

Welcome and Integrate the Military Community Into Your Campuses

Overview

Hosting programs or events on college campuses dedicated to welcome and integration are instrumental in helping those who have separated from the military or are currently serving in the Reserve or National Guard feel comfortable and welcome. These programs ensure a smooth transition into campus life, while informing veterans of resources available on campus and within the community. Additionally, a welcome and integration program is an opportunity to overcome the unique difficulties student veterans face on campus and provide face time with community leaders. The college is given the opportunity to highlight campus offices and resources, as well as convey that they believe in the value of student veterans. The college community will benefit from increased performance and longevity of their student veterans, and enjoy a reputation for services that better the lives of those in the military community.

Most of these programs can be designed to accommodate other members of the military community as well, such as spouses, survivors of the fallen, younger siblings and children of veterans and service members. The military community will benefit from having a support system prepared to help them succeed in academia. The overall goal of a “Welcome and Integration” program is to help members of the military community stay in school, have a positive experience and graduate. The goal of this practice is to increase student veteran retention by generating a sense of belonging on campus, which will ultimately be instrumental in the desire to stay and complete their degree.

There are three steps to implementing this practice: 1) Reach Out To and Identify the Military Community at the Local Campus; 2) Decide How Best to Welcome Them; and 3) Find Partners, Market Special Programs and Events.

Is it being done already? The gap analysis of your community will give you an idea of what, if any, integration programs already exist. If something is already in place, you could still offer to help by providing additional services or collaborating to create a more comprehensive plan for integration. If you are still not sure, connect with leading organizations and or programs in your community (i.e., Yellow Ribbon, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Student Veterans of America [SVA], etc.) what activities they know of in the integration realm.

Step-By-Step Implementation

Step 1: Reach Out To and Identify the Military Community on Campus

Partner with the college's offices like Veterans Services, Registrars, Housing, Services for Transfer and Re-Entry, and Student Life. Although they will not be able to give personal information out to members of the public they will likely be able to provide some basic information, such as the number of student veterans on campus, which will enable you to plan your programs appropriately. By communicating with these offices you may be able to convince them that they would want to "lead" the initiative and leverage you as a volunteer leader to help support its implementation. This would be the ideal outcome as it would ensure its sustainability over time. These offices can also distribute information to the student body by posting a flyer or offering other media. Additionally, staff members, professors or student body officials who are members of the military community may be strong allies for the welcome and integration programs.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Surveyor

Task: Identify the military community on campus, to include groups like SVA, etc., and get a rough head count of veterans

Attributes: Outgoing, detail-oriented, familiar with survey techniques

Who: A statistics, business or economics student

Hours: 20 over one week

Step 2: Decide How Best To Welcome Them

Once you have partnered with the college or university you will need to decide which program is most appropriate to welcome and integrate your military-connected population. As all communities are unique, one program does not fit all. Be prepared to tailor your approach with each institution and community. After the initial analysis of your community's military composition, decide which of the following (possibly all of the following) would be appropriate for your community:

- **Conduct a transition orientation for student veterans:** Different speakers from different offices around campus can attend and highlight the services and resources available to the student body. Offices and departments that should be highlighted include tutoring programs (a real academic challenge for veterans returning to school appears to be the writing and math courses required for degree completion and acceptance into a degree program), student affairs, counseling, student life, etc. You can integrate this into the general new student orientation programs. Letting the campus' military community know that they are appreciated and welcome will strengthen the bond between student and school which will lead to higher graduation rates.
- **College resource fair:** Though a more extensive event, a resource fair may be best for smaller communities with limited resources. This will showcase programs on- and off-campus in a similar style to a career fair, with booths, brochures and the opportunity to network within the military community. This fair should run for around four hours and can be incorporated into the current orientation program.

- **Veterans' resource center:** A veterans' resource center is a dedicated location for veterans to bring their concerns, both academic and financial, to an understanding and trained individual who can assist them. This center could be mirrored on the college's website. This will help student veterans get connected to your programs and stay informed. This center can also serve as a place to relax and digest the news or happenings of the day. Many colleges have student lounges and unions just for this purpose. Having something similar can be a great way to let the veterans know that you want them around. You may also generate a list of faculty and staff with military experience who would be willing to volunteer at the center to discuss any issues the student veterans might have. See *Higher Education Promising Practice :Mentoring*. Does the college or university follow the American Council on Education's credit recommendations for military service? The trained support individuals can serve as a guide through these recommendations to ensure that student veterans are getting academic credit for their military service. See *Other Resources* for a link to the ACE Military guide.
- **Early course registration for veterans:** Allowing members of the military community to register with senior students can ensure that they get the classes they need. This is important because, in many cases, the students will need proof of registration prior to receiving educational benefits. By allowing them to register early, this process can be expedited which will allow them to address their financial needs in a timely manner.
- **Active outreach and recruitment of veterans:** You may want to generate media, like a video, to highlight the services or your local institutes of higher education and their commitment to veterans' education. This video could be distributed wherever military members are likely to come into contact with it, like at a National Guard Armory or Armed Forces Career Center. Include information like the size of the veteran community on campus, the Veteran Resource Center, special websites just for veterans interested in your campus and examples of your veterans participating in the student life on campus.
- **Start up a local chapter of SVA:** Your community can work with student veterans and other members of the military community to start an SVA chapter. This will provide a forum on campus to meet, discuss challenges and opportunities as they present themselves and plug into the larger student veteran community in the United States. Such a group could be valuable in implementing other promising practices within many of the impact areas of the Community Blueprint Network.
- **Conduct a welcome breakfast or luncheon with the institution's president or chancellor:** This will provide the veterans with an excellent opportunity for an initial "buy in" – feeling like they are welcome and valued – with an orientation with the upper leadership of the institution. The veteran will feel that they are an important part of the framework of the school's student body. You can also include VA outreach events where the local VA clinic or hospital come on campus and register students into the VA Health Care System.

Step 3: Find Partners, Market Special Events and Programs

You can reach out to the school's Office of Veterans Affairs, Office of Student Services and/or Office of Multicultural Services; these offices routinely organize events for various student groups and populations on campus and are likely to be the ideal partner for your group. If you decide that a transition class for veterans is something you would like to focus your efforts on creating, you might consider visiting with the Records or Registrars Office and see what the requirements are for that specific school and follow their suggestions. Marketing and spreading the word are real keys to success.

Consider working with the college to directly recruit veterans in your area. Reach out to local installations to educate the service members there on their education options and the importance of obtaining a post-secondary education. You could set the goal of having the largest veteran population in your state or region. Contact SVA, Military Officers Association of America, The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary, IAVA and other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) for help reaching veterans in your area.

Volunteer Opportunities

Title: Outreach Coordinator

Task: Establish relationships with the college offices and VSOs on campus

Attributes: Outgoing, with excellent presentation and communications skill

Who: College's faculty, staff member or alumni; VSO member

Hours: 20-30 hours per month

Measures of Success

The goal of a welcome and integration program is to secure an initial sense of belonging to the college community, which will positively affect the access, persistence and graduation of student veterans. Service organizations and college offices should be asked to track the number of veterans and military-connected individuals they speak to and who signed up for services in order to measure program and service effectiveness.

Moreover, in order to measure the level of satisfaction felt by participating student veterans, consider requesting they fill out a simple pre- and post-survey. On this survey, quotes or personal stories can be collected from members of the military community to tell your group's story. This information can be used to generate ideas for future events and programs. Students taking statistics courses and students with certain majors (such as psychology, statistics, economics, higher education or business) on campus can be utilized to develop a survey instrument and analyze the data. This would be a win for both your organization and the school – you can generate data sets for free while the students gain real-world experience. For further information on how to design a survey, see the *Surveying Guideline Tool*.

Other Resources

- Student Veterans of America has many resources for campuses interested in becoming more veteran friendly. You can access guides on starting Student Veterans of America chapters and other resources at: <http://www.studentveterans.org/resourcelibrary>
- Houston State University has instituted a program for welcoming student veterans on campus that incorporates many of the programs suggested here. You can visit their resource center here: http://www.shsu.edu/~reg_www/VRC/index.html
- San Diego State University Student Veterans Organization has incorporated an interesting veterans' space onto campus. They have included a lounge, computer/study area, a barbeque and pool table: <http://sdsusvo.ning.com>
- In order to incorporate veterans with PTSD or TBI, the university will need to make adjustments to certain courses and policies. The American Council on Education has a report that would be beneficial for volunteers and university faculty and staff to familiarize themselves with. You can find the report at: http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/MilitaryPrograms/serving/AccommodatingStudentVeterans_06222011.pdf
- The American Council on Education has a Military Guide, which many colleges and universities use to adapt military experience and training to academic credit. All you need is the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of the soldier in question; you can then search the guide for recommendations. There are additional credits granted for skill level and rank. You can find the guide here: <http://www.militaryguides.acenet.edu>