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Serving those who served: Understanding the needs of student veterans

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Serving Those Who Served: Understanding the Needs of Student Veterans

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A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the selfless men and women who protect our nation. May you forever have fair winds and flowing seas.

Acknowledgements

This research could not have been completed if it were not for the tireless efforts of Boyce McClellan, Dr. David Onestak, Dr. Jennifer Taylor, JMU's Student Veteran Association, JMU's Veterans Scholars Task Force, my research committee: Dr. Renee Staton, Dr. Lennis Echterling, and Dr. Anne Stewart, and my dear friends and family. You all have inspired me to always reach for the stars. Thank you for your patience, wisdom, care, and guidance.

Abstract

Following the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill), higher education witnessed a nationwide influx of student veterans. In the last decade, this population has continued to gain significant momentum as a result of the educational benefits offered to service members and their families within the Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008. James Madison University recognized this growing trend and researched how to best serve the academic and personal needs of the student veteran community by conducting a needs assessment. The data from the needs assessment and literature from several university veteran task forces were reviewed and used to develop program recommendations at JMU. These recommendations outlined the need for an advanced registration policy for student veterans; the creation of a veteran center; stronger focus on veterans within the orientation program; and the development of a training program for faculty and staff to broaden their understanding of student veterans. The survey results also emphasized how student veterans differ demographically from their civilian-student peers and appear to generally be older, married, have a child, work full time, and have a more developed sense of personal identity.

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Introduction

“I’ve dropped out of school twice. This is my third shot.” Student veteran and Former Chief Petty Officer for the United States Navy, Jack Willmont¹, is hopeful that the third time is the charm in college. Feelings of frustration and alienation led Jack to leave college twice before and left him wondering if he would ever fulfill his aspiration to further his education.

Following the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also commonly known as the GI Bill, higher education witnessed a nationwide influx of student veterans like Jack. Fifty-one percent of returning World War II veterans embraced the educational benefits offered by the bill and began a trend that has grown with the United States involvement in global conflict (Mettler, 2005). As greater and greater numbers of soldiers served their country in the Korean and Vietnam wars, more veterans returned to civilian life seeking higher education. In the last decade, this trend has continued to gain significant momentum as a result of the educational benefits offered to service members and their families through the Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008 (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Cook and Kim (2009) evaluated this increasing trend and surmised that postsecondary institutions are currently experiencing the highest influx of student veterans since World War II. Over 564,000 veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are receiving educational benefits. The American Counsel of Higher Education (2009) found similar results and reported that during the academic year of 2007-2008, approximately 660,000 veterans and 215,000 military service members were enrolled in undergraduate institutions, representing around 4% of the student population. Equally, Elliot, Gonzalez, and Larson (2011) reported that over 210,000 veterans utilized the Post

¹Name changed per request of participant

9/11 bill to attend college in the fall of 2010. Substantial enrollment gains were also witnessed between 2005 and 2010 at Western Michigan University during which they experienced a 43% expansion in their student veteran enrollment (Moon & Schma, 2011).

Trends at Other Universities

Auburn University

The significant influx in student veteran enrollment has led higher education institutions to consider the frustrations of student veterans like Jack and ask the question: “How can higher education best serve the needs of the student veterans?” In 2010, Auburn University heard the call to arms and developed a twenty-three member veteran task force to identify how Auburn could better serve the needs of their student veterans (Auburn University Veteran Task Force, 2010). The task force consisted of interdisciplinary faculty, administrators, and students from focus areas such as financial aid, veteran orientation, and academic success.

Auburn’s task force conducted student veteran focus groups and interviews to receive feedback about their veteran services. After analyzing the data, the task force developed a report of concerns and provided recommendations for remediation. A primary concern outlined by the data suggested a lack of coordinated resources for student veterans and dependents receiving military benefits (2010). Consequently, the task force recommended the establishment of a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) that would support the needs of student veterans by integrating campus offices such as financial services, student affairs, academic support, and student counseling services in one centralized location. According to Auburn, this integrative approach would better serve the practical needs of student veterans by increasing the ease of access to veteran

services and improving communication amongst the academic departments (See Figure 1).

The University of Hawaii

Thousands of miles away, The University of Hawaii (UH) also heard the call to support the needs of their student veterans). According to UH's Interim President, David Lassner,

We owe all of our veterans a path to a high-quality degree that will help them find rewarding employment... Veterans have a wealth of talent and expertise to share if we are successful in providing them with higher education experiences that enable them to obtain great jobs and contribute in our communities (UH Task Force of Veterans Affairs Formed, 2011, n.p.).

True to his words, UH recently formed a fifteen-member task force comprised of UH students, faculty, staff, and community members within UH's ten-campus system. The Task force estimates that UH enrolls more than 2,400 veterans, roughly four percent of the student body, and seeks to do more for their student veterans by collaborating with other UH campuses (2011). UH's task force is hopeful that these collaborative efforts in conjunction with data collection will help foster the development of student veteran services and thereby proposes to:

Survey and catalog current capabilities and practices of UH campuses relative to known best practices and available programs; work with UH veteran students and recent veteran graduates to understand barriers and contributors to their enrollment and success; identify ongoing system wide approaches to collecting and utilizing data to inform the extent and success of veterans' participation at

UH; provide recommendations for priority actions across the UH System and campuses that will improve the educational access and success of our veteran students; and identify changes in federal policy that would support increased access and success for student veterans (2011, n.p.).

Following these proposed investigations, UH hopes to provide recommendations on how to best serve the needs of their student veterans.

The University of Arkansas

In stride with the progressive efforts of Auburn and UH is the University of Arkansas (UARK). Recently, UARK formed an interdepartmental veteran task force to assess the needs of their student veterans and create a more “veteran-friendly” campus. (University of Arkansas Task Force to Study Needs of Student Veterans, 2008). Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong (2009) defined a veteran-friendly environment as “the efforts made by individual campuses to identify and remove barriers to educational goals of veterans, to create smooth transitions from military life to college life, and to provide information about available benefits and services”. UARK believes that creating a veteran friendly campus will help meet the needs of their student veteran community and expects to see more veterans enrolling at their campus. Equally, Task force Chair, Josette Cline, believes that collaboration may be the most important aspect to creating a veteran friendly campus; “Most of the veterans’ needs can be met by a greater collaboration and cooperation among entities on our campus, so we can better coordinate services for the men and women who have served or are currently serving in any branch of the U.S. military” (2008, n.p.).

In an effort to meet the needs of UARK's student veterans, the task force at UARK sought to investigate the following areas:

Recruitment, outreach and tracking of student veterans; the coordination of financial benefits and resources; online and distance education opportunities; identifying a "single point of contact" for veterans in key offices across the university; examination of transfer credit issues, including ACE guidelines regarding the transfer of military credits; methods to improve access to disability and mental health services for veterans; and methods to increase knowledge and interest in veteran issues across the campus (University of Arkansas Task Force to Study Needs of Student Veterans, 2008, n.p.).

Following these investigations, a webinar released through the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) highlighted the task force's nineteen recommendations. Several of these recommendations emphasized a need for a stronger sense of community amongst veterans, financial assistance, credit for military training, and the education of student veteran issues for faculty and staff. The taskforce's primary recommendation suggested creating a veterans resource center or "hub" (University of Arkansas Veteran Task Force Recommendations, 2014). Additional recommendations offered by the task force were:

Accepting military courses, accepting DD214 credit, creating veteran scholarships, establishing permanent scholarships funding, increasing tuition discount for National Guard members, establishing a veteran support committee, creating an official website for student veterans, increasing military cultural competency among faculty, training of all staff members in veterans' issues,

establishing allies, advocates and mentors for student veterans, establishing speaker's bureau, increasing mental health and disability services, and creating transitional services including remedial courses (n.p.).

The University of Texas at San Antonio

During the spring of 2011, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) witnessed an enrollment of 1,672 combined student veterans and student veteran dependents (UTSA Student Veteran Needs Assessment: Executive Summary, 2011). This influx in veteran enrollment inspired UTSA to survey student veterans and dependents to best serve their needs. A combination of multiple choice options, Likert-like statements, and open-ended responses were collected from 214 respondents. The data from these responses were used to create themes of student veteran experience at UTSA.

The survey's demographic information suggests a majority, around 75%, of the respondents identified as a veteran. Additionally, roughly 30% of respondents identified as having served in the Air Force, another 30% identified as having served in the Army, and the rest of the respondents identified as having served in either the Navy or Marines Corps. The survey's open-ended comments covered a wide array of topics and special attention was paid to the experience veterans had with civilian students. Several respondents commented on the disparity they felt between being in classes and orientation programs with younger-civilian students. The respondents commented on how civilian students appeared to have little awareness of what it is like to transition from engaging in combat to academic life. Some respondents also detailed their issues with transfer credits and feelings of dissatisfaction regarding credit for their military service.

Several respondents also reported they challenges of attending school fulltime while balancing a full time career and family (UTSA Student Veteran Needs Assessment: Executive Summary, 2011). The UTSA intents to use this survey information as a foundation from which further investigation can be made regarding the needs of their student veterans.

The University of Arizona

The University of Arizona (U of A) has also noticed the increase of student veterans and responded with two needs assessments within the last fourteen years. In 2007, they conducted their first needs assessment and concluded their research with the creation of a Veteran Education and Transition Services center in 2008. Another needs assessment was conducted in the 2012 to further U of A's understanding of student veterans academic and personal needs. The needs assessment survey was sent to all students who were eligible to receive veteran education benefits, including student veteran family members-dependents, through an email invitation to an online survey (Student Veteran Needs Assessment Survey, 2012).

The online survey was sent to 1,122 student veterans and dependents receiving veteran educational benefits and was comprised of multiple choice options, Likert-like statements, and open-ended responses. The complete responses from 205 individuals were used to create the needs assessment's summary of results. The demographics of the survey suggest that two-thirds of the veteran respondents were age 25-35 (62%), nearly half of the respondents were married (44%), the majority of the respondents lived off campus (56%), and over half of the respondents were employed while attending school (52%) (Student Veteran Needs Assessment Survey, 2012).

When asked about the services that student veterans felt to be the most important respondents reported that: registration assistance (91%), registrar service/enrollment verification (88%), retention/degree completion assistance (87%), and a one-stop-shop for veterans (86%) as the most important. Additionally, respondents were asked what might make U of A even more “veteran friendly” and open ended responses offered the following primary recommendations: Expanded VETS Center with increased visibility (one-stop-shop concept); provide credit for military service, offer more evening, weekend, and online classes; increased academic support services specifically geared toward veterans; and training for faculty, staff and even traditional college students on veterans’ issues and needs (Student Veteran Needs Assessment Survey, 2012).

Auburn, UH, UARK, UTSA, and U of A, have all made great efforts to combat the dearth of literature surrounding the needs of the student veteran population and have sought to improve the lives of their student veteran populations. While support is still pending regarding the soundness of the methodology and recommendations from these universities, their findings are compelling and underscore the need to better understand the academic and personal needs of student veterans. As a result, this researcher strove to address the needs of the student veterans at her institution, James Madison University, by conducting a needs assessment.

Method

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to survey the needs of JMU’s growing student veteran population. Results from the study provided a baseline of descriptive statistics regarding student veteran demographics, military service background, and perceptions

about JMU's services and personal experiences. This baseline data were used to form recommendations for JMU's Veterans Scholars Task Force regarding student veteran program development and revisions. Similar to Auburn and UH, JMU has an interdisciplinary, twenty-plus member veteran task force that seeks to improve the lives of student veterans on campus.

The student veteran survey was jointly developed by the researcher, JMU's Counseling Center director, Dr. David Onestak, and through consultation with JMU's Student Veteran Association (SVA) president, Boyce McClellan, and SVA Faculty Advisor, Dr. Jennifer Taylor. The subjective military backgrounds of McClellan and Taylor were used to validate the survey's military language and question format. Additionally, Taylor's experience as a research analyst for Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey assisted in creating the survey's methodology and question content (Blue Star Families, 2013).

Participants

A total of 146 participants responded to the survey. Of those, 57 participants completed the survey in its entirety. Only the responses of the 57 completed surveys were analyzed. The 57 participants of this study were JMU students who could identify themselves as a "student veteran." For the purpose of this study, a "student veteran" refers to an individual who is a former or current member of the Armed Forces for the United States of America who is also currently or formerly enrolled as a student in a higher education program.

Participant gender was unbalanced, with 78.9% ($n = 50$) male and 21.1% female ($n = 12$). This proportion is not representative of JMU's student population because there

is considerably larger female population on campus compared to JMU's male population (JMU Fall Census, 2012). However, it is representative of the large male population within military personnel (Military One Source, 2011). In regards to racial background, 87.7% identified as Caucasian ($n=50$), 4.0% identified as Asian American ($n=2$), and the remaining 6 participants identified themselves as the following: Native American ($n=1$), African American ($n=1$), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n=$), Latino ($n=1$), Biracial ($n=1$), and other ($n=1$). The lack of racial diversity is reflected in both JMU student body and within military personnel. Specifically, less than one-third of active duty members identify themselves within a minority population such as Asian American, Native American, or African American (2011). Similarly, JMU's student population predominately identifies as Caucasian followed by Asian Americans as the next largest population (2012).

Procedure

During the spring of 2013, the university's President distributed a bulk email request to JMU's student body (See Appendix). The email contained an invitation for student veterans to identify themselves and participate in our study. Participants were also recruited through a version of non-probability sampling known as a "snowball sample of convenience" (Trochim, 2006). Namely, once a veteran had been identified, the researcher recommended the veteran encourage other veterans to participate in the study. A second bulk email request was sent by JMU's Veteran Benefits Certifying Official to students the Office of the Registrar had already identified as student veterans (See Appendix). Both emails invited student veterans to participate in our study by following a link to the online survey.

Instrumentation

The survey evaluated student veterans across three domains: personal and academic background; military service; and perceptions of JMU's academic services and personal experiences. The survey was conducted through *Qualtrics*, an online survey database, and contained Likert-type statements, open-ended questions, and multiple-choice questions. The Likert-type statements used a five-point scale that varied depending upon the content of survey questions (e.g., very high concern to no concern and very unlikely to very likely). Open-ended questions asked the participants to elaborate on their personal experiences (e.g., *Please describe the most disappointing or frustrating experience that you have had while pursuing higher education at JMU*). Multiple-choice questions provided options for the participants to choose statements that best fit their experience (e.g., *Which of the following three statements best describes you?*)

Results

Personal and Academic Background

Predominantly, study responses came from Caucasian ($n = 50$; 87.8%) males ($n = 45$; 78.9%) who were either 18 to 24 years of age ($n = 21$; 38.6%) or 31 and older ($n = 22$; 36.8%). A moderate portion of the surveyed population entered JMU as transfer students ($n = 23$; 40.3%) and a majority of the population reported as full-time undergraduate students ($n = 36$; 63.2%). Additionally, a majority of student veterans reported living off campus ($n = 48$; 84.2%) and roughly half of the sample reported having children ($n = 29$; 50.9%).

When participants were asked to consider the reasons that led them to choose JMU, 73.7% ($n = 42$) identified that JMU offered a major of interest to them and 49.1% ($n = 28$) of participants reported JMU's good academic reputation as a leading factor in their choice. Participants were also asked to consider the important factors that helped them decide to pursue higher education. The top factors reported by the participants were: wanted to get a better job ($n = 48$; 84.2%), being able to make more money ($n = 36$; 63.2%), and wanting to learn more about things that interested them ($n = 35$; 61.4%).

Military Service

The responses regarding the participants' military status were largely split between identifying as a veteran, ($n = 24$; 42.1%) or as a reservist, a member of the military reserve forces, ($n = 21$; 36.8%). Likewise, military rank was primarily split between Junior Enlisted (E1-E4) ($n = 26$; 45.6%) and Senior Enlisted (E5-E9, non-commissioned officers) ($n = 19$; 33.3%). The participants were fairly evenly distributed amongst the seven branches of military: Air Force, Air National Guard, Army, Army National Guard, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy. Within this item, 47.3% of the participants identified as serving in the Army ($n = 15$) or Army National Guard ($n = 12$) branch. Following their discharge from military service, participants were asked how long it was before they began attending JMU. Responses for this item varied and were mainly split between two years ($n = 18$; 31.6%) and not being discharged yet ($n = 15$; 26.3%).

Academic and Personal Experiences

In an effort to best understand how to improve the academic and personal experiences of student veterans, the survey asked questions surrounding the level of

satisfaction and concern participants experienced at JMU. Participants rated their level of satisfaction for seventeen of JMU's academic departments and staff areas. A majority of participants marked the Veteran Benefits Certifying Official in the Registrars office as the highest area of satisfaction, while the Orientation office received the lowest area of satisfaction for the participants. Participants were also asked to rate their level of concern for forty-six personal and academic areas. Responses from this item indicated *coping with prejudice against the military on JMU's campus* as the highest area of concern followed by *feelings of depression; finding services to help me in my class; navigating the admissions process; fearing I will be a failure; and dealing with the "culture shock" of moving from a military to a college environment* as significant areas of concern.

Participants also reviewed prospective services for student veterans and rated how likely they would be to use them. A website listing available programs and services for student veterans and where to access them was reported as a service that would be most likely to be used. Distance learning courses to help students maintain their academic progress during periods of deployment was reported as next most likely to be used.

The identities of the student veteran participants were also reviewed during this portion of the survey. Namely, participants were asked to choose which statement best fit the view of their military service and how that incorporated into their identity. The majority of the responses were split between identifying their military service as a part of their personal identity but not a defining part of who they are ($n = 28$; 49.1%) and identifying it as an important part of their personal identity that others needed to know about them in order to understand who they are ($n = 20$; 35.1%).

Open Ended Responses

Similar to the open-ended questions of U of A, participants had the opportunity to offer personal narratives during the open-ended question portion of the survey. The open-ended section sought to capture the real-life experience of what it felt like to be a student veteran on JMU's campus. A theme developed when the participants were asked to describe their most disappointing or frustrating experience pursuing higher education at JMU. Participants primarily detailed issues with professors, advisors, and various academic departments as well as how they felt disconnected from their civilian peers. One participant noted how there was a "lack of recognition by institutions of higher education for certain military training." Another student reported, "I don't fit in because I am a veteran and not fresh out of high school. I am older than most students and I feel like an outcast."

Participants were also asked to describe how JMU students, faculty, and staff responded when they learned that the participants serve, or had served, in the military. Largely, the responses fell into either positive or indifferent reactions with a scattering of negative experiences. One participant explained, "They're indifferent or just don't understand the gravity of how the military changes someone." Another participant expressed, "My faculty and friends all responded graciously and tried to do all they could to help me manage the situation". The response of one participant appeared to summarize the variety in responses, "Some respect it, some are indifferent, and others really don't seem to care."

The short answer section also investigated what stereotypes, if any, participants felt the community at JMU had regarding military service members. The majority of the

responses were distributed amongst three categories: positive stereotypes, none, or negative stereotypes. Participants who responded with positive stereotypes suggested that JMU associated military service members with positive characteristics such as excellence and hard work. One such participant responded, “Mostly positive stereotypes-trustworthy, hard-working, organized.” Other participants felt no stereotypes existed, “None.” Participants who responded with negative stereotypes suggested that JMU associated military service members with negative characteristics such as, “Military service members are stupid, conservative, macho men.” Another participant referenced the idea of being “Damaged.” One participant encapsulated the variety of responses, “It’s mixed, I guess. Some could not care less, some thank you and others think you are a crazed killer. Just depends.”

At the end of the survey, participants had the opportunity to offer feedback that might aid the survey’s mission to enrich the quality of life for student veterans. Some participants offered suggestions about specific academic policies and services that might be helpful at JMU. Some participants responded on a personal level and expressed their hopes for greater connection to other student veterans. One participant offered that JMU needed a “Veteran Club location – an area to study, an area to visit with other veterans. Similar to a USO type of environment.” Another student commented, “Most of us are older, work full or at least part time and probably have families. We need more choice for classes that are accommodating to our schedules. At least give us higher priority for registering for classes. Students that live on or near campus suck up all the good times or classes needed, more than likely Vets will be commuting.”

Recommendations

During May of 2013, the survey results were shared with JMU's Veterans Scholars Task Force and program recommendations were offered. The foundation for these recommendations was built upon our survey results, suggestions from the Lumina Foundation (a private foundation that is committed to increasing Americans' success in higher education), and student veteran-focused practices from several academic institutions. The recommendations outlined an advanced registration policy for veterans; the creation of a veteran center; stronger focus on veterans within the orientation program; and development of a training program for faculty and staff to broaden their understanding of working with student veterans.

Advanced Registration

At U of A, student veterans reported that registration assistance was the service that was of the utmost importance to them (Student Veteran Needs Assessment Survey, 2012). Likewise, survey participants at JMU offered advance registration as a priority recommendation. However, while the GI bill has helped thousands of student veterans and dependents pursue higher education, the complex, and at times convoluted, process of course registration can become a troublesome hurdle. According to SVA President Boyce McClellan, the Veterans Administration will only fund courses that are specific to the student veteran's graduation requirements. JMU survey participants commented that it is difficult to enroll in necessary course work with the severe competition for course availability during open enrollment. As reported by the survey participants, this classmate competition can periodically result in the student veteran not receiving a place in the

course, hinder the progression of the student veteran's major, and potentially limit the student veteran to only non-required course options. One such participant remarked,

Veterans need to be able to choose their classes prior to other students on campus due to the nature of the GI Bill. In order to qualify for funds we HAVE to take our required classes. Registering early would allow this to happen without any snags.

Another participant commented, "Advanced registration [would] help ensure veterans are able to get the classes they need since only classes required for the major are VA funded." Consequently, JMU survey participants suggested the creation of a student veteran advanced registration policy to reduce the competition for necessary courses.

Veteran Center

JMU survey participants, the Lumina Foundation, and several universities also recommended the creation of a veteran center to help foster communication, community, and resources distribution amongst student veterans. According to the Lumina Foundation, "Perhaps the most critical aspect of a veteran-friendly colleges and universities is having a place on campuses where student veterans can congregate and gain access to vital resource" (Focus, 2013, p. 7). SVA members at U of A reflected this importance and reported how they found their veteran center to be a place where they could make trusting connections with other veterans (Focus, 2013). Auburn echoed this trend and recently created a Veterans Resources Center (VRC) (Auburn University Veteran Task Force, 2010) UARK is close behind the progress of Auburn and U of A, having reported the same recommendation for the creation of a veteran center "hub" from their task force as well. (University of Arkansas Task Force to Study Needs of Student

Veterans, 2008). JMU survey participants have also noted that the potential benefits from having a veteran center on campus. One such participant commented,

Veterans need a place close to the center of campus that is a veterans only area. This would allow us to share stories and blow off steam with other people who have shared in much of the same experiences, and also provide a meeting place for our community.

Student Veteran Orientation

The Lumina Foundation and JMU survey participants both outlined the necessity of a stronger student veteran orientation program as well. According to Lumina Foundation, it takes roughly a year for enlistees and recently commissioned officers to adjust to the demands of military life (Focus, 2013). Similarly, the transition from combat to classes can take an equally long time, if not longer, and a veteran specific orientation could help ease the process. At U of A, veterans have the opportunity to participate in Support of Education for Returning Veterans, SERV. This program consists of three courses during which the student veterans can seek assistance and learn to become more effective students (Focus, 2013). JMU survey participants also emphasized the need for programs like SERV when they reported as having the least satisfaction with JMU's Orientation Office. One such participant reflected, "Veterans should have a different orientation from other incoming students. Much of the transfer orientation I went through was inefficient and a waste of my time."

Staff and Faculty Training

JMU survey participants and UARK also identified a need to create training programs for faculty and staff surrounding veteran issues (University of Arkansas Task

Force to Study Needs of Student Veterans, 2008). Such trainings have the potential to increase the ability of campus faculty and staff to identify distressed students, make necessary referrals, create a welcoming classroom environment, and learn how to accommodate course material to the variable schedule of student veteran needs. To help spread the awareness of veteran issues through all departments on campus, potential training programs would require at least one representative from each department to attend. One JMU survey participant elaborated on the necessity of such training programs,

I feel professors should take the time to understand that there is a veteran in their classroom and they don't need to always treat us like the 18 year olds that are sitting next to us. It is demeaning and disrespectful when you are lumped into a group of students just because the teacher doesn't want to take the time to be proactive and learn about their students.

Another survey participant emphasized the need for such training, “[There was a] lack of respect and understanding from my teacher in regards to my missed time in class due to a military obligation.”

Follow Up on Recommendations

Between May of 2013 and April of 2014, JMU’s Veterans Scholars Task Force diligently worked to make the survey recommendations a reality. JMU’s task force used an assembly of subcommittees to investigate the best means to execute the survey’s recommendations. Recently, these subcommittees offered an informal report of their progress. The subcommittee for Advanced Registration distributed an email with consultation questions to neighboring Virginian institutions of higher learning. These

questions helped to assess whether or not the institutions had advanced registration policies for their student veterans. According to the subcommittee, roughly half of the institutions of higher learning had advanced registration policies while the others did not.

Specifically, Old Dominion University (ODU), Blue Ridge Community College, and Virginia Tech did not report having an advanced registration policy. ODU remarked that their large military population would not benefit from having an advanced registration policy since the majority of the student body would be eligible. Conversely, Virginia Commonwealth University, Radford University, Sauk Valley Community College, and Keystone College all had advanced registration policies for their student veteran population. JMU's proposal for an advanced registration policy outlines that only student veterans, not dependents, would only be eligible for the policy and hopes to be in effect within the next year.

The subcommittee for the creation of a Veterans Center reported that a formal space request has been made. With recent alterations to the JMU's campus, the subcommittee is extremely hopeful to procure a space soon that might also be shared with other commuter students. Furthermore, the subcommittee for Student Veteran Orientation has made plans for alterations to the orientation process starting as soon as December of 2014. The subcommittee plans to have members of the task force and SVA walk through summer orientation and identify what parts of the program are most pertinent to veterans. During the Fall of 2014, the task force will make recommendations and propose a pilot Veteran Orientation Program in which a student veteran would serve as the liaison to incoming student veterans. The subcommittee for Staff and Faculty Training has also made progress and has scheduled a Green Zone Project workshop for

May 14th of 2014. This presentation is led by faculty and staff volunteers that have received special training and are knowledgeable about student veteran issues and resources. The subcommittee believes that that this presentation will begin to help increase faculty and staff awareness of student veteran needs.

Discussion

The undeniable, nationwide presence of student veterans has led officials in higher education to come to attention. As summarized by Jamie Merisotis, President and CEO of the Lumina Foundation,

These students are, in many ways, the most nontraditional for all nontraditional students. These soldiers/scholars are set apart from their campus peers – by age, by life experience, by envelopment in the military culture, and all too often by a close up view of war's horrors. Colleges and universities simply can't conduct business as usual and expect to properly serve these students (Focus, 2013, n.p.).

Fortunately, higher education is beginning to build momentum and investigate the challenges that student veterans experience during their transition to academic life. The purpose of this study was to continue such vital research and offer recommendations to best serve the student veterans community at JMU. The data gathered through this study mirrored Merisotis sentiment and exemplified how student veterans differ from their traditional-civilian counterparts.

According to the results from JMU's needs assessment and the research from Auburn, UARK, UTSA, and U of A's task forces, student veterans typically are older than 25 years, are married, have at least one child, work full time, and generally believe that civilian peers do not understand the challenge of transitioning from combat to

classes. These demographic differences can occasionally prove to be alienating and create a deeper division between student veterans, peers, and faculty. Equally, the study suggests that balancing a full academic course load, family, and a career adds up to a mentally, physically, financially, and academically exhausted student veteran. Beyond these demographic differences, this study also suggests that student veterans bring a wealth of experiences and a more developed sense of their personal identity. Having a mature sense of self, and of the world, can serve as a great resource in the classroom yet can also make student veterans feel infantilized when faculty approach them as traditional 18-year-old students.

JMU has heard the call to better serve their student veterans and has joined ranks with universities like Auburn by beginning to develop and initiate student veteran services. JMU's Veteran Scholars Task Force hopes to continue this progress by annually distributing the needs assessment, collaborating with neighboring universities and academic departments, as well as by following their mission to create a more "veteran friendly" campus. Aside from these substantial gains at JMU, this study embodies how the biggest changes can occur from the smallest of wonderings. Like ripples stretching ceaselessly across a pond, the first ripple of this study began when the researcher genuinely wanted to help her frustrated student veteran friends and concluded with a tidal wave of attention from JMU. I hope that all who read this study may also have their ripples multiplied and continue to wonder how to be the change they hope to see.

Appendix A

JMU's Veteran Scholars Task Force is conducting an anonymous survey to help us to develop programs and services most needed by students with a history of military service.

Your input is vital to accomplishing this goal.

The survey will consist of three parts:

Part 1 focuses on your **personal and academic background**.

Part 2 focuses on your **military service**.

Part 3 focuses on your **perception of JMU's services and your experiences at JMU**.

You are now **beginning Part 1** of the survey. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your **personal and academic background**.

Q1) Your gender:

- Female
- Male

Q2) Your age:

- 18-24
- 24 – 30
- 31- and above

Q3) Your race/ethnicity:

- Native American
- Asian American
- Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial
- Black/African American
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Latino/Hispanic American
- White/Caucasian
- Other

Q4) Your student status:

- Full-time undergraduate
- Part-time undergraduate
- Full-time graduate
- Part-time graduate

- Adult Degree and/or Outreach and Engagement

Q5) Your transfer status:

- Not a transfer student
- Transferred from a two-year college
- Transferred from a four-year college

Q6) Your academic level:

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student

Q7) Your college:

- Undeclared
- Arts & Letters
- Business
- Education
- Integrated Science & Technology
- Science & Mathematics
- Visual & Performing Arts
- Don't know

Q8) Your residence status:

- Residence Hall
- Off-Campus Housing

Q9) What were your combined SAT scores?

- 1300 or more
- 1200 to 1299
- 1100 to 1199
- 1000 to 1099
- 900 to 999
- 800 to 899
- 799 or less
- Did not take SAT

Q10) Your collegiate GPA

- Below 2.0
- 2.0 – 2.49
- 2.50 – 2.99
- 3.0 – 3.49
- 3.5 – 4.0

Q11) Your relationship status:

- Single, never married
- Married
- Living with partner
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed

Q12) Do you have a child or children that live with you while you attend JMU?

- I do not have children
- Yes
- No

Q13) Your employment status:

- Not employed
- < 10 hours/week
- 11 – 20 hours/week
- 21 – 30 hours/week
- 31 – 40 hours/week
- >40 hours/week

Q14) What were the reasons that you considered to be very important in deciding to attend JMU? *(please check all that apply)*

- JMU offered a major of interest to me
- JMU has a good academic reputation
- Supportive atmosphere of JMU
- JMU has good extracurricular opportunities
- JMU's social life
- Appearance and geographical setting of JMU
- Reputation of JMU's graduates obtaining desirable jobs
- Reputation of JMU's graduates attending top graduate schools
- Identify with fellow students
- Size of JMU
- Opportunity to live on campus
- Change in scenery or location
- Range and availability of student services
- JMU has low tuition
- Someone who had been here before advised me to attend
- Friend suggested attending
- Offered financial aid
- Relatives wanted me to come here
- Guidance counselor advised me
- Employer's suggestion

- My teacher advised me
- JMU representative recruited me
- Not accepted anywhere else
- To help retain my current employment
- Wanted to be close to my home
- Other

Q15) When you decided to pursue higher education, what important factors helped you to make you decision? *(please check all that apply)*

- Learn more about the things that interest me
- Meet new and interesting people
- Be on my own and make my own decisions
- Be able to get a better job
- Gain a general education and appreciation of ideas
- Be able to make more money
- Prepare myself for graduate or professional school
- Make me a more cultured person
- Developing a global awareness
- Improve reading and study skills
- Enhance my social life
- Please my parents
- Meet my future spouse
- Do what my friends are doing
- Other

You are now **beginning Part 2** of the survey. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to **your military background and service.**

Q16) What branch of service do, or did you, serve in?

- Air Force
- Air National Guard
- Army
- Army National Guard
- Coast Guard
- Marine Corps
- Navy

Q17) What is your current military status?

- Veteran
- Retired
- Active Duty
- Reservist

Q18) If reservist, please select your status from the following options:

- FTS (Full Time Support)
- SELRES (Selected Reserve)
- NG (National Guard)
- ANG (Air National Guard)
- IRR (Individual Ready Reserve)

Q19) What is, or was, your rank?

- Junior Enlisted (E1-E4)
- Senior Enlisted (E5-E9)
- Warrant Officer (W1-W5)
- Company Grade Officer (O1-O3)
- Field Grade Officer (O4-O6)
- General/Flag Officer (O7-O10)

Q20) How many months have you been away from home performing military duties? (Duties such as training/field time, schooling, work ups, and TDY Assignments) Please estimate to the best of your knowledge.

- < 6 months
- 6-12 months
- 13-24 months
- 25-36 months
- 37-48 months
- >48 months

Q21) Has a deployment ever interrupted your schooling at JMU?***

- Yes
- No

*** This was the question that was asked in the survey. I would recommend making the question more general and say “*Have you ever had to leave school or had your schooling disrupted by your military service?*”

Q22) Following discharge from military service, how long was it before you began attending JMU?

- Within 30 days
 - Within 60 days
 - Within one year
 - Within two years
 - > two years
-

You are now **beginning Part 3** of the survey. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your **perception of JMU's services and your experiences at JMU.**

Q23) Please rate your level of satisfaction with the services offered by the following JMU individuals and departments:

Scale:

Never utilized this service

Outstanding Service

Very good service

Fair service

Disappointing service

- Admissions
- VA Benefits Certifying Official in the Registrar's Office
- Financial Aid
- Business Office
- Off-Campus Housing
- Orientation
- My academic advisor
- Communication Center
- Science & Math Learning Center
- Supplemental Instruction
- University Writing Center
- Disability Services
- Counseling & Student Development Center (Varner House)
- Health Center
- Career & Academic Planning
- Outreach Programs
- The Graduate School

Q24) JMU is attempting to prioritize a variety of programs and services to benefit our student veterans and service members. Considering your normal workload and responsibilities, how likely would you be to utilize the following:

Scale:

Very likely

Likely

Undecided

Unlikely

Very unlikely

- Orientation sessions for incoming veteran students by veteran students
- A website listing available programs and services for student veterans and where to access them

- A vet-to-vet transitional mentoring/sponsorship program matching incoming students with veteran students already at JMU
- A vet-to-vet transitional mentoring/sponsorship program matching incoming students with veteran faculty and staff members
- A student veteran's listserv
- A campus job placement for student veterans
- Development of an on-campus Veterans Resource Center (VRC)
- Distance learning courses to help student maintain their academic progress during periods of deployment
- Maintenance of electronic communications with students (e.g. copies of *The Breeze*, enrollment dates, financial aid opportunities) during periods of deployment
- JMU-sanctioned Family Readiness Group (FRG)

Q25) Thinking about your experiences here at JMU, please rate your current level of concern in the following areas:

Scale:

No concern

Low concern

Moderate concern

High concern

Very high concern

- Difficulty navigating the admissions process
- General transition to college
- Dealing with the "culture shock" of moving from a military to a college environment
- Managing GI Bill benefits
- Learning to handle stress and anxiety
- Finding services to help me in my classes
- Getting faculty members to respect my abilities
- Getting faculty to respect my age and experience as an adult
- Finding people with whom I feel comfortable to talk about my problems
- Concerns about how my professors will respond when I inform them that my military commitments (e.g., deployments, monthly drills) conflict with course requirements
- Coping with prejudice against military service on JMU's campus
- Fearing that I will be a failure
- Feelings of depression
- A lack of financial resources
- Feeling more self-confident
- Confusion about my academic major
- Confusion about my career
- Feeling better about how I look

- Fitting in with non-military students
- Being the only person of with a military background in my classes
- Being the only person of with a military background out of class at social events
- Handling money wisely
- Budgeting issues
- Feeling emotionally unstable
- Knowing what I need to do to earn a good grade in a class
- Feeling at a disadvantage in class because of my academic preparation
- Feeling that my military service is misunderstood
- Learning to express my opinions honestly and directly
- Learning to express my feelings honestly and directly
- Developing a network of friends to meet my social needs
- Developing a network of friends to meet my emotional needs
- Feeling like I have to speak for all military veterans to civilians on campus
- Family issues
- How to talk to my professors about academic concerns
- Concerns that my military service will negatively affect other students' opinions of me
- Concerns that my military service will negatively affect staff and faculty's opinions of me
- Coping with difficult memories from my military service
- Feeling overly anxious when I take tests
- Handling conflicts with others in a calm, effective manner
- Connecting with programs, services, and organizations for military veteran students
- Being disorganized
- Time management
- Procrastination
- Drinking more alcohol than I should
- Coping with sexual abuse
- Coping with sexual assault
- Coping with sexual harassment
- Medical needs
- Psychological needs

Q26) Have you or do you intend to seek accommodations from JMU's Office of Disability Services related to combat experiences?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q27) Which of the following three statements best describes you?

- My military service is an important part of my personal identity and something that others need to know about me if they are going to really understand who I am.
- My military service is a part of my personal identity but not something that defines much of who I am.
- My military service is a past chapter in my life and not important to who I am currently or will be in the future.
- None of these statements best describe me

Q28) Please describe the most disappointing or frustrating experience that you have had while pursuing higher education at JMU:

Q29) How have JMU students, faculty, and staff responded when they learned that you serve, or have served, in the military?

Q30) What stereotypes, if any, do you feel members of the JMU campus community have about military service members?

Q31) Would you be interested in joining the Student Veterans Association on campus?

- Yes
- No

Q32) If you would like to join the SVA on Campus please provide email

Q33) Please provide any other information or feedback that could help us to enrich the quality of life for student veterans and service members at JMU:

Appendix B

Dear James Madison University Community:

As an institution, as a commonwealth and as a nation, we have a responsibility to support the growth and education of those who have served in this nation's military – be it through active duty, Reserves, or the National Guard. For this reason, I have asked our Veterans Scholars Task Force to examine how we are currently serving our veterans and ways in which we as an institution might better serve our veterans in the future. The Task Force has already discovered that as a university, we do not know who all of our veterans are. If we do not know who they are, it is difficult to determine if we are serving them in the best way possible. For that reason, if you are a veteran, I would ask that you take a few moments to complete this survey. By completing it, you will greatly impact the services that we offer to veterans and help us to enhance the college experience for veterans at JMU. The survey can be found at http://jmu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6KijnAlpXiRFAe9

For more information on the survey, please contact Jessica Hayden (haydenjc@jmu.edu) or JMU's Student Veteran Association's chapter president Boyce McClellan (boyce.mcclellan@gmail.com). Also, if you are a veteran, I encourage you to visit the JMU Student Veteran Association Facebook page to receive chapter updates. (<https://www.facebook.com/JMUSVA>)

Thank you for your consideration, and our special thanks to all of our veterans who have served our country.

Sincerely,

Jon Alger
President

Appendix C

Consultation Questions for Veteran Centers

1. How do you identify veterans on your campus?
2. Do you have a policy for veterans that allow them to register early for classes?
3. If yes, What is your policy for veterans regarding advanced registration?
4. Who do you define as a veteran under an early registration policy? Who is eligible?
Veteran on GI Bill
Veteran in reserve forces
Dependent of a veteran
Veteran who has exhausted their GI bill and are paying out of pocket
5. How did your institution navigate the process of establishing a policy and attaining approval for advanced registration for veterans
6. How long has this policy been in effect?
7. What resources did you reference to help make this policy possible?
8. What issues have you come across when trying to establish advanced/priority registration for veterans?
9. What is your policy for veterans regarding academic advising? i.e. (assigned specific advisor through vet center?, major advisor? etc.)

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“Integrated Approach” for providing support services for students with military experience

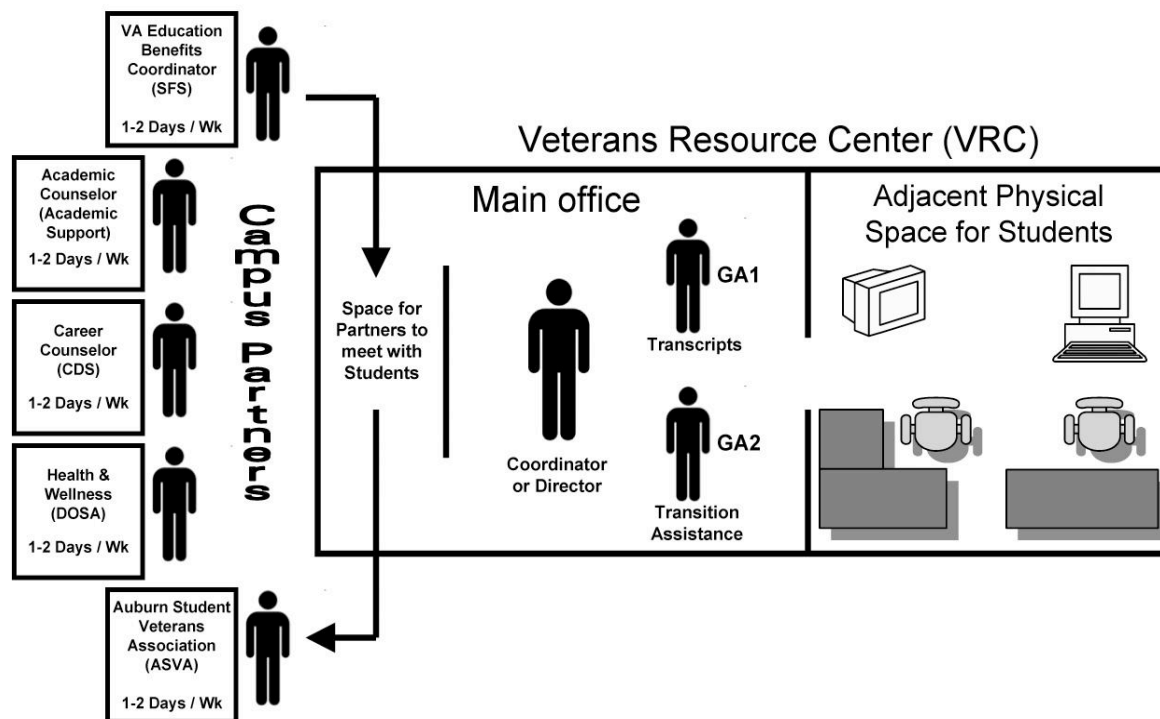


Figure 1. Sample Veterans Resource Center at Auburn University