

Helping Military and Veteran Students Transition to Academic Life:

The Role of the Academic Library

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Abstract

Military and veteran students face unique challenges when coming into an academic environment. Libraries can play a role in easing those transition challenges. Fort Hays State University is a comprehensive state teaching university. Roughly 6% of the student population, both on-campus and virtual, identifies as a currently serving military member or a veteran. The university as a whole is designated as a Military Friendly School and participates in the Department of Education 8 Keys to Veterans' Success initiative. Forsyth Library supports these efforts through library-specific initiatives that help military and veteran students connect with academic resources and become acclimated to the academic environment. This paper outlines how Forsyth Library has taken specific steps to address the unique educational needs of military and veteran students, and shares ideas for working with various campus organizations involved in the military and veteran student community.

Keywords: military student success, military student retention, student success and retention, library liaison programs

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The Role of the Academic Library

Academic libraries play an integral role in student success, especially for transfer and non-traditional students. Libraries are known for their efforts at engaging all members of the campus community, and often provide specific tailored support for various student populations. Military and veteran students are often overlooked as a unique group due to their resemblance to so many other groups in the student body. While they have similarities to traditional transfer students, traditional undergraduates, non-traditional undergraduates, or other intersectional groups, their military and veteran status creates unique challenges necessitating direct support. Libraries that recognize these unique challenges can position themselves to be an important asset for military and veteran students as they transition to academic life. In turn this can have a positive effect on student success and help cement the library's role as a vital campus resource.

Background

According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, in 2018, there were more than 660,000 veterans and military members enrolled in higher education. Of those enrolled, the majority are first generation students earning their undergraduate degrees. Overall, they are older than traditional students, more likely to be married, and more likely to have children. As a group, they resemble more closely the profile of the non-traditional student than they do the traditional undergraduate. As a result, many institutions tend to lump military and veteran students with the non-traditional students when it comes to determining academic support needs. This similitude to non-traditional students masks the fact that military and veteran students face specific challenges when entering higher education for the first time.

While the literature on the topic is limited, some pertinent studies have emerged that shine light on these specific challenges. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found that military and veteran students faced barriers at recruitment and retention benchmarks because of the inherent unpredictability of military training schedules. Military separation dates often do not coincide with the start of an academic term. For students who are still in the military, like those in the National Guard, a deployment over which they have no control may disrupt their undergraduate experience. Once they are enrolled, Schiavone and Gentry (2014) found that military and veteran students had difficulty in navigating the myriad of benefits available to them. The web of supports, including veterans' benefits, financial aid, campus mental health resources, student organizations, and other veterans' assistance can be difficult for military and veteran students to connect with. (Ackerman et al., 2009)

In addition to the administrative difficulties, military and veteran students report challenges in transitioning to campus culture. Schiavone and Gentry (2014) and Rumann and Hamrick (2010) also found that the dissimilitude of the military environment and the campus environment made assimilation difficult for military and veteran students. The military environment is highly regimented in a way that a university campus is not. Soldier students reported differing values regarding work-ethic and self-discipline than what they observed in their fellow students. This often created feelings of disconnect. Military and veteran students often come in with a higher level of maturity and more developed leadership skills than do their non-military connected peers (Ackerman et. al., 2009). In the classroom, military and veteran students reported experiences not unlike those of other minority groups. Being singled out in class as the representative of all veterans, or being asked to disclose details about their military experience created a sense of discomfort which hindered classroom participation (Rumann and Hamrick, 2009). Military and

veteran students also reported that their lack of familiarity with an academic environment in general presented further challenges (DiRamino et al., 2008).

Even though there is a growing body of literature identifying barriers to student success for this group, a 2012 survey by McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead found that while universities are increasing their efforts at providing transition support for military and veteran students, fewer than 40% of institutions surveyed provided specific transition assistance. From a library perspective, the literature landscape is even more bare. There are no current studies on how many academic libraries provide specific transfer assistance for military and veteran students. Much of the library literature focuses on transfer students coming in from community college, which means library supports for those students will likely miss the mark for military and veteran transfer students. (Robison et al. 2020). Recent studies have shown that when transfer students receive library instruction early on, they are more likely to engage with the library as they continue their path to their degree (Grigg and Dale, 2017). Library engagement as an undergraduate has a direct correlation to student success (Soria et al., 2014). This suggests that academic libraries would do well to specifically invest in transition assistance for military and veteran students as a means to contribute to student success over all.

Military Students at Fort Hays State University

Fort Hays State University (FHSU) is a master's granting teaching university in western Kansas. FHSU has a total enrollment of around 15,000 students on-campus, virtual, and through international partners. Roughly six percent of the student body identifies as having military or veteran status. This is on par with numbers for society as a whole where, according to the US Census Bureau , between six and seven percent of the U.S. population identifies as having military or veteran status. FHSU has taken direct steps to provide transition assistance for military and

veteran students. The university has applied for and received the Military Friendly School designation from the Military Friendly Program, and it participates in the Department of Education's 8 Keys to Veterans' Success program. In 2019, FHSU formally created the Transfer and Military Center that serves as a one-stop point of contact for students using military or veterans benefits to fund their degrees. The Transfer and Military Center's assistant director is a veteran, and they have a dedicated transfer counsellor for military and veteran students who is a veteran himself. The Military Focus Committee is a Provost-level committee that brings together representatives from the various departments across campus offering support to military and veteran students. An active Student Veterans Association (SVA) provides an outlet for military and veteran students to come together and to engage with other groups across campus.

Forsyth Library and Military and Veteran Students

At FHSU, the Military Focus Committee (MFC) is the gemination point for many ideas related to military and veteran student transition assistance. Its membership consists of representatives from each of the five colleges, Student Affairs, Financial Aid, the Kelly Center, which is the primary mental health resource on campus, a military or veteran student, and chosen faculty members who are veterans themselves. In order to ensure that the library continued to play an integral role for all students, Forsyth Library asked for a representative on the MFC. This allowed the library to have its finger on the pulse of the needs of the military and veteran community at FHSU. This representation on the MFC has been the driving force behind library initiatives for military and veteran students.

Early on, the committee identified a need for a military and veteran-specific study space within the library. Military and veteran students who may have combat-related stress issues can find studying in the open spaces of the library difficult, and so a room was set aside for these

students to use if they so choose. The creation of this space served as an active indicator that Forsyth Library values military and veteran students as a unique group. Dedicated spaces can help create a feeling of inclusion for military and veteran students who are having difficulty transitioning to academic life.

Libraries are in a prime position to create aggregated resource lists for students. To this end, Forsyth Library created a Military and Veteran Resources libguide. This guide provides links to a variety of resources both on campus and across the web. There are specific tabs for active duty and military benefits, women veterans, education benefits for spouses, health and wellness, employment resources, and library specific resources. As part of the development of this resource guide, an assessment of library-held resources revealed gaps in the collection. While there were large numbers of resources addressing PTSD and combat-related stress, there were few dedicated to the transition to civilian life, navigating the higher education system as a student veteran, or how to access veterans' benefits. By working with other members of MFC, the library identified resources to help round-out the collection in a way that better served the needs of military and veteran students.

As the Military and Transfer Center expands its offerings, Forsyth Library has made it a point to engage with the military arm of the transfer center to identify where in the transfer process library orientation works best. The Transfer and Military Center is currently offering a limited transfer orientation with plans to expand in Fall 2022. In support of this, the librarian representative on the MFC has agreed to act as library liaison to military and veteran students. In order to introduce these students to their library liaison, a video was developed and provided to the Transfer and Military Center to include as part of their virtual orientation packet. This video introduces the

librarian, provides a broad overview of library services available, and directs students to the Military and Veteran Student resource guide.

Next Steps

There are multiple opportunities for Forsyth Library to continue to support military and veteran students in the future. A student success center is currently under construction and once completed, the Transfer and Military Center will have a permanent home. There are opportunities for the liaison librarian to become a known face around the Transfer and Military Center by holding “officer hours” there once a week. As the Transfer and Military Center expands its orientation process, the library is planning to develop a full module for inclusion as part of that orientation. Efforts to expand the library collection to include topics outside of mental health are ongoing. Specific areas for development include financial skills for newly separated veterans. Beginning in summer 2021, there is a joint project between the liaison librarian and the developer of the military transfer program to revamp the “Green Zone” training for faculty and staff who have an interest in better serving military and veteran students. This training will focus on how to include military and veteran students in class without singling them out, as well as to provide awareness of the specific challenges this group faces when transitioning to academic life.

Supporting military and veteran students contributes to student success overall. When students are engaged with the library, they do better. Libraries can play an important role in helping military and veteran students transition to academic life. By engaging with the systems that already exist on a campus, libraries can identify areas where they are uniquely positioned to provide assistance. They can connect students to resources and help them feel like valued members of the campus community. These initiatives have been mutually beneficial for both the library and the university. The efforts at Forsyth Library to support military and veteran students have played a

role in securing the Military Friendly School designation for the university, and have been specifically cited as part of the university's implementation of the Department of Education's 8 Keys to Veterans' Success. With the support of library administration and the MFC this partnership will likely continue to grow over the years and will serve more and more military and veteran students.

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