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Research Brief

Serving Those Who Have Served- Managing Veteran and Military Student Best Practices

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Keywords: Military Student, Student Veteran, College Experience

Research Highlights:

- Successful management of “military students” brings benefits to the student, the academic institution, and the community.
- Understanding the role of each of these organizations in support of the military student and academic institution is vital for successful military student management.
- The criteria for a military friendly institution serve as a vital framework for continuous quality improvement and a platform for enhancing a student-centered culture, a culture that benefits all students.

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Abstract:

“An increasing number of veterans and military students are seeking to complete degrees online and through enrollment at campuses across the nation. Their increased numbers present some unique challenges and opportunities. Post-9/11, Chapter 33 GI Bill funding is enticing more institutions to look at the veteran and military population as a critical recruitment population. Successful management of these students requires institutional responses that many consider transformational. Failure to understand the needs of these students is likely to result in an unsuccessful experience for both the student and the institution of higher education. The following introduces the concept of a “military friendly” institution and outlines practices engaged by Western Carolina University supporting the concept.”

Implications

For Practice

A combination of the expansion of online education and the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill Veterans Benefits Program has resulted in an increase of military student presence on college campuses and in online educational programs nationwide. University recruitment effort of veterans is a growing trend, and a successful experience for both the military student and the institution of higher education requires a significant strategic overhaul. In this article the term “military student” refers to a member of the active duty, reserve, National Guard, retired military population, or a spouse or primary dependent of one of these students. Typically these are motivated and goal-oriented students, focused on achieving career goals. Their success as students is influenced by their military background: they have worked within a disciplined job environment, established a proven work ethic, and developed tested leadership skills. These students face many challenges when matriculating to a student-civilian lifestyle including a lack of understanding in their educational status as a transfer student, degree completion requirements, benefits processing, as well as the overall adjustment of moving from a command and control environment to the openness of a college campus. Military students are often placed in courses far below their competency level, sometimes covering material that have already mastered through their military training schools. These less than ideal incidents and a growing population of military students led to an increased need for creating a centralized management system of incoming military students.

For Policy

Successful management of “military students” brings benefits to the student, the academic institution, and the community. Without appropriate adaptation for these students, successful educational program completion is at risk. The term “military friendly” is used to describe institutions that embrace practices that recognize the unique needs and characteristics of military students. The underpinnings of this distinction is adherence to principles of best practice that define membership in Service Members Opportunity Colleges (SOC), the nine principles of good practice for assessment of learning established by the Military Installation Voluntary Educational Review (MIVER), and the American Council of Education for credit evaluation. Understanding the role of each of these organizations in support of the military student and academic institution is vital for successful military student management. Collaborating with various departments on and off campus, such as the Admissions Office, Registrar’s Office, Finance Department, Financial Aid Office, University Counseling Center, Asheville Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital, and county VA officers can help to promote centralized management of the military student. Western Carolina University is one example of an institution in higher education that has taken a strategic approach using the SOC principles as a framework for program management, and worked to enforce these principles through on-campus workshops with the faculty and administrators.

For Future Research

The criteria for a military friendly institution serve as a vital framework for continuous quality improvement and a platform for enhancing a student-centered culture, a culture that benefits all students. In 2008, \$474 million was spent supporting 815,700 online courses. However, approximately \$3 billion was spent to support veteran’s benefits in the same year. Knowing what resources are available is the first step to building a strategic plan of action in service to these students. Successful management of the military students can be leveraged to transform processes and practices that benefit all students. Tracking the progression of military students from degree completion to job attainment is an important consideration. Advocacy for the military student has proven to generate military friendly activity across campuses, creating a welcoming and supportive environment. The majority of returning veterans seek colleges and universities near home with the intention to rejoin their civilian community and use their new knowledge and skills gained from earning degrees or certificates afforded by their available veterans’ benefits.

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