

# Comprehensive Services Tailored for the Transitional Success of Veterans in Higher Education

Dustin D. Lange<sup>1</sup>  
Susann Heft Sears<sup>2</sup>  
Nicholas J. Osborne<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

It is estimated that in the next decade, over two million veterans and dependents will utilize the Post-9/11 GI Bill for postsecondary education. Most colleges already possess the resources that veterans need to successfully transition and persist, though this subpopulation of learners also require services that are tailored to their nontraditional and unique backgrounds. Drawing on case study examples, this article offers a student-centric conceptual model that was developed at a major public university in the Midwest where approximately 400 student veterans are enrolled. The model offers a holistic approach for blending academic, career, family, and disability services for veterans along with recommended practices for student service offices and administrative leaders.

Keywords: *Veterans, military, transition, student services, higher education*

Over the past decade, college campuses around the nation have seen an increase in the number of student veterans enrolled in postsecondary education. Not since World War II have so many veterans transitioned from military life to student life (Cook & Kim, 2009; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek & MacDermid, 2013). The number of student veterans and beneficiaries (i.e., dependents or spouses) accessing military educational benefits across the United States increased from 397,598 in 2000 to 564,487 in 2009 to over a million in 2012, totaling over \$10.5 billion in utilized benefits in 2011 alone (McCaslin, Leach, Herbst, & Armstrong, 2013). Overall, it is estimated that over two million service members returning from conflicts in the Middle East and departing the military will enroll in postsecondary education (Cook & Kim, 2009; Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009). This influx of veterans and their dependents utilizing education benefits is largely the result of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which took effect in 2009. This, according to Cate (2014), is a massive investment of more than \$30 billion dollars to make college more reachable for military-connected populations. As President Truman stated to Congress on January 6, 1947, "History will judge us not by the money we spend but by the future

contributions we enable our veterans to make to their country" (Strom, 1950, p. 60). Indeed, aside from a national responsibility, an investment in the welfare and education of veterans is integral to offset potential long-term and individual costs, which could result from lost productivity, reduced quality of life, homelessness, domestic violence, family strain, suicide, and disability (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Compared to military conflicts from previous eras, improved equipment and advances in medical technology have led to an increased survival rate for service members, but with a much higher rate of injury. For example, DiRamio and Spires (2009) reported that the ratio of wounded to dead among American service members in Iraq was roughly 16 to 1 versus 3 to 1 during the Vietnam era. According to the Congressional Research Service's Report, between October 7, 2001 and August 7, 2015 the U.S. had a total of 52,351 service members wounded in action (Fischer, 2015). The most common injuries include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), amputations, burns, and sexual assaults.

<sup>1</sup> Center of Innovation for Complex Chronic Healthcare (CINCHH) at Edward Hines Jr. VA

<sup>2</sup> University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Depiction of the Problem

Veterans have nontraditional features and requirements that make them a unique student population to work with. To adequately meet their needs, colleges and universities must evaluate their services and understanding of veterans to determine if existing resources are adequate and particularly when assessing support for a disability. According to 690 institutions surveyed by the American Council on Education (ACE), a majority of institutions provide basic services for veterans, such as financial aid and counseling assistance. However, the survey also found that few institutions have established programs or services to specifically assist veterans with physical disabilities and less visible injuries such as TBI (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). In addition, the survey illuminated that only 12.9% of public four-year colleges have support groups specifically for student veterans with disabilities and only 8.2% offer services for veterans' families.

Veterans with newly acquired injuries must develop an understanding of how their disability may affect their learning (Church, 2009; Madaus et al., 2009). Many are unaware of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), their rights as students with a disability, or how to initiate support for receiving academic accommodations (Madaus, 2009). Making matters more complex, veterans with disabilities are transitioning from a military culture that may stigmatize their condition. Although studies have shown that many student veterans believe that their service provided them with positive attributes such as discipline, maturity, and innovation (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009), a rigid military culture that emphasizes toughness and self-sufficiency can make asking for help difficult for today's student veteran (Osborne, 2014).

### Conceptual Comprehensive Service Model for Student Veterans.

The purpose of this practice brief is to create awareness of a student-centric conceptual model that incorporates academic, career, disability, veterans and family services. This model was created by the authors and has been implemented successfully at a major public university (more than 40,000 students) in the Midwest that serves approximately 400 student veterans. Additionally, this brief provides case study examples and suggestions for working with student veterans that readers can consider implementing based on their own institutional needs.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual services model to support the academic and transitional success of student veterans. Four core service areas are recommended for student veterans to ease their transition from military to academic life. They are: (1) Academic Services, (2) Career Services, (3) Disability Services, and (4) Veteran and Family Services. Figure 2 provides a detailed list of items that fall under each core area. Most colleges already have these services in place but may need to tailor them specifically for their veteran population; as their unique experiences and characteristics can be quite different from traditional students and even of other non-traditional groups. To meet this aim, the authors worked with current student veterans while developing the model to determine the types of resources they found most helpful in addition to determining how these offices could brand elements of their services specifically to veterans. As a starting point, the authors conducted a needs assessment survey that was disseminated to all registered student veterans. The purpose of the survey was to identify the types of services and resources that student veterans found most helpful or that needed to be enhanced in order to be more effective. Additionally, semi-structured interviews and meetings with the student veteran's organization provided enhanced insight into strategies for strengthening existing resources. For example, career services developed brochures for student veterans that addressed workshops related to translating their military experiences to non-military employers in addition to career fairs and industry partners who are looking to hire veterans.

### Description of Practice through Case Studies

The following case studies were developed to demonstrate the unique characteristics and potential range of needs that student veterans may exhibit while pursuing a postsecondary education. Although the following case studies are fictitious, they represent an amalgamation of students that the authors have worked with. The fundamental vision for the proposed practice implementation is to treat the student veteran holistically by addressing their psychosocial and emotional health through a spectrum of services that support their transitional and academic success.

#### Case Study 1

Jeff is a 27-year-old married male with a four-year-old daughter. Jeff experienced a concussive blast when he was deployed to Iraq. As a result, he has been diagnosed with TBI and PTSD. His brain injury has impacted the emotional control center of his brain along with his short-term memory and retrieval skills.

Recently, Jeff had a dispute with a neighbor. His wife has further reported that he has emotional outbursts and she anticipates these are an outcome of having survivor's guilt, as other soldiers in his unit were killed in action. Jeff recently started taking courses at a local college, but is not utilizing any support services.

**Intervention approach for case study 1.** It is suggested that Jeff seek out a staff member who can serve as an academic coach to meet weekly or bi-weekly to help him prioritize his ongoing academic and non-academic responsibilities. Such an individual may be available either through his campus academic or disability services offices. The goal is to assist Jeff in staying on schedule and to keep the majority of his responsibilities and priorities from escalating into a crisis. In doing so, the academic coach would help Jeff establish both long and short term goals to further ensure he is appropriately managing both his academics and connecting with additional support services. Jeff is in need of learning how to utilize computer and cell phone technology to keep track of major academic deadlines (e.g., midterm and final exam dates; class project deadlines; and research paper deadlines) as well as non-academic priorities (e.g., medical appointments, filling prescriptions, and picking-up his daughter from preschool). Additionally, ongoing counseling with a psychologist that specializes in working with combat veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD and TBI will assist Jeff in being more consciously aware of how his emotional states appear to others while he is functioning throughout his day as well as strategies for effectively coping with mood fluctuations. It is further recommended that Jeff register with the campus disability services office so that he can qualify for accommodations for his courses due to his short-term memory and retrieval skills as well as his concerns for the possibility of having to sit with his back to the doorway of a classroom; a stressor that makes him anxious. Early registration access is another recommended benefit so that he can select course sections that occur when his medication levels are most optimal.

### **Case Study 2**

Jodi is a 26-year-old single female who was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and experienced an amputation of her left leg. She experienced ongoing sexual harassment from her superiors during her enlistment. Jodi was athletically gifted while in the military and ran a number of marathons throughout her service. She has reported that she is experiencing a dramatic change in her sense of identity as a female, in her career path, and as an athlete. The trauma associated with both her combat missions and from the negative experiences from her leadership has resulted in a PTSD

diagnosis. She is now enrolled in higher education to obtain a degree for a career change and to establish a new beginning for herself.

**Intervention approach for case study 2.** Jodi will likely benefit from meeting with a counselor that specializes in working with women who have experienced trauma so she can address the ongoing concerns she has related to the sexual harassment she experienced during her military tenure as well as addressing her sense of identity. Registering with the campus disability services office may afford her the ability to have accessible parking and additional transportation services to and from classes. She may further qualify for academic accommodations for her PTSD diagnosis. Disability services or the Veterans Administration (VA) may have additional resources to assist her in connecting with either local, regional, and national adaptive sports programs, since athletics continue to be a part of her identity. Jodi may also benefit from meeting with her campus career services office so that she can learn more about professions that are compatible with her interests and strengths as well as companies who are known to interview and prioritize the hiring of veterans.

### **Case Study 3**

Mike is a 28-year-old single male who served one deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and another in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). He did not experience any physical injuries related to combat and would like to know more about how to utilize his GI Bill to enroll in higher education to pursue studies for a career change, as he decided not to reenlist in the Army. He has demonstrated strong leadership and problem-solving skills as a Staff Sergeant.

**Intervention approach for case study 3.** Although it does not appear that Mike has self-identified as having service-related injuries requiring additional treatment or intervention, it would still be important for him to be aware of the support services available in the event that his circumstances were to change in the future, as the onset of PTSD or issues related to mobility can occur months and years following the experience of combat.

### **Services Beneficial for All Student Veterans**

Although each case study presented has their own distinct needs, there are a number of support services that universally benefit most student veterans regardless of their circumstances or disability status. The following section identifies these recommended services.

**Peer support.** Veterans are notorious for looking out for each other. Connecting new student veterans with currently enrolled student veterans is a helpful way to establish an immediate peer network. Many

schools have a veteran's student organization in place and chapters can be found through the Student Veterans of America ([www.studentveterans.org](http://www.studentveterans.org)). Additionally, community-based support can be found through several Veteran Service Organizations (e.g., American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars). These groups offer effective resources for helping new veterans acclimate to the community and they are often engaged in various philanthropic work that benefit military populations.

**Financial assistance and advisement.** Many veterans are entitled to multiple types of benefits and selecting the best one can be confusing. For veterans who have a service-connected disability, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program ([www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab](http://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab)) provided through the VA offers individualized career and education counseling, including benefits selection. Additionally, ongoing advisement from a financial aid officer who is knowledgeable of the GI Bill and various state grants and scholarships is another critical area to ensure is in place.

**Academic related supports.** Student veterans may require additional supports for their academic demands in higher education. Services such as tutoring or test-taking strategies may be needed to further ensure they are performing optimally. Additionally, academic coaching services can further support executive functioning skills management with the goal of advising students on techniques for successful self-management of their coursework.

**Psychological counseling.** Counseling centers and mental health staff should be made available to student veterans to help them process the academic and cultural adjustments they experience while transitioning to higher education. Attention should also be directed toward providing counseling staff with training on military culture in addition to specialized training related to military sexual trauma and PTSD. The Center for Deployment Psychology (<http://deploymentpsych.org>) is a helpful resource for receiving specialized training related to military populations.

**Career counseling.** The employment focus of student veterans make career services one of the most sought after resources on campus. Workshops and services that build on skills acquired in the military offer a great starting point for working with student veterans.

- Translating military experience to civilian employment: learning more about how their prior work-related and combat experiences translate into skills and assets for the employment setting in the civilian world.

- Information on existing careers: information on careers that is compatible with one's interests and aptitude.

### Implications and Portability

The process of student veteran support services will vary across institutions. The listed recommendations provide guidance for initiating a course of action toward establishing or improving service provision to student veterans. The primary objective is to provide information that is both practical and useful for a wide variety of higher education institutions. The critical elements essential for creating positive impact include the establishment and sustainment of professional relationships with other campus units and the effective management and usage of resources. The following recommendations address student veteran's needs at the individual and campus level.

#### Individual Level

- Create web-based surveys for student veterans and dependents to assist in determining needs for service provision.
- Conduct focus groups with student veterans to learn about their transitional experiences, perception of campus climate, and identified barriers. Including student veterans by way of surveys and focus groups is effective for giving student veterans buy in with regard to their input being used to strengthen and shape programming.
- Collaborate with other Registered Student Organizations. Student veterans should be encouraged to integrate into the larger campus and engage with diverse student populations. An excellent strategy for promoting integration is to empower the student veteran's organization to collaborate with other student groups. The authors' have sponsored activities that have linked student veterans to international students, veterans from other countries and students associated with Greek life to engage in various social and philanthropic events.

#### Campus Level

- Create a veterans services website and link other student services to it. The campus homepage should also consider having a link for veterans to enhance visibility.
- Utilize social media to increase visibility of veterans' presence on campus.
- Educate faculty and staff about military culture,

ways to effectively work with student veterans, and how to brand services toward military-connected students. For instance, residential services might consider including information that explains whether or not veterans are required to live on campus or of housing options for nontraditional students.

- Collect data on veteran enrollment, retention, number of wounded veterans, and types of disabilities.
- Reach out to different college units for collaborative projects. A veteran's advisory committee is a helpful way to bring multiple units together to strategize development and programming for veterans.
- Consider how student veterans needs align to your campus' strategic plan

The goal of this practice brief was to create awareness of a conceptual model that incorporates multiple services that are critical for supporting the transition and integration of student veterans. It should be noted that regardless of the size and philosophy of an institution, the infrastructure necessary to best serve student veterans is often times pre-existing; in other words, the services that are currently available and that benefit traditional students are likely to also benefit student veterans. However, the infusion and tailoring of a "veteran's lens" into these existing services is required.

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### **About the Authors**

Dustin D. Lange received his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. in Community Health with a Vocational Rehabilitation emphasis from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He spent 8 years on active duty in the Marine Corps and is currently doing an Associated Health Post-doctoral Fellowship at the Center of Innovation for Complex Chronic Healthcare at Edward Hines Jr., VA Hospital. His research interests include the use of complementary and integrative health practices for managing the symptoms and sequelae of neurological disorders, implementation of veteran transition programs, and the career development of veterans with visual and non-visual disabilities. He can be reached at [dustin.lange@va.gov](mailto:dustin.lange@va.gov).

Susann Heft Sears received her B.A. degree in Communicative Disorders from the University of Northern Iowa, her M.Ed. in Higher Education Student Affairs Administration from Iowa State University and is a part-time doctoral student in Community Health with a Rehabilitation emphasis at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. She is a military spouse to a Chief Warrant Officer and is currently the Acting Director of Beckwith Residential Support Services (BRSS) with the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) at the University of Illinois. Her research interests include investigating the career readiness levels of college students with disabilities and the factors that impact their vocational behavior. She can be reached by email at: [sheft@illinois.edu](mailto:sheft@illinois.edu).

Nicholas J. Osborne received his B.S. in sociology from Lees-McRae College; his M.A. in sociology from Humboldt State University; and his Ed.D. in educational leadership from the University of California, Davis. He is a former Coast Guard officer and is currently the Director of the Center for Wounded Veterans in Higher Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include first-year experience programs, student veterans, male community and disability. He can be reached at [nosborne@illinois.edu](mailto:nosborne@illinois.edu).

Figure 1. Conceptual Services for Academic and Transitional Success of Student Veterans

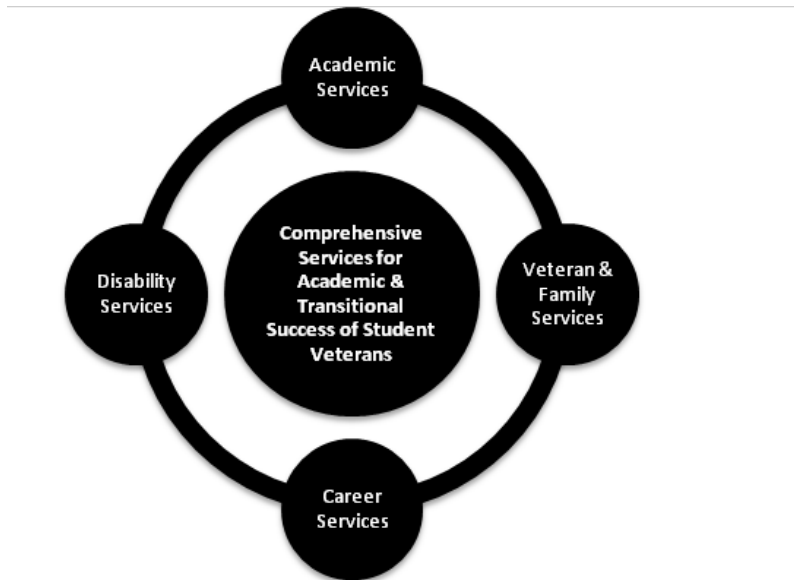


Figure 2. List of Comprehensive Services for Student Veterans

<p><b>Academic Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Veteran Orientation</li> <li>Tutoring</li> <li>Writing Labs</li> <li>Academic Coaching</li> <li>Financial Aid Services</li> <li>Scholarship Services</li> <li>Priority Registration</li> <li>Reduced Courseload if Needed</li> <li>Evening / Online Courses</li> <li>Academic Advising</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disability Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transitional Disability Management Program</li> <li>Hiring, Training, Scheduling, and Managing Personal Assistant</li> <li>Health and Life Skills Management Program</li> <li>Training in the use of Assistive Technologies and Auxiliary Aids</li> <li>Academic Accommodations</li> <li>Academic Coaching</li> <li>Adaptive Sports Teams / Support Groups</li> <li>Speciality Printed Materials</li> <li>Education on Disability Rights and Self-Advocacy (e.g., ADA)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Career Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career Placement</li> <li>Education / Resources for Job Searches</li> <li>Education on Writing Resumes &amp; Cover Letters</li> <li>Education on Application Process</li> <li>Mock Interviews</li> <li>Education on Accepting and Negotiating Contracts</li> <li>Career Counseling</li> <li>Education on Networking</li> <li>Introducing them to Alumni Association</li> <li>Translating Military Experiences into Civilian Language (e.g., soft skills)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Veteran Family Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peer Mentoring via Veteran Support Group</li> <li>Points of Contact for Local Veteran Service Organizations</li> <li>Points of Contact for VA and VA Benefits</li> <li>Access to VetSuccess Rehabilitation Counselor on Campus</li> <li>Family Support Groups</li> <li>Counseling to Veterans and Family Members</li> <li>Veteran's Lounge and/or Veteran's Center</li> <li>On-Campus Daycare Services</li> <li>Registered Veterans' Student Organization</li> <li>Campus Veteran Coordinator</li> </ul>

Figure 2. List of Services to Consider. This list is not exhaustive but offers an excellent start for services that could be utilized by veterans and their families.