC DNS) to unify separate service branches and leverage recent DoD educational partnerships.

Both staff and administrators reported increases in institutional membership in SOC between 2010 and 2012 (staff: 30 to 38 percent; administrators: 38 to 49 percent). In 2010, almost half of staff and one-third of administrators didn't know if their school was a member of SOC; by 2012, this proportion had fallen to 26 percent of staff and just 16 percent for administrators. Information gaps also appear to exist between administration and staff understanding of veteran-related university policy and SOC membership.

Higher learning institution differences in veteran support

Public or profit status

Whether a school was public or private (for profit or nonprofit), was not related to the indicators we measured. One trend we noticed was that administrators at public — but not other institutions — were more likely than staff to indicate the existence of support systems for student service members and veterans. Administrators at all schools were also significantly more likely than staff to report being members of SOC.

Institution size

We found no significant differences between small (less than 10,000 students) and large (greater than 10,000 students) institutions for staff members or administrators.

Presence of graduate programs

Relative to those without graduate programs administrators at institutions with graduate programs were significantly more likely to respond "yes" to the questions we asked for this report. However, administrators at schools that had a special focus (e.g., engineering) were less likely to offer veteran student services and tended not to award credit for military coursework and experience. Regarding use of ACE guidelines for transfer credits, both staff and administrators at institutions with graduate programs were more likely than others to say "yes."

Staff versus administrator gap

Though the situation has been improving, we still saw knowledge and information gaps among and between administrators and staff. However, one of the most promising shifts was a decrease in the percentage of staff and administrators who answer "don't know" to our questions. The exception to this pattern concerned the use of ACE guidelines for the transfer of military credit, where we saw an increase in uncertainty for both groups. This may reflect a difference among colleges and programs, as there is wide variation in how much credit and what type of credit is awarded and the process a student must complete to receive that credit. Overall, administrators remain significantly more positive than staff regarding all services offered to student service members and veterans, to include awarding military coursework credit, use of ACE guidelines and SOC membership.

Benchmark institutions

Consistent with their recognition as leaders in support for student service members and veterans, the benchmark schools as a group were more likely to report implementing each of the items we asked about. In 2012, staff responses for benchmark institutions differed significantly from those of Indiana schools:

» awarding credit for military coursework and experience (88 versus 68 percent);

» following the ACE recommendations for transfer of military credit (64 versus 40 percent); and

» SOC membership (64 versus 38 percent).

Administrators at benchmark schools also were significantly more likely than their Indiana counterparts to report using ACE recommendations for credit transfer (80 versus 55 percent) and SOC membership (72 versus 49 percent), but their responses for awarding military credit were similar. Staff and administrators at benchmark schools seemed to communicate greater certainty about policies and resources for student service members and veterans, with relatively low levels of "don't know" responses for both groups.

Why recognizing military training and service matters

The number of student service members and veterans taking advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities is expected to increase substantially in the coming years as troops return from Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S. reduces the size of the military force (American Council on Education, 2012). Veterans are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill which provides cost-of-living and other benefits in addition to 36 months of tuition at two-and four-year colleges and universities, trade and vocational schools, licensing, and on-the-job training programs. The Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Benefits Administration has conducted an aggressive marketing campaign promoting GI Bill educational benefits.

Student veterans are frequently faced with unmet expectations of recognition of prior, competency-based learning, which is an important tool in student retention and success (DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell, 2008; Steele, Salcedo & Cooley, 2010). Military credit transfer policies that recognize prior military training and experience may help students complete a degree within timelines required by DoD and VA education benefit programs.

Military service requires considerable training that varies in content, length and intensity and typically includes both classroom and performance-based applied learning. The ACE Military Guide Online matches military educational experiences with comparable academic credit to help bridge the gap in awarding specific credit for military coursework, training and experience.

Institutional membership in SOC DNS can also be beneficial for military students and veterans. Members of this organization have committed to a set of operating standards which increase campus support for veterans and service members. Now backed by the DoD's Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding, schools will become partners with the DoD on veterans and student service member issues.

The SOC DNS initiatives:

» provide reasonable transfer of credit to avoid excessive loss of previously earned credit and coursework duplication;

» allow reduced academic residency;

» recognize and use the ACE Military Guide Online in evaluating and awarding credit for military training and experience; and

» evaluate and award credit for nationally recognized testing programs, including the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), and English Language Proficiency (ELP).

Military experience may also provide tools to students who are veterans or service members. For example, military experience teaches self-discipline, dedication and many other skills that serve student service members and veterans well on campus. These students bring other assets to campus including maturity and experience, and they are often leaders who are not afraid to speak up (Headden, 2009). Those institutions that acknowledge the issues student service members and veterans face, and that work to facilitate their academic transition will be more likely to attract and retain this growing student demographic.

About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to conduct impactful research and to conduct outreach and engagement activities informed by scientific evidence. We strive to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families, including researchers and practitioners from both military and civilian communities. MFRI is a part of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Health and Human Sciences at Purdue University. For more information about MFRI and its programs, visit www.mfri.purdue.edu.

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