**Teaching Veterans and Military Members**

Following, in no particular order, are tips, suggestions, comments, and anecdotes from both group discussions of this topic on May 17, 2014. (These apply to ALL students in classes but military or former military are often more travelled and experienced because they are usually older.)

* Create a class climate that encourages veterans and active or reserve military to self-identify.

● Include vets’ and military members’ insight and experience (with permission) when possible or applicable. They will usually have had much broader and extensive encounters in and with other parts of the country or world.

● Invite students to meet one-on-one in your office and to perhaps share some of these experiences. Often a student who may be reluctant to share in “public” will open up in a more intimate situation.

● This visit also allows veterans/military members to share any “problems” they may have such as with academics and/or foundational courses, transitioning from the highly structured military mindset, or dealing with “civilian” students in their new roles. Some, particularly the younger ones, may also be experiencing psychological, emotional or other problems from those experiences, especially if they have seen combat.

* Utilize the applicable knowledge and experience of the veterans or military members in your lecture or lab instruction.

● Most have developed leadership skills. That and their more mature approach to academics and life serve as role models to other students.

● Ask for their “help” in teaching topics in which they have had training and/or experience. Depending on their branch of service and/or rate, military specialty, or job classification, some have specific skills such as mapping, orienteering, map interpretation, navigation and so on.

● Real life experiences “weigh more” with most students than simply “what the teacher says.” Often application of what is being presented in class not only gives the student a reason to learn it but also insight into what it can be used for “in real life.”

● You may want to ask your veteran student to share those experiences and knowledge that are relevant to your topical discussion. Always clear this with the student before addressing them in class, however, there may be situations in which they would prefer that you not identify them but give you permission to use their contribution.

* Be aware and sensitive to individual situations, not just those about which you have been told.

● Be pro-active and approachable so the military member will be comfortable confiding in you.

● Make allowances for some behaviors when possible or necessary because there may be issues including Post-Traumatic Stress or merely a short turnaround from combat. Many of our drilling reservists, for example, do multiple and frequent short deployments (with little or no “turnaround” time) that can put them into stressful situations unlike “ordinary students” deal with.

● Some vets “must” sit with their backs to the wall and be able to see the door.

● Some vets from recent combat areas experience stress at unexpected times in ordinary situations. For example, one vet admitted to an instructor that if he was just walking down the hall with friends and a group of students in hijabs stepped out of a classroom in front of him, it would immediately make him anxious and give him flashbacks. He would then have to go to his car or other “safe place” to de-stress so he could continue with his day. It did get easier over time but it was quite difficult for him in the meantime.

● If you have students whom you may have identified as being recent combat veterans and who are experiencing stress syndromes, it might be a good idea to inform them of impending fire or storm drills on campus. Alarms and klaxons can produce stress and anxiety in ordinary students; it can produce a much more intense response in a recent combat vet.

* Communicate class policies and procedures in class in addition to in the syllabus. And do this multiple times over the semester as a reminder. All students can benefit from this but veterans and active members are always briefed before a mission, allowing them time to prepare mentally – and physically – for what is coming. This also allows them to consider options and alternatives ahead of time.

● One of the “wall sitters” became highly agitated when an instructor walked behind him during an exam. He was unaware that she was pacing the room as she proctored because he was so focused on his exam. A quick reminder before starting an exam was enough to calm the nerves of ALL the students.

● If you have students whom you may have identified as being recent combat veterans and who are experiencing stress syndromes, it might be a good idea to inform them of impending fire or storm drills on campus. Alarms and klaxons can produce stress and anxiety in ordinary students; it can produce a much more intense response in a recent combat vet. (This is a duplicate of the last item in the previous section – but it applies in more than one way.)

* Frequently share with students reminders of services or events on campus available to them as well as some upcoming events. By doing this for ALL students, centers, and organizations, you can inject announcements about services and meetings/events specific to veterans and military members without appearing to single them out.

● Veterans do NOT want to be separated from the general student population. Rather, most want to return to normalcy after a deployment and re-assimilate.

● By including announcements about general campus resources, the instructor can inject information about Veterans’ Services that veterans rarely ask for – sometimes because they are unaware of the availability.

● Because they are trained to be self-sufficient, many veterans are reluctant to ask for help. Veterans may be more likely to relate to other veterans, though. Student veteran groups can be places to share support, tutoring, advice, information, and tips and suggestions about classes, instructors, and so on. But the veteran/military member needs to be made to feel not that they are being ostracized but rather included in a special demographic.

* Veterans and military members often have educational funding issues that are quite different from those of “ordinary” students. Instructors need to inform themselves about some of these special requirements.

● There are different types and requirements for the variety of financial benefits programs available to veterans and active duty members. Under some versions of the GI Bill, a student will be paid to re-take a failed class but not for one that was passed, even with a D. If a student is borderline, it would behoove the instructor to contact that student to have them come in to discuss their grade. If this is done for all students, the discussion could benefit every student but especially any who may let you know that they would be affected by this GI Bill requirement. Being “kind” and helping them receive a D may not be the best for the student.

● Some programs require the student to pay back funding if they do not pass a course or not receive a certain minimum grade.

● Some benefit programs have an attendance requirement for the student, such as the Hazelwood Act. Attendance will have to be tracked and reported to a designated authority.

● This is one more reason to communicate with your veteran or active military student. They will know what is required for their individual program. Knowing this will help you help the student.

* Be an advocate on campus for veteran and active military students. Many faculty, staff, and/or administrators may want to “do things” for the veterans on campus to make their campus “veteran-friendly”, a movement that is becoming more and more popular on college campuses. You can contribute much to any of these discussions if you have made it a practice to seek out, listen to and work with your veteran and military students.

● Instructors who are veterans or who have personal knowledge of veterans or military experience expressed great concern and strong feelings against setting up classes specifically for veterans. This is often done because “they have similar backgrounds (military service) and can relate to one another.” These people have good intentions but nearly every veteran told about this plan objected strongly; their response was, “What’s wrong with us that we have to be separated from the rest of the population? What do you think we’re going to do to everybody else?”

● Veteran students who have stress symptoms related to their service can benefit greatly with a place to go to de-stress, sometimes with others who understand and may share that need. It can be a place to talk it out with another vet or simply sit quietly and re-group. Most student centers are active, crowded and noisy, frequently filled with younger students with much different attitudes toward college than that of the older and/or veteran student.

● Many campuses have a Veterans Benefit representative but not all are in separate offices or deal exclusively with military students. Even more of these representatives are not even on campus every day. A central location to find answers, even if from other students who have successfully travelled the same or similar paths, would go far to assist the students – and make it easier for the faculty to reach them – and help them conquer this step toward their futures.