Returning From Service: College and Careers for Veterans With Disabilities

Tens of thousands of veterans returning to civilian life from recent conflicts have physical injuries (e.g., amputations, blindness, hearing impairments) and many more have sustained less visible conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury—which have been called "the signature injuries of the war." Many of these veterans have the potential for earning postsecondary degrees and filling positions in challenging fields such as those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

It is anticipated that an outcome of post-9/11 conflicts and the new G.I. Bill will increase numbers of veterans with disabilities on our campuses, especially two-year institutions. Student veterans face challenges that include social adjustments, financial burdens, and reluctance to disclose disabilities.

Participation in postsecondary education can play an important role in mitigating some of the effects caused by injury and trauma that result from deployments into conflict areas. Learning new things and developing career goals can help veterans look to the future with hope and excitement.

But how can postsecondary institutions best support veterans with disabilities on their campuses? This was the topic a think tank, a capacity-building institute, and numerous other events that were funded in part by the National Science Foundation (NSF). These events engaged faculty, disability services, and veterans with disabilities themselves. Topics discussed included

- recruitment and support of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education,
- military benefits,
- transition from military life to college life,
- transition to employment after postsecondary graduation, and
- resources for students, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders.

This publication synthesizes key issues to consider and interventions to explore that emerged from presentations and rich conversations at these meetings. It is hoped that this content will help postsecondary institutions make their programs more welcoming and accessible to veterans returning to school after sustaining injuries during service. The following content is organized around responses to key questions that participants discussed.

What are the unique issues facing veterans with disabilities with respect to college and career success?

Presenters and participants shared how veterans who are returning to school, especially those with disabilities, often
- face challenges in adjusting to civilian life.
- deny or minimize the impact that their disability has on their learning.
- want to fit in and be "normal."
- are unsure of what academic field will be a good fit with their skills, interests, and military training.
- fear failure.
- are frustrated with trying to navigate college and veterans bureaucracies.
- are reluctant to self-identify as having a disability and access disability services.
- experience interruptions in sleep and depression as a consequence of military experiences.

What interventions might promote the success of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education?

Participants emphasized that grass roots efforts are important as well as those that engage high-level administrators who have the power to mandate policy changes. They suggested that the following interventions be considered to make the campus welcoming and accessible to veterans with disabilities.

Ongoing engagement of leaders and other stakeholders.
- Create a coordinating council to identify common barriers for veterans with disabilities and explore ways to make campus services relevant to veterans. Include disability support services; recruitment, registration, career services, tutoring centers, and other student services; and veterans-serving organizations.
- Support an online community of practice for those who wish to improve support services for veterans and their families.
- Establish partnerships with organizations that serve special populations (e.g., Latino, black, and Native American populations) to ensure that cultural issues of veterans with disabilities are addressed.
- Conduct regional capacity-building institutes to identify strategies for supporting transitions to education and careers for veterans with disabilities.

Recruit veterans with disabilities.
- Bring activities to veterans in hospitals, on military bases, and in local communities.
- Develop agreements between the campus disability services office and the veterans vocational rehabilitation counselors to coordinate services and provide a "warm hand-off" for student veterans.
- Provide outreach through online and on-site veteran networks.

Support veterans with disabilities.
- Include campus and community resources for veterans in campus orientations.
- Provide courses, presentations, and/or coaching for student veterans on how to talk with faculty, advocate for their needs, deal with feelings of stigma and isolation, access assistive technology, benefit from campus services, and gain academic skills. Help student veterans understand differences between the military, higher education, and the corporate world.
- Start a veterans student group to support academic and social aspects of campus life. Establish a place for members to gather that is welcoming and accessible to veterans with disabilities.
- Form learning communities where small groups of student veterans attend orientation and take some classes together.
- Facilitate opportunities for new student veterans to be mentored online and on-site by students, faculty, and/or staff veterans who have been successful.
- Help veterans link postsecondary education opportunities to military skill sets and map military specialties to specific academic programs.
- Increase the visibility and accessibility of campus and community services for veterans.

Develop and distribute information resources.
- Design a website dedicated to veteran issues and resources and post a prominent link to the site from the college's home page. Include resources to support educators, service providers, employers, veterans with disabilities, and families.

- Create and distribute a brochure for faculty and teaching assistants covering issues relevant to veterans in postsecondary education.
- Provide a postsecondary transition guide to local veterans centers and hospitals.
- Create a campus resource guide for student veterans.

Train and support faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders.
- Provide training for faculty, teaching assistants, and staff on military culture, language, and customs; positive attributes that student veterans bring to campus such as experience, motivation, and dedication; myths and stigmas associated with veterans with disabilities; psychological issues that many veterans experience; the needs of student veterans. Include information on how traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress, and other disabilities may impact students. Share situations that may cause problems for some veterans, such as using a laser pointer in a dark room.
- Make it clear that supporting veterans is not about individual political viewpoints.
- Offer brown bag lunch programs for faculty to discuss how to work with veterans with disabilities.
- Create opportunities for faculty and staff to talk with student veterans to increase understanding of their interests and needs.
- Encourage departments to locate a faculty member, preferably a veteran, who can train, mentor, and share information and resources with others in the department.
- Encourage faculty to integrate curriculum and undertake research that relate to veterans with disabilities.

Host veterans-related events.
- Plan activities to recognize and celebrate Veterans Day (e.g., tributes, art galleries).
- Host an open house at the campus disability services office and invite local veterans-serving organizations to participate.
- Recognize faculty and staff who are effectively serving veterans with disabilities.

Resources
Several resources evolved out of the discussions in stakeholder meetings focused on veterans with disabilities.

Veterans Community of Practice (*CoP*). A *CoP* for veteran stakeholder groups is hosted by the University of Washington. Communicating using email and other electronic tools, *CoP* members share perspectives and expertise, and identify practices to promote the participation of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary education and careers. Collaborators can also receive support from *AccessComputing* and *AccessSTEM* project staff in making their activities and resources more accessible (e.g., assistance in the design of an accessible website). Members
- interact regularly to improve services to veterans with disabilities;
- discuss how to recruit veterans with disabilities and accommodate them in their programs and activities;
- devise solutions that increase the accessibility of program offerings;
- develop internships and workshops to complement their program activities;
- co-sponsor events, design potential projects, and share funding possibilities;
- plan capacity-building institutes and identify resources.

To join the Veterans *CoP,* send the following information to *doit@uw.edu*: name, position/title, institution, postal address, and email address.

Video. The *AccessComputing* project created a video in which veterans with disabilities and postsecondary administrators discuss strategies for encouraging veterans with disabilities to pursue computing and IT fields. *Returning from Service: College and IT Careers for Vets* can be viewed or downloaded at *http://www.uw.edu/doit/Video/index.php?vid=52.*

The Veterans Center Website and Knowledge Base. The Veterans Center website at *http://www. uw.edu/doit/Veterans/* includes resources for veterans with disabilities, faculty, and support staff; information on typical accommodations and universal design; and a link to a searchable knowledge base of frequently asked questions, case studies, and promising practices for fully including veterans with disabilities in programs and employment. Individuals are encouraged to learn from and contribute to this valuable resource.

Proceedings. To share findings with others, the following proceedings are available:
- *Think Tank: Serving Veterans with Disabilities Proceedings, 2008*
  http://www.uw.edu/doit/cbi/veterans/proceedings.html
- *Building Capacity for Veterans with Disabilities*, 2009
  http://www.uw.edu/doit/cbi/vetcbi/

Guidelines for Conducting a Capacity-Building Institute. To conduct a capacity-building event on your campus or in your region, consult: *Building Capacity for a Welcoming and Accessible Postsecondary Institution*
http://www.uw.edu/doit/cbiN/

About DO-IT, *AccessSTEM*, and *AccessComputing*

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