

CREATING A VETERAN-FRIENDLY CLASSROOM

Veterans and current service members are a diverse and dynamic student population at Minnesota State University, Mankato. By affirming our support of the U.S. Department of Education's Eight Keys to Veterans Success¹ and partnering with the Department of Defense's Voluntary Education Program,² our university is committed to serving student veterans. This handout is intended to inform the reader of some common characteristics, assets, and challenges student veterans encounter, along with suggesting some best practices.

STUDENT VETERANS IN THE CLASSROOM

Veterans and military members bring a tremendous amount of experience and insight to the classroom, offering a unique voice and valuable perspective. Given a respectful environment, veterans can offer a distinctive and personal insight that enriches the classroom and the campus. However, surveys repeatedly highlight that student veterans feel alienated and unwelcome discussing their service in classroom settings.

STUDENT VETERANS: WHO ARE THEY?

- **Non-Traditional:** Student veterans tend to be non-traditional students. Research published by the Student Veterans of America³ in 2016 found:
 - 73% of student veterans are male; 27% are female
 - 80% of student veterans are over the age of 25
 - 45% of student veterans are or have been married
 - 46% of student veterans have children
- **Diverse:** Veterans and military members have been intimately exposed to other cultures, religions, beliefs, and backgrounds. Not only is the veteran population representative of society as a whole, the distinctively intense nature of military service results in one of the most diverse experiences possible.
- **In-Transition:** Some veterans may be adapting to new disabilities at the time they enter higher education. As such, they face a vastly different learning experience than expected or previously encountered. The process of understanding these differences, accepting them, and adapting to them can be a complex and confusing experience – especially in the higher education setting. Even without a disability, the transition to higher education can be a difficult and emotional time.
- **Misunderstood:** While some veterans suffer disabilities, most do not. Recent research shows that the general public vastly overestimates the number of Post 9/11 veterans with mental health disorders. This negatively impacts treatment, attitudes, employment prospects, and their own well-being.⁴

WAYS TO SUPPORT VETERAN SUCCESS

The following is a list of common concerns and issues identified by student veterans. Recognizing these can help maximize the participation and success of student veterans.

- 1) **Avoid putting them on the spot.** Veterans and military members are often proud of their service, but it can also be an intensely emotional and personal experience. If seeking a veteran's perspective, offering opportunities without calling on them directly is best.
- 2) **Don't make assumptions about an individual's opinions or politics.** Students have complained of being *told* by an instructor to provide a "military" or "pro-war" perspective. Please remember that the beliefs and opinions of veterans are as diverse as the rest of the students in your class.

¹ "8 Keys to Veterans' Success Sites." Accessed August 03, 2016. <http://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families/8-keys-success-sites>.

² "Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)." Accessed July 19, 2018. <https://www.dodmou.com>.

³ Cate, C., PHD, & Davis, T. (2016). SVA Spotlight (Vol. 2, Ser. 1, Rep.). Washington, D.C.: Student Veterans of America.

⁴ "New Research Reveals Misconceptions about Veterans That Can Keep Them from Securing Jobs, Impact Their Well-being - Edelman." Edelman. Accessed August 03, 2016. <http://www.edelman.com/news/new-research-reveals-misconceptions-veterans-can-keep-securing-jobs-impact-well/>.

- 3) **Consider how political or condemning comments about a war the US is or has been involved in may be interpreted by someone who has personal experiences with it.** To a veteran or a family member, this can be a question of their individual actions and character, not foreign policy. Avoiding broad generalizations encourages veterans to share their unique insights and experiences.
- 4) **Deal with course content involving war and military topics in a sensitive manner.** Course content, especially video clips dealing with war, combat, or other scenes of death may trigger personal and painful memories and can invoke physical responses. This is true not only for the veterans themselves, but also for students who have loved ones currently serving. As issues such as these are discussed, please use care knowing that someone in the class may have an intimate connection. Providing advance notice of these topics can allow students to either prepare or excuse themselves if necessary.
- 5) **Veterans and military members may need to be excused from class for VA appointments and military duties.** These absences must be accommodated according to both MN Statute (192.502) and Minnesota State board policy (5.12.1).
- 6) **Recognize that the transition to college can be very stressful, frustrating, and unexpected.**
 - a. While the transition from military to college can be stressful and challenging in itself, veterans are simultaneously facing other transitions, such as rebuilding relationships and reconnecting with family and friends, or adjusting to a significant loss of income. Often, the full impact of these transitions may not be realized until well after a return.
 - b. Veterans often experience excessive delays in accessing benefits they have earned for college, heightening an already stressful transition.
 - c. Veterans often have high expectations for themselves, classmates, and instructors. Survival in the military depends on teamwork, accountability, and defined roles. The different nature of higher education requires time to understand and adjust.

RESOURCES FOR YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS

The Veterans Resource Center is the university's hub for veterans, military members, and their families; providing assistance and referrals for:

Educational benefits and scholarships
 Veterans' employment and unemployment benefits
 Medical benefits
 Mental health resources
 Family assistance services
 Service-connected disability claims
 Academic support and assistance

The Veterans Resource Center also coordinates events, training, and support activities throughout the year, as well as provides a welcoming space for peer support to aid in student success. Please contact us with any questions or assistance.

Advising and Activities:

Tim Adams
 Military & Veteran Student Success Coordinator
 168 Centennial Student Union
 507-389-1465
tim.adams@mnsu.edu

Benefits & Resources:

David Schrader
 Higher Education Coordinator
 Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs
 173 Centennial Student Union
 507-389-5726
david.schrader@mnsu.edu

*** If you encounter an emergency, contact University Security and/or 911 as appropriate. Further, the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255) can connect veterans in crisis with qualified responders.**