The Road Home…From Combat to College and Beyond

How Your Campus Can Better Serve Student Veterans

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Section 1

Introduction

• American Troops have deployed almost 3.3 million troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.

• Females make up 14-15% of the US active-duty. The percentage of women in the military has doubled in the last 30 years.

• 30,000 men and women leave the military and return to California each year. That number is expected to increase dramatically as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and as the military downsizes due to budget cuts.

• With an estimated 2.2 million veterans residing in California, the state’s veteran population leads the nation.

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More than 26,600 veterans utilized their educational benefits at a community college in 2009. In addition, there were an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 active duty military personnel enrolled in the education system during that same period.
As these veterans transition back to civilian life, many will take advantage of their educational benefits and look to the community colleges as their best option.
However, for the majority of veterans attending community colleges, this is their first real experience in higher education, and the transition from military to college can be quite challenging.
Section 2

Understanding our Student Veterans: Military Culture 101

U.S. Coast Guard (Guardsman)

U.S. Air Force (Airman)

U.S. Army (Soldiers)

U.S. Marines (Marines)

U.S. Navy (Seaman)

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Military Lingo...

**Active Duty** = Employed full time by the military – 24/7

**Anniversary Date** = dates that have an adverse effect on our life based on a traumatic event or events.

**CalVet** = California Department of Veterans Affairs

**DD-214** = Standard Separation Document from the military

**DOD** = Department of Defense

**GWOT** = Global War on Terror

**IED** = Improvised Explosive Device

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Military Lingo continued..

**KIA** = Killed in Action

**mTBI** = mild Traumatic Brain Injury

**MOS** = Military Occupation Specialty (a person job classification)

**MST** = Military Sexual Trauma

**OEF** = Operation Enduring Freedom (i.e. the Afghanistan War)

**OIF** = Operation Iraqi Freedom (i.e. the Iraq War)

**OND** = Operation New Dawn (marks official end to the Operation Iraqi Freedom & combat operations by U.S. forces in Iraq)
Military Lingo continued..

**PTSD** = Post traumatic Stress Disorder

**TAP** = Transitional Assistance Program

**TBI** = Traumatic Brain Injury

**Reserves/National Guard** = Typically 1 weekend per month & 2 week long training during summer months.

**VA** = Veterans Administration

**WIA** = Wounded in Action
BATTLEMIND

- A soldier’s inner strength to face fear and adversity during combat with courage. It is the will to persevere and win; It is resilience.

- This training helps soldiers stay alive in combat but can become problematic when carried over to life at home.
Buddies. No one understands your experience except your buddies who were there with you. Your life depended on your trust in your buddies.

Accountability. Maintaining control of weapons & gear is necessary for survival.

Targeted Aggression. Soldiers make split second decisions that are lethal in a highly ambiguous environment. Kill or be killed. Anger keeps you pumped up, alert, awake, & alive.

Tactical Awareness. Survival depends on being aware of your surroundings at all times & reacting immediately to sudden changes, such as sniper fire or mortar attacks.

Lethally Armed. Carrying your weapon at all times is mandatory & an absolute necessity for life or death.

Emotional Control. Controlling your emotions during combat is critical for mission success. This control quickly becomes second nature.
Mission Operational Security. Talk about mission only with those who need to know. One can only talk about combat experiences & missions with unit members or those who have “been there---done that.”

Individual Responsibility. Your responsibility in combat is to survive and to do your best to keep your buddies alive.

Non-Defensive (combat) Driving. Unpredictable, fast, rapid lane changes, keeping other vehicles at a distance, straddling the middle line, designed to avoid IEDs.

Discipline and Ordering. Survival depends on discipline and obedience. Following orders kept you and those around you safe and in control.
Military Mottos

- The things we do…so that others may live
- Service Before Self
- Lead, follow, or get out of the way
- Adapt and Overcome
- Semper Fi (Always Faithful)
- Honor Before Glory
- Duty, Honor, Country

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Section 3

Typical Transition Challenges for Student Veterans

Marriage, Family & Work Stressors

Multiple Deployments

Loss of Camaraderie
Due to the length of absence from school, the majority of veterans test into remedial courses, making it difficult to reach their educational goals before their GI Bill benefits terminate.
Transition Challenges Continued...

Difficulty navigating through the bureaucracy of VA paperwork in order to receive their benefits. (i.e., GI Bill, disability claims, health benefits, medical care, etc.)

Financial Aid stressors (FAFSA, unemployment forms, GI Bill payment, etc.)

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Transition Challenges Continued…

• Concerns about career and educational goals can cause anxiety.
• Lack of awareness regarding VA benefits, financial aid, and other available resources.
• Trying to take on too much too soon.
  (Veterans often feel like they are behind in obtaining their degree when comparing themselves with younger college students.)
Transition Challenges Continued...

• Approximately 40% of OIF/OEF veterans are from the National Guard and Reserve. These veterans and their families have less access to the support they need than those of active duty service members and their families.

• Unemployment for young veterans is 20% which is double the national average.
Transition Challenges Continued...

• Age differences and life experiences can cause veterans to feel isolated.

• Conflict between classes and scheduling medical appointments with VA Health Care.

• Military reserve/National Guard obligations conflicting with class schedules.
• Trust issues. In combat, you always knew your buddy had your back no matter what.

• Struggle to find new purpose and meaning in life after combat.

Leaving the military isn’t just leaving a job…its leaving a way of life.
-Student Veteran, Marine, OIF/OEF

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Risky behaviors such as getting into fights, living on the edge, high speed motorcycle riding, etc., can recreate adrenaline rushes experienced in combat.
Although not all veterans serve in combat, those that do, may experience additional challenges such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Military Sexual Trauma (MST).
What is PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

“PTSD is the inability to flip the switch from combat soldier to every day citizen to stop reliving the war at so high a frequency that it interferes with the ability to function.”


“At the early stages, it’s like a toothache, painful and troubling. Left untreated, the infection festers and grows.” Ilona Meager, Moving a Nation to Care
Signs and Symptoms of PTSD

- Insomnia
- Memory problems
- Poor concentration
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Stress symptoms
- Emotional numbing
- Hyper vigilance
- Flashbacks
- Avoidance
Avoidance

• Trying to avoid situations that may trigger memories of combat, to include talking or thinking about past event(s)

• May become work-oholics to keep very busy and avoid seeking help
Reliving the Event(s)

( flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares )

• Can be triggered by:
  • Specific scenes – crowded streets, clothing, personnel of certain ethnic backgrounds
  • TV, reading material, and movies
  • Sounds - car backfiring, helicopters, loud noises, etc.
  • Smells – rain, smoke, blood, certain foods, candy, etc.
Becoming Emotionally Numb

• Difficulty expressing feelings
• Feeling disconnected from others, including loved ones
• Disinterest in activities that one previously enjoyed
• Things around you feel strange or unreal
• Trouble remembering certain aspects of traumatic events
• Another way to avoid memories
Feeling Keyed Up
(hyper arousal; hyper vigilance)

• Always on the alert and on the lookout for danger
• Can lead to becoming angry and irritable
• Difficulty sleeping
• Difficulty concentrating
• Fear for safety of self and others
• Can be easily startled
What is Traumatic Brain Injury (mild-TBI)?

- A Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is caused by a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain.
- Caused by external physical force to the head
- Acceleration-deceleration injury (motor vehicles)
- Concussion, with or without loss of consciousness
- “Shaken Soldier” Syndrome

(DVBIC/CBHCO conf. 2006)
Incidence of \textbf{mTBI}?

- Between 10-20\% of Iraq and Afghanistan vets have suffered a TBI (IAVA.org)

\textit{Why?}

- Technological advances in battlefield gear, reduces deaths, increases severity of injuries to head and limbs

- Modern military medicine allows for life-saving trauma care in the war zone with immediate transport to definitive care and rehabilitation (DVBIC/CBHCO conf. 2006)
Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI)

What you might not see:
Signs and Symptoms of mTBI

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury

- Insomnia/sleep problems
- Impaired memory
- Poor concentration/attention
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Irritability/mood changes
- Headache
- Dizziness/imbalance
- Excessive Fatigue: physical and mental
- Noise/light intolerance
- Ringing in the ears (tinnitus)
- Vision change: blurred or vision

(DVBIC/CBHCO conf. 2006)
What is MST? 
(Military Sexual Trauma)

- Any unwanted sexual attention, uninvited sexual advances, or forced sex while in the military
- MST can negatively impact a person’s mental and physical health, manifesting in a number of symptoms even years later
  - Disturbing memories or nightmares
  - Difficulty feeling safe
  - Feelings of depression or numbness
  - Problems with alcohol or other drugs
  - Feeling isolated from other people
  - Problems with anger or irritability
  - Problems with sleep
  - Physical health problems

(womenshealth.va.gov)

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MST Cont...

• In 2006 there were 1,167 reports of MST
• In 2009 it increased to 3,200
• VA disability claims are rejected because the victim cannot prove an initial assault or rape
• Sexual assault occurs twice as often in the military as they do within civilian society
• 40% of homeless women veterans have been sexually assaulted while serving in the armed forces

(www.pbs.org),(www.pubrecord.org)

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Triggers that may adversely affect veteran students suffering from combat stress injuries...
Crowded Classrooms and Campus Crowds
Timed Tests

Pressure of timed exams may trigger hyper-arousal thus making it difficult for students to concentrate.
Anniversary Dates

Television & Movies

Smells

Driving

Loud Noises

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Potential Obstacles That May Interfere with Veteran Students’ Success in College

- Difficulty getting a full night’s sleep due to hyper vigilance or nightmares
- Side effects from prescribed or non-prescription medications
- Inability to find a seat in the back of the room near the exit can cause additional stress in classroom
  - Being a veteran makes me feel a little out of place sometimes.
    — 24 Year Old Caucasian male Veteran

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Veterans often end up self-medicating to deal with combat stress injuries.

Use of alcohol and drugs as coping mechanism.
Please remember...

- Not all veterans have served in combat
- Not all veterans that served in combat have PTSD
- Not all veterans diagnosed with PTSD are ticking time bombs waiting to explode
- Not all veterans are males
- Women veterans are also exposed to combat action
Remember…most veterans bring great assets and diversity to your campus. In addition, they can offer…

• Outstanding leadership qualities
• A desire to serve as mentors and assist others
• Maturity, motivation, discipline, and an enthusiasm about learning in your classroom
Obstacles to Treatment

Over 40% of those experiencing mental health problems associated with combat refuse treatment due to fear that treatment will:

• hurt their image
• ruin their military career and/or promotion
• cause negative perception from peers and leadership

This stigma carries over into the college environment. Veterans are extremely reluctant to seek help from Disabled Student Services.
Section 5: Suicide & Homelessness Among Vets

- More U.S. Soldiers have killed themselves than have died in the Afghan War.
- 95% are male
- 95% are enlisted
- 80% are white
- 47% are under 25
- 41% had received outpatient behavioral-health services

(Times Magazine, July 23, 2012)
The high suicide rate among veterans has already emerged as a major issue, but a larger trend that has remained hidden from society is the surge in the number of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who have died not just as a result of suicide, but also because of vehicle accidents, motorcycle crashes, drug overdoses or other causes after being discharged from the military. (Aaron Glantz, The Bay Citizen)
Suicide & Veterans

• A Recent news article reported nearly half of student veterans have contemplated suicide.

• Nearly half of student veterans show significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a third suffer from severe anxiety, and a quarter experience severe depression, according to the study.

Homelessness & Veterans

• Approximately 33% of homeless males in the U.S. are veterans.

• Woman are 4 times more likely to become homeless than their male counterparts.

• Veterans are twice as likely as other Americans to become chronically homeless.

• Veterans represent 11% of the adult civilian population but make up 26% of the homeless population, according to the Homeless Research Institute (2007).

• The number of homeless Vietnam-era veterans, male and female, is greater than the number of soldiers who died during the war.

(VeteransInc.org)
Primary causes of homelessness among veterans are:

1. Lack of income due to limited education and lack of transferable skills from military to civilian life (especially true of younger veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan)

2. Combat-related physical health issues and disabilities

3. Combat-related mental health issues and disabilities

4. Substance abuse problems that interfere with job retention

5. Weak social networks due to problems adjusting to civilian life

6. Lack of services

(VeteransInc.org)
Section 6

How Campuses Can Better Serve Student Veterans

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Designate a College Veterans Counselor

- Questions for Veteran Counselors to ask during counseling appointments with veterans
  - Where the veteran served while in the military and what was their MOS (job)
  - If the veteran was deployed, where was their deployment and how long have they been home
  - Have they contacted VA to enroll in the VA Health Care system
  - Do they need information about filing a disability claim
  - Does the veteran have a solid family/friend support system
  - Are there any concerns or questions they may have
Veterans Counselor should be educated in following:

- GI Bill process and regulations
- Military customs & traditions
- Community Veteran Services & Resources
- Combat Stress Injuries (PTSD & TBI)
- Degree, certificate, transfer, and internship programs, to include industrial and technical education trades programs

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Campus Recommendations

- Provide specialized orientations for veterans & dependents
- Create a Multidisciplinary Veteran Advisory Team
- Network with veteran community services (VA auditors, Vet Centers, Veteran County Service Offices, VFW’s, American Legions, Am Vets, non-profit veteran programs, Rotary Clubs, etc.)
- Develop a Veteran’s website & Facebook
- Host Veteran Education/Resource Fairs

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The Road Home…
From Combat to College and Beyond

- Provide Workshops for faculty, staff & administrators:
  - Academic challenges with veteran student population
  - Practical learning techniques and solutions to common learning difficulties
  - Military competency & sensitivity training

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Campus Veterans Resource Center (VRC)

Mission:
Provide safe and welcoming place for veterans and their dependents to receive support, information, and camaraderie; including space where vets can work on their homework, unwind, or just have another vet to talk to.
VRC Programs Include:

• Break/snack room

• Relaxation room for veterans experiencing anxiety, stress, etc.

• Computers/Printers & Assistive Technology Devices

• Mentoring, Internships, and Employment Opportunities

• Collaborate with local Veteran organizations and veteran service providers

• Regular visits from Vet County Service Officer:
  • Assist in completing VA disability claims & applying for VA health benefits

• On-campus appointments with Vet Center Counselors (individual and couple therapy)
Utilize Veteran Work Study on your campuses:

- No costs for campuses if veterans are enrolled minimally at \( \frac{3}{4} \) time and receiving their GI Bill
- Veteran Work Study can assist in the following ways:
  - Educational Benefits/GI Bill
  - Veteran Community Resources
  - Financial Aid
  - Campus Tours
  - Class Registration
  - Vet to Vet Tutoring
  - Camaraderie
  - Veteran Student Club

I really enjoy the veterans lounge to get help with homework.
—I am an older adult female veteran returning to school
Develop Experiential Learning
Challenge Courses

- Challenge Courses typically are one to three days in length.
- Focused on personal growth, self-determination, & leadership skills. Veterans participate in a series of physically, mentally, & spiritually challenging exercises.
- Benefits include increased competence & skill in areas of trust, inter-personal communication, decision-making, & stress-management awareness.

“I really enjoyed this weekend and I have new brothers and sisters, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for every last one of my new family members.” - Sierra College Student Veteran

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Experiential Learning Challenge Courses

The vast majority of military training is hands-on/experiential learning, which includes both physical and mental challenges.

Recreating this environment in the academic setting, provides a familiar component to ease the transition from military to college, as well as allowing veterans to recognize skills developed from service are applicable and relevant to success.

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Experiential Learning Challenge Courses

• 1 – 3 day event that may include activities such as:
  • Ropes courses
  • Camping
  • White water rafting
  • Skiing
  • Rock-climbing
  • Cook-outs
  • Surfing
  • Etc.

“This weekend up here at Granlibakken has been life changing for me, it has shown me life is not planned out or just a ride we all are on.”
— Sierra College Student Veteran

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“This ropes course was really tremendous for all of us in the class. It really brought unity and camaraderie to us all. I became friends with many guys and ladies that normally were just a face in the classroom.” – Sierra College Student Veteran

Ropes Challenge Course 2008 & 2010

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Student Veterans Rafting Trip 2011
Boots to Books Community Learning

- 16-week semester program
- (5-6 units) College Orientation & English writing course
- Transition class for veterans. Focus on developing camaraderie, keys to success, goal setting, time management, college & community resources, combat stress, etc.

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Additional Class Combinations for Boots to Books Community Learning

• Variations of Boots to Books Community Learning could include the following:
  • College Success and career exploration combined with trade-industrial and technical programs, remedial English, reading, and math courses

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Recommendations for the classroom

• Include in the course syllabus, a comment inviting veterans to approach instructors if they are experiencing any difficulty in their transition from military to college.

• Invite veteran work-study into your classroom to provide a brief presentation regarding campus veteran programs and resources.

I sacrificed my life for my country but don’t always feel like people really get that.

—Sierra College Vet
Please be sensitive to the fact that there are likely students in your classroom who have a loved one serving in the military, and they can be affected by the comments made about current or past conflicts.

Sometimes it’s all on me…the house, the kids, the yard, the car, the dog,... I take care of everything, it all falls on me. When you add in the real fear for my husband’s safety half way around the world, well, I don’t know how I make it through school. —military wife, parent, 28

I lost my brother in the Afghanistan war. I am going to school for him. I know he would want his little brother to graduate. —19 years old

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Tips on how to avoid and/or diffuse challenging situations with veterans

• Please be sensitive to comments made about the war in Iraq/Afghanistan.

• Remember that even though the veteran is back home, they are likely to still have close contacts with buddies in combat.

• Avoid power struggles. Let the veteran know that you will address their concern, but would like to give him/her your full attention at a designated time after class.
Continued

• **Give the veteran permission ahead of time to leave classroom if they encounter “triggers” during class**

• Remember, on occasion, some veterans may make inappropriate comments in the classroom; consequently, do not hesitate to talk to the veteran after class and remind them of “situational awareness.”

• **If the veteran appears stressed or agitated, encourage him/her:**
  - To take a short break
  - Offer to talk to the veteran after class
  - Contact your veterans resource ctr/counseling dept.
Asking Questions ??

You should avoid asking questions such as:

• How many guys did you kill? What was it like?

• Do you think it was worth it?

• Political view of the war.

I don’t like it when people ask me if I killed someone.
I feel uncomfortable when the subject of war comes up in class.
—Sierra College Veteran, Iraq
Remember, when you are not sure what to say to a veteran, just say...

Welcome Home!

Many people don’t realize what it’s like to be part of something greater than just themselves.

I would like to share that.

—Sierra College Veteran, 24 years old
Recommended reading:

• *Achilles-Vietnam-Combat Trauma and Undoing of Character*, by Jonathan Shay

• *Black Knights, On the Bloody Road to Baghdad*, by Oliver Poole

• *Chasing Ghosts; Failures and Facades In Iraq: A Soldier’s Prospective*, Paul Rieckhoff

• *Courage After Fire*, By Keith Armstrong

• *Down Range to Iraq and Back*, by Bridget C. Cantrell & Chuck Dean

• *Exit Wounds, A Survival Guide to Pain Management For Returning Veterans and Their Families*, by Derek McGinnis, Iraq War Veteran

• *I Can’t Get Over It, A Handbook for Trauma Survivors*, by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.
Recommended reading:

- **Back From The Brink, A Family Guide to Overcoming Traumatic Stress**, by Don R. Catherall, Ph.D

- **Moving a Nation to Care**, by Ilona Meagher

- **On Killing, The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society**, by Lt. Col. Dave

- **Operation Homecoming**, by Andrew Carroll

- **Restrepo**, by Sebastian Junger

- **Rule Number Two-Lessons I Learned in a Combat Hospital**, by Dr. Heidi Squier Kraft

- **The War Comes Home**, by Aaron Glantz

- **Vets Under Siege, How America deceives and Dishonors those Who Fight Our Battles**, by Martin Schram

- **What Was Asked of Us, An oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers who fought it**, by Trish Wood
Resources

- [www.VetCenters.VA.gov](http://www.VetCenters.VA.gov) (Provides free counseling to combat veterans and their family)
- [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov) (Provides information on educational benefits)
- [www.GiveAnHour.org](http://www.GiveAnHour.org) (Provides free counseling to OIF/OEF vets & family)
- [www.USAtogether.org](http://www.USAtogether.org) (Helps meet specific needs of injured service members)
- [Swords-to-Plowshare.org](http://Swords-to-Plowshare.org) (Provides wrap around care to veterans in the San Francisco area)
- [www.nvf.org](http://www.nvf.org) (National Veterans Foundation)
- [www.calegion.org](http://www.calegion.org) American Legions
- [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org) Veterans of Foreign War
- [www.cacvso.org](http://www.cacvso.org) (county veteran service offices)
- [www.semperfifund.org](http://www.semperfifund.org) (Provides financial assistance to injured marines and their family)
- [www.Amvets.org](http://www.Amvets.org) (Veteran Service Organization)
- [www.soldiersproject.org](http://www.soldiersproject.org) (Provides free counseling to OIF/OEF veterans and their family)
- [www.mentalhealth.va.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov) (Provides information on mental health issues and suicide prevention)
Special Thanks to:

- Aaron Glantz, Editor at New America Media, Author & journalist
- Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Centers (DVBIC), and Community-Based Health Care Organizations (CBHCO)
- Donna Knifong, Faculty, Communications Studies, Sierra College
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, IAVA.org
- Shad Meshad, National Veterans Foundation
- Sierra College student veterans and their families
- Times Magazine, July 23, 2012
- Veterans Inc.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education
- Tributary White Water Rafting