



**IUPUI**

OFFICE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY PERSONNEL

## **Everything you wanted to know about teaching our veteran and student service members!**

Most instructors and professors have a pre-conceived idea about who their potential students in the classroom are, the era they represent, and age/gender/socio-economic/marital status, and so on. Preconceptions can be helpful, but in certain cases they can be detrimental to the student's academic and personal wellbeing.

When it comes to teaching our veterans and service members it is helpful to keep in mind some basic facts:

### **Veteran Demographics**

Veteran students generally do not fit the "18-20-year-old" age slot. Most are older, married/divorced, may have children, rarely live on campus, and are often working at least 3/4 to full time in order to provide for their families. They may have been out of school for more than five years and may require some assistance in refreshing math or writing skills. Older veterans may have difficulty listening to the perceived naïveté of younger students, especially with the regard to social life and drinking.

### **Veteran Identification**

Veterans and service members are female, male, or transgender. Few will self-identify in the classroom, and view being "outed" as a veteran as a negative, as assimilation with their civilian peers is a goal for many. Identifying them as a "disabled veteran" in the classroom should always be the students' purview and not that of the instructor. Some will appreciate various accommodations regarding how the room is set up, (i.e., having their chair face the door, sitting near the instructor, or in the back of the room).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress**

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS or PTSD) should never be ascribed to any student whether he/she has served in the military or deployment. PTS is caused by a wide variety of environmental factors such as severe weather events, physical or sexual violence, terminal illness, domestic violence, severe accidents with cars or machinery, assaults, being present during a violent act that causes

death, amputation or other severe injury to fellow service members or local civilians. All of these can contribute to the possibility of a person experiencing PTS. The trauma-related stress may cause a response that is barely visible, or may present a highly visible debilitating disorder. PTS reactive events may be triggered by simple small things such as the sound of texting or lack of respect for others such as talking during a lecture.

### **Insight into Current Events**

Keep in mind that even as you, as a faculty member, cannot answer for the policies or decisions of the entire university, your student service member or veteran does not -- and should not be expected to -- answer for the decisions of the United States government's foreign policies. With that being said, they *may* be able to share rare and/or valuable insight into some military events in which they were involved, but the decision on whether or not to share said insight should be left up to them.

### **Moral Recollection/Sensitivity**

Moral injury is a real thing. Orders to act in a way that departs from a person's inner moral compass may cause long-term dissonance in his/her mental processing of the military or deployment experience. Sometimes this means that the "normal" reaction is no reaction at all, other times it may present itself as great anger over small issues, sometimes it is with deep sadness and regret. Sensitivity to this range of possible reactions may require decades of personal struggle, therapy, support groups, or family time to reach comfort in these areas.

### **Military Sexual Trauma**

Military sexual trauma (MST) is often on the news. Please note that MST survivors may be male, female, or other gender-identified persons. The Veterans Affairs (VA) Health system has special counseling and treatment centers for this issue. Again, not all survivors will react with the same response, so do not try to generalize their situation to any other survivor modality.

### **Combat Experience**

Asking a veteran about the type of combat he/she has experienced is not a positive step. The veteran student may offer some information, but the instructor should be well-advised to accept this information without probing for more details. All people react differently to death or deadly

events. Some have a numb reaction, while others are emotionally and psychologically affected for years after.

### **Dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs**

Appointments with the VA Health services are notoriously difficult to get and the process for re-scheduling one is a nightmare. If your student service member or veteran says they have an appointment on a particular date/time, believe them that it is necessary for them to keep that appointment. Try to work around that schedule.

### **Student Veterans' Sense of Belonging**

The success of students, whether former military or currently serving, is closely correlated to their sense of "belonging" to the university. Helping them get involved in organizations, student clubs, and group projects will help them form these relationships and increase their chance of persisting to graduation.

### **Assumption of Benefits**

Not all veterans have their tuition paid for in full or part. Some did not serve in the GI Bill-covered era, may have run out of benefits, or have not deployed, so do not assume that they are getting a "free ride" education. Disability may play a role in their educational benefits while requiring special services with the Students with Disabilities Office.

### **"Mission Oriented" Military Culture**

Veterans and those currently serving are "mission oriented" so making requirements tangible and less ambiguous is very helpful. Asking for help is frowned upon in the military culture, so encourage them to utilize tutoring, or set aside time outside of the classroom to answer questions.

### **Connections with Traditional Students**

Veterans have a wealth of experience and cultural exposure that helps them contribute to the classroom discussion in valuable ways. They may, however, be less patient with younger students who have little concept of the military experience, the wide global viewpoints, or global cultural norms.