Student Veteran Retention and Completion in Higher Education

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Student Veteran Retention and Completion in Higher Education Case Study Project Proposal

**Background**

Serving in the United States Military comes with a benefit of education at both public and private institutions across the United States before, during, and often after active enrollment. These benefits have led to an increase of student veterans in years past and that number is expected to continue to increase steadily over the next several years (Olsen, Badger & McCuddy, p. 101). Knowing that this student group will continue to give rise, it is important that institutions of higher education learn from the past, review her current position, and strategically plan for the future regarding the support of this student group.

Currently, many institutions have devoted offices and programs to support student veterans, but others are lacking, including my own. I expect to find support may come in the form of admissions and course advising on the front end along with additional services and programs targeted toward this student population as part of the institution’s environment and outcomes. These services can be as simple as additional student groups or organizations purposed with engaging student veterans in a nonacademic manner to separate academia and social life during college. Starting with admissions and financial aid, this student group has a notably different start than most traditional college students. The Post 9-11 GI Bill in and of itself should be enough to support the creation of financial aid advising positions for these students. Financing their education through a government aid riddled with bureaucratic red tape, coupled with the threat of being recalled into active service makes for a tough start to an intended health college career.

This project seeks to review the current programs at my institution, Columbia State Community College and understand how they affect retention and completion rates for student veterans. I want to look at the programs specifically that we offer currently and how they play a role in getting a first-time student veteran through the system and to a degree. With the expected increase of this student group, it is imperative that we plan accordingly and properly distribute and evaluate the resources we are putting toward this student group in order to support its retention and completion rates.

**Objectives**

The overall purpose of my case study is to examine the current state of affairs regarding student veterans at my institution and understand what support structures are needed to play a pivotal role in supporting student veteran retention and completion rates. The primary research question being asked in this case study seeks to answer: what student offices or programs affect retention and completion rates at institutions of higher education? Additionally, it will take answering questions such as: what affects student veterans institutional selection process? This question will help determine the mindset of student veterans in their expectations of their college experience. Lastly, I will consider what steps my institution can take to increase student veteran retention and completion.

**Literature Review**

I began reviewing articles for my literature review by looking at specifically what affects retention and completion of student veterans. Specifically, I reviewed articles that point to the needs of student veterans as it relates to retention and how student veterans differ from traditional college students. In addition, literature was reviewed regarding specific needs tailored to student veterans. The literature reviewed supported institutions needing to have specific and purposeful program for retention of student veterans. This review will discuss the importance of retention with student veterans and the types of services that institutions should consider that influence retention and completion rates.

**Retention**

The initial concern and overarching reason for this case study proposal is that there is an issue with student retention. The first literature reviewed for this proposal addresses the objective of this case study proposal in that it addresses current problems with retention of student veterans. Renn and Reason (2013) specifically address and discuss barriers to retention especially by men and women in the National Guard (Renn & Reason, p. 15). While looking at enrollment patterns, our text discusses the issue of retention as it relates to student veterans often having to take pauses from their education to perform military duties, mentioning that some of these pauses can be for some period of time. Renn et al. noted this is especially important to those students wanting to return to their education and finding reentry an issue after such a sudden disruption terming this patter as “enrollment-to-service-to-enrollment” (Renn & Reason, p. 15).

In addition to returning to studies, Renn et al. continues to discuss the forms of support student veterans will need as they transition back into higher education. The student veteran group issues, including stress and role incongruities have caused student veterans to even see higher education as hostile (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 16).

While this review has somewhat overstated the importance of student veteran retention, an article reviewed in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* listed several reasons that student veterans have retention issues in higher education. The reasons listed below help paint a needed picture that can certainly address or suggest specific institutional offices and programs to affect student veterans.

**Social Connection and Identity.** Student veterans reported in this study as having difficulty connecting socially with traditional students. An apparent social lacking can even come in the form of traditional students lacking knowledge in conversation with student veterans on current affairs especially with those related to currently military operations at home and abroad.

**Mental Health.** Bosari et al. mentions many mental health issues often affecting student veterans including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, and depression (Bosari et al., p. 168). While not listing traditional student data, Bosari et al. also references suicide and ideations as something approximately ten percent of student veterans struggle with.

**Physical Disabilities.**  One of the physical aspects of engaging in combat results often in physical injuries that can even cause true permanent disabilities that affect an individual’s ability to learn and self-regulate (Bosari et al., p. 168).

**Redeployment.** Mentioning National Guard and National Reserves commitments, Bosari et al. also reviews the consequences of deployment as a pause to higher education and its negative effects on retention and completion.

**Differences of Student Veterans and Traditional College Students**

Student veterans do not fit into the traditional college student group. From personal experience as a faculty on a southern community college campus and having been on statewide institutional academic audit teams visiting various campuses across the state of Tennessee, student veterans tend to fit more closely with the nontraditional student group based off perceived average ages alone. Often student veterans do not have the same support structures as traditional college students as well. Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy (2014) supports this distinction and does a great job at comparing the differences between civilian students and student veterans including descriptive feelings of students in those student groups toward being a part of the campus community, GPA performance, and financial assistance.

**Completion**

While this case study concerns itself with retention and completion, most of the literature reviewed did not support a difference in the two, often using both terms interchangeably and does not specifically target my questions regarding student veteran completion specifically. It should be of note however that retention and completion certainly affect one another. While I understand the causative relationship between retention and completion, I do believe there is a difference.

Jenner defines retention as the percentage of students who simply return for a second year at the institution (Jenner, p. 32). Rightly so, Jenner makes a distinction toward retention and completion in that the idea is for the student not just to return from their first year but to successfully complete toward a degree. In addition to retention strategies, Jenner focuses more on academic achievement and degree completion in his work on student veteran groups. Of importance, Jenner explains a requirement for GI Bill assistance as having an end goal toward degree of certificate completion and that progress must be made by student veterans toward those goals to continue receiving GI benefits.

Jenner’s study participants also reported that having a veteran student office with veteran student workers was a major factor toward completion at his community college citing the central role veteran peers in veteran student success (Jenner, p. 32).

**Desired Institutional Support Structures**

Of note, the major lacking factor in Olsen et al.’s study for student support seemed to be social support. Most mention financial support with study respondents stating they felt like they had very little access to support in accessing financial benefits for education with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Financial Factors.** Student veterans often experience trouble accessing their financial aid benefit through the GI Bill and feel there is a lack of support in this area. In a world of unknowns, especially for first time college students, lack of financial aid support can be an unnecessary stressor and burden for the student. ASHE (2011) listed a decent amount of research being completed toward understanding not only issues accessing the financial aid pipeline for student veterans but also in financial policies of institutions especially regarding policies of absences, when student veterans are called away, or activated for duty (ASHE, p. 104).

**Strategic and Administrative.** A causative factor found in research affecting student veteran retention centered around access of support services and lack of specific advising; or advising tailored to those with military experience. The article links to data in the original report that shows less than ten percent of institutions report having an academic advising structure specifically designed for student veterans. (ASHE, p. 105).

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants interviewed for this case study are current student veterans in the Tennessee Board of Regents system, a system with oversight by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Students were selected at random based on information received form the student veteran service office at Columbia State Community College. Students were advised that their information would be held private and that only their views would be expressed in the case study. Ten students were initially contacted to ensure enough participants for interview; seemingly though, all ten students responded with willingness to make contributions. Addressing feedback from the case study project proposal, I limited the scope of interviews to only three current students.

**Interview Components**

Interviews were held in person at my office located on the main Columbia State Community College campus. Interviews lasted approximately fifteen minutes per individual. I did not change the interview questions from the originally posted focus group questions but did change the intent of the interview from being focus group based to individual interview based on prior feedback received. The specific interview protocol used can be found in Appendix A.

**Review of Feedback Received**

Information collected during interviews was reviewed at the end of the interview process to ensure that I did not have a bias toward a future respondent or lead questioning past the interview protocol to achieve information consistent with a prior interview. Information received was reviewed for similarities and differences in overall themes such as those presented in the earlier literature review related to negative aspects that impact student veteran retention and completion. While the literature reviewed stated there was a definitive line between the student veteran and a traditional college student, I was not expectant that it would be such a major theme of feedback received during the interview process.

Information from the interview process and a final copy of this case study will be delivered to the Vice President of Student Affairs at Columbia State Community College in an effort to understand gaps of programs and offices to support student veterans at Columbia State Community College as they relate to information obtained from the literature review and perceptions received from the interviews regarding such.

**Significance**

Student veterans are an important student group on college campuses today. They are our nations heroes and deserve the admonition, respect, and support of higher education institutions. Knowing the difficulties that tradition students face, this subset of nontraditional students will experience additional hurtles that can affect retention and completion. The significance of this case study proposal seeks to serve as a gap analysis to provide information on where we as an institution are succeeding or failing in our mission to retain and complete student veterans.

**Interview Findings**

The first individual interviewed seemed very interested to speak about his experience as a student veteran. It became evident very early on that the biggest issue facing this student as far as retention is concerned was related to the lack of financial aid structure for student veterans. “It seems like they don’t care about us or are just pushing us off to another department all of the time”, “signing up to defend our country was much easier than navigating the GI Bill” (E. McCullough, research conversation, February 17, 2020). The comments made by this interviewee clearly agreed with the information in Olsen et al’s. study regarding the lack of social structure with the financial aid portion facing student veterans.

Another student felt as if he was completely different as a being on the campus from his peers stating that, “they don’t even know what hard work is, heck, they complain often about discussion postings or group assignments and don’t understand the real world.” “My brothers in combat rely on discussions and group assignments to bring our squad home each mission, we don’t get a choice” (J. Jackson, research conversation, February 17, 2020). In addition to feeling different than his peers, Sgt. Jackson also discussed a negative feeling of being ill advised academically due to the unforeseen issue of being called away from academia on orders.

While sharing many of the same sentiments, one interviewee was quick to note positives that our campus provides and attributed some of those items to his “staying on” and “staying strong.” Sgt. Marks noted that:

“the student veterans organization on the main Columbia campus gave me an outlet to discuss my education situation with other brothers who are going through the same thing. We met several times a month and were allowed to discuss issues we faced in classes and helped each other overcome those issues. We had faculty members that were veterans that also attended and quickly became academic coaches where many of us felt we had been left behind or been given the wrong info” (D. Marks, research conversation, February 17, 2020).

**Discussion**

My goal was to understand the difference in the student veteran sub group and to use those differences to ensure that my institution was taking positive strides to ensure that these differences caused as little impact for our student veteran population as possible as it relates to their retention and completion in higher education. It was clear through the literature review and through interviewing current student veterans that there are issues that affect our student veterans. Namely, I found the most stressed issues affecting student veteran retention to revolve around their difference (as a whole) to the traditional student population and the difficulty in having to take pauses in education, with the unknown of returning to studies at a later time.

These student veterans supported the literature studied and together this should beg for more to be done on the topic of supporting our student veterans. Of the most significance was the fact that these student veterans had solutions to the retention and completion issues; they didn’t want to just respond to complain. Multiple times two individuals stated that they wanted to be a solution to the problem and not just complain that problems exist.

**Implications for Practice**

This case study made it evident that changes need to be made at my institution and across the nation to better support our student veterans. I believe the first step in increasing retention and completion is going to be developing a consistent system and governing body for GI Bill use. One of the overwhelming themes was not being able to retrieve financial aid advising because of how poor this aid has been publicized, rendered, and the depth and breath to which current institutional personnel are trained regarding its availability and use. Not only do financial aid matters impact a student remaining enrolled but it could also impact student admission, which was not even looked at in this case study.

Additionally, we need to do a better job at educating our current student base and faculty/staff to ensure they are aware of the diversity in our student groups. What one student veteran felt was a stigma on being different turned out to be supported by the literature. This movement could and should begin in the administrative outsets from the beginning instead of being caught on the backend. Increases to academic advising is just an example of how frontloading academic support could help additional student veterans complete their degree or be in a positioned spot to return to higher education if forced to take an educational absence due to being called to war.

To speak of the positives, the student veterans interviewed for this case study did feel like our institution was taking positive steps to ensure additional social options during their time as a student at our institution. It was great to see how well the student veteran’s organization was received and how important they felt that it was.

I now, even more than before, believe we should be putting our best foot forward for our student veterans. They have given us so very much and it only seems fitting that we give them our best in return. The issues noted in this case study to be affecting retention and/or completion of the student veteran subgroup by and large for the most part can be fixed and we should be taking appropriate strides to do so.

References

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**Appendix A**

**Student Veteran Interview Protocol**

Thank you for attending today’s research interview centered around student veterans. My name is Gregory S. Johnson, and I am researching information regarding retention and completion of student veterans. Please be honest with your feedback today as information gathered from this interview will help to applaud current positive institutional programs and services for student veterans and spur additional conversations on needed programs and services for student veterans that we currently lack. Thank you very much for participating in this interview!

1. Active duty status?
   1. Active
   2. Reserves
   3. Veteran
2. Number of semesters completed at current institution?
   1. 1-2
   2. 2-6
   3. 6+
3. Reason for choosing your academic institution?
4. Positive attributes (including programs and offices) perceived of your institution toward student veterans?
5. Negative attributes (including programs and offices) perceived of your institution toward student veterans?
6. Suggestions for additional programs and support services for student veterans?

This is the end of the interview, thank you for your participation.