



Veterans Support Office

THE TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

May 19, 2016

BEST PRACTICES FOR MILITARY AND VETERANS SUPPORT AND SERVICES

The Texas A&M University System is committed to providing a welcoming environment, quality education and path to success for veterans, dependents and the military community. These Best Practices guidelines, based on a holistic approach and input from numerous veterans support organizations, universities, and studies, provide an optimum framework for supporting those who have served their country in uniform, and whose unique experiences enhance their own lives and enrich those of their new academic families.

Military and Veteran-Supportive Status.

- System universities will comply with necessary policies from the VA, DOD, DOE, DOJ, TVC and relevant governmental agencies regarding veterans, military students and their families.
- Periodic advisory reviews of the military and veteran-supportive status of each campus regarding adherence to A&M System Best Practices will be provided by the System Veterans Support Office (VSO) to enhance and coordinate service for veterans and the military community.

Campus veterans success centers. System university presidents should direct the establishment and support of a campus Veterans Success Center or Resource Center (or similar name).

- The campus success or resource center will perform on-site VA and Hazlewood certification as well as other relevant administrative services. The center will utilize models based on a real-time administrative core cluster, hub-and-spoke (designated referrals), or a virtual connection to related university areas impacting student veterans such as financial aid, registration, admissions, advising, counseling, family support, on or off-campus housing and jobs.
- Such services should include a designated office or space providing privacy for confidential discussions with veteran and military students regarding benefits.
- Where possible, the Center should be physically incorporated in or near the campus Student Center or Academic Success Center (or similar name).

Top-down support. In accordance with recommendations from the American Council of Education (ACE), numerous studies and national feedback, president's offices should maintain active support of student veteran programs.

- Presidents should designate a high-level administrator or senior faculty member as director (or manager or coordinator) of veterans support services. A veteran, preferably with military service that included leadership assignments, is strongly recommended. The position can be full or part-time, and will be the on-campus "champion" for veterans and point-of-contact (POC) for campus veterans issues. If feasible, supervision of veterans functions should be incorporated into the position description (PD) of designated faculty or staff.
- Presidents should appoint or review a Veterans Advisory Council of faculty, staff and student veteran membership.
- The director (or manager or coordinator) and the VA-required certification specialist(s) constitute the core of the veterans services office. Staff may be augmented as enrollment and services require.

Data and tracking. Accurate data collection to track the matriculation, level of involvement in student life and progress of veterans, dependents and military personnel attending universities is essential to favorable student outcomes.

- While the VA provides macro-data on VA expenditures and enrollments, and the state reports Hazelwood data, it is the responsibility of each university president's office to designate procedures to ensure measurement of the success of the campus veteran population.
- Each university's veterans services office will provide to the system VSO on a semester basis the total enrollments for veterans and dependents of record, and also a separate tally of Hazelwood exemption students. Further data points may be added when feasible.
- Methods to capture and report graduation rates and persistence (retention) data should be developed, both for reporting to the system and to the VA.

Engagement of student veterans. Success of student veterans is heavily influenced by their sense of well-being, involvement, vet-to-vet camaraderie, and also inclusion, acceptance and participation in general university life.

- To that end, each campus will sponsor and actively nurture a campus Student Veterans Organization, and support other activities consistent with veteran success goals. SVOs primarily should be organized and guided by students rather than university staff.
- Peer-to-peer counseling networks such as PAVE (Peer Advisors for Veteran Education) are highly recommended.

- Student veteran-community-building initiatives may include social activities such as informal receptions and get-togethers, dinners or luncheons for guest speakers or campus awards, fund-raising events or community service projects, and vet-community social media engagement.
- Recognition programs, such as SALUTE or other academic honors programs to encourage success among veteran and military students, are encouraged.
- Graduation honor and recognition observances should be developed and implemented.
- VA-funded, work-study students should be used to the full extent authorized.

Engagement of faculty. The role of university faculty providing leadership through mentoring, advising, representing and interacting with student veterans cannot be overstated.

- Orientation programs for faculty and staff regarding issues facing military and veteran students should be developed and offered each semester where feasible, or annually at a minimum. These can be successfully augmented with interactive events such as informal receptions, informational coffees, or departmental meet-and-greets between faculty and student vets.
- Faculty mentoring programs should be created and supported. Especially recommended are programs pairing a vet with a faculty member from his or her program of study (e.g., “Mentors and Majors”).
- Creative options suitable to campus identity and traditions may be continuously developed, such as “Veteran Friendly” type decals on faculty office doors, or practical assistance projects such as veterans textbook exchanges.

Commitment to veteran academic success. Procedures and protocols for academic standards, credits and curricula are addressed in ACE guidelines, and in various federal and state regulations and policies. Universities should support and build upon these bases.

- Universities should consider establishing and supporting a permanent Veteran Success Committee, consisting of faculty, staff and students, to advance student veteran academic and co-curricular progress. This may be congruent with or part of the Veterans Advisory Council.
- Universities shall participate actively in the Texas College Credit for Heroes program managed by the Texas Workforce Commission and funded by the Legislature.
- Areas of particular interest to military and veteran students include but are not limited to: preferred track admission and early admission for veterans; priority registration; expanded service-for-credit acceptance (such as in criminal justice and health care programs);

maximum flexibility for students who are deployed, in training, or otherwise assigned military duties during the academic year.

- Special attention should be given to increasing the availability and quality of online and distance education components; course exchange programs; continuous, year-round course scheduling; and co-curricular initiatives. These offerings are especially critical in helping bring veterans and military to well-established universities rather than predatory environments.
- Clear procedures should be communicated every academic term to simplify student veteran requirements, streamline and reduce related administrative costs and address procedures for dispute resolution.

Health and counseling services. While the VA is often the major care provider through its regional health networks, hospitals and clinics, support at the campus level is vital.

- Universities should designate a veteran-oriented mental health counselor in the campus counseling or health center to respond to student veterans as needed.
- Crisis hot-line numbers for veterans should be clearly and prominently posted in campus facilities and online.
- Campus clinics should create and maintain active contacts with external counseling services available to veterans, to specifically include crisis, family and marital counseling.
- Where possible, clinics should provide restricted access to private, on-campus counseling rooms for veterans and family members on an appointment basis.
- Student veterans should be informed of veteran health care services during orientation, from the nearest VA facilities to community health facilities and vet-specific initiatives.
- Universities should maintain awareness of veterans court options in the State of Texas and participate as necessary on behalf of justice-involved veteran students.
- The A&M System's TexVet Initiative, operated through the Texas A&M Health Science Center, is recommended as a reference for assistance for clinic staff and students. Primarily an online resource, its database provides a connection to an extensive network of agencies and service providers ranging from health to jobs to housing.

Transition services. Smooth transition into higher education and then post-graduation entry into the job market are benchmarks of success for student veterans.

- Orientation should be provided each semester for incoming student veterans to acquaint them with academia and their new roles as part of the campus community. Where

mandatory sessions are not immediately feasible, they should be instituted as soon as possible.

- If possible, universities should offer a one-hour, for-credit veterans transition class amplifying the initial orientation. These have been successful at many campuses.
- During the years of degree program pursuit, veterans should receive ongoing input from mentors and advisors regarding adjustments to courses of study, and the effects of changes regarding benefits, graduation dates and career goals.
- As graduation approaches, student veterans should be advised regarding the status of final degree requirements, and be referred to outplacement services and recruiting venues from the public and private sectors.

External connections. Interaction with external veteran organizations allows feedback and interactivity between campus and community, and promotes awareness of veterans on and off campus.

- Major external groups that can provide support include but are not limited to the VFW, American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America, IAVA, Lone Star Veterans Association.
- Local, state or federal agencies and organizations can provide support and information, from county veterans services offices to the Texas Veterans Commission to the VA, especially through its regional Veterans Centers.
- Campus veterans service offices should maintain a current list of points-of-contact for all external agencies and organizations with which there is interaction.
- Opportunities should be continuously sought to interact with the external community through participation in veterans or military events, celebrations or projects that enhance awareness of veterans on the campus.

Communications. Specifically emphasized by a 2010 State Auditor’s Office report on veterans in higher education, communications can be the critical success factor. Modes of communication cover virtually all aspects of the student experience, from interpersonal contact with faculty, staff and other students to use of email and social media.

- University website homepages should feature a prominent link to a veterans support page (e.g., “Veterans”), which should be actively maintained as a major point of contact for veterans seeking information about both university and veterans issues. The state’s Texas Veterans Portal link should appear on all university website homepages.
- University or agency websites or other forms of communications regarding veterans should not be exploited by predatory commercial entities or for predatory promotional purposes, directly or indirectly.

- Veterans services offices should maintain updated contact information on all enrolled student veterans and develop reliable and effective means of communicating relevant information.
- Veterans services offices should participate in Systemwide informational forums including the A&M System Military and Veteran Educational Support Network Listserv, intra-System conference calls, or teleconferences. Attendance by senior representatives from each campus is required at the A&M System's annual Military and Veteran Educational Support Symposium.
- Veterans services offices staff should maintain and develop professional links to veterans support organizations such as American Council on Education (ACE), National Association of Veterans Program Administrators (NAVPA), Western Association of Veterans Education Specialists (WAVES), and regional VA offices.
- In all endeavors, the communications mission is to actively share information and promote the success of enrolled veterans, dependents and the military community.

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