Serving Those Who Serve: Supporting Student Veterans on Campus

by Wade Livingston

Housing professionals can play a key part in a student soldier's transition to campus.

A student veteran who is suddenly deployed for active duty with only a day or two's notice must quickly navigate through a complicated process of withdrawing from classes, canceling housing contracts, arranging for refunds, etc. Daniel Adams, who knows firsthand what it's like to transition between student life and military life, emphasizes the importance of having an immediate source of help. "One of the most important things the soldier has is a point of contact that is knowledgeable and can help them or refer them to the right place," says Adams, a student veteran at Clemson University in South Carolina. Implicit in his statement is an understanding of the often complex nature of

Student veteran Daniel Adams talks about classes and life on Clemson’s campus with Mary Ann Rampey, administrative assistant to the associate dean of undergraduate studies.
withdrawal and re-entry for student veterans: “A deployment is already a stressful enough process for a student-soldier to think about – the personal contact would greatly help in easing their [student veterans’] stress ... and assist them both in their pre-deployment stage and in their return to school.” Personal contact, the very thing we pride ourselves on as professionals in student affairs and housing, goes a long way in supporting our student soldiers as they make the transition between two of the nation’s oldest institutions: the military and higher education.

Thousands of armed service personnel enroll and then, after deployment, re-enroll at institutions across the nation. Student veterans attend college using G.I. Bill benefits, but these no longer cover the full cost of attending a college or university. In her article “New G.I. Bill Could Bring More College Benefits,” Kim Clark of U.S. News & World Report noted that increasing tuition costs have now outpaced the benefit value of the G.I. Bill. In recent months, efforts have been made to increase the educational benefit. On February 28, 2008, Senator Hillary Clinton introduced legislation calling for an amendment of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which would allow institutions to use grants authorized by the Secretary of Education to provide programs and services for student veterans. More recently, President Bush signed into law the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act which, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Web site, allows service personnel who served on active duty on or after September 11, 2001, to receive full tuition – up to the amount of the most expensive in-state public institution – a housing allowance, and a stipend of $1,000 per year for books and supplies.

It is the responsibility of student affairs administrators to acknowledge student veterans as a unique student population on campus and to support them accordingly. The nature of this support will differ from one institution to another, depending on student veteran enrollment. Dr. David DiRamio, assistant professor in the adult and higher education program at Auburn University in Alabama, notes that the “Veterans Administration suggests that 90 percent of returning veterans will attend only 200 institutions in the U.S.” This means that some institutions may be inundated with student veterans, while others may have very few. Institutions with large student veteran populations may be more easily able to enact policies and procedures for accommodating these students, but those with minimal veteran populations may have more difficulty. On the other hand, institutions with lower numbers of veterans may be able to provide better support for student soldiers simply because they are not overwhelmed with such large numbers. In any case, student affairs administrators must be attuned to the administrative culture governing student veteran support: Is there an established point-person or office that handles student veteran withdrawal and reenrollment, and are there policies and procedures related specifically to them? Are there avenues of institutional support dedicated specifically to this group? Is there a student veteran organization or support group on campus? Are specialized resources available through campus health and counseling centers?

Student affairs support for this group of students is sometimes complicated by the fact that student veterans may choose to remain invisible, not because they hide in the crowd or are leery of being identified as veterans but simply because they may not wish to disclose their military background. This invisibility can affect institutional tracking of this group; while some administrative officials may know how many veterans there are and who they are, this information is not – or cannot be – shared with other departments. Student veterans themselves have difficulty pinning down their numbers on campus and thus have difficulty connecting with each other. Sam Cook, a Clemson graduate and former president of the Clemson University Student Veterans Association, states, “We had roughly 30 members, and about half of those were active members, but we think there are many more vets on campus.” Administrators can counter this problem by establishing a culture of appreciation to make the group more visible: promoting a military-friendly attitude, inviting veterans to take an active and valued role in campus life, creating a military appreciation day, or organizing a student veterans advisory council.

For housing professionals in particular, supporting student veterans can be challenging because many of these students choose not to reside
in on-campus housing. Several factors may influence this decision. One is maturity: student veterans, especially those who have seen combat, may find it difficult to relate to their non-military peers. “Other students have not been where they have, and it’s hard for them to relate to the vets – it’s a maturity issue,” says Mary Ann Rampey, student veteran point-person and administrative assistant to the associate dean of undergraduate studies at Clemson. In addition to sometimes being older than traditional age students, veterans often have families to support, a factor that may weigh into their decision to live off campus. Affordability is another issue. Though the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill offers a housing allowance, a veteran’s dollar may stretch farther at an off-campus venue where more amenities are available for a lower price.

For student veterans who do decide to live in residence halls, it is important that housing professionals be prepared to do all that is necessary to support them. This may require some flexibility, and latitude may need to be given for policies related to housing assignments, contract cancellation, and move-in and move-out requirements. Specific examples of the kind of support needed include the following:

- **Find out who the point-person is for student veterans who need to withdraw from and re-enroll at the institution.** Housing personnel at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, partnered with Teresa Johnson, assistant director for financial aid and veterans affairs coordinator, to help re-enrolling student veterans with the assignment process. Johnson notes, “We were able to get in touch with one of our housing officials while they [student veterans] were still abroad and get them pre-registered in the housing lottery.” This kind of collaboration allows housing directors to handle issues before they become problems.

- **Know the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes related to student veterans.** Knowing how to access information and making referrals to other departments is another crucial element of effective support. Texas A&M University in College Station provides an excellent snapshot of the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes on their financial aid Web site (http://financialaid.tamu.edu/forms/VeteransReenrollmentHandout.pdf). The one-page format conveys information quickly and effectively, but it could also be supplied as hard copy or posted on the housing department’s Web site. Having a staff member in the office who understands all the details of the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes can truly help student veterans during stressful times.

- **Disseminate the housing contract cancellation and renewal procedures to student veteran organizations.** These organizations can often help disseminate information more directly and more effectively. As DiRamoia notes, “Sometimes the
best support is peer support.” Organization representatives could be invited to offer feedback on relevant housing processes, helping to create a more complete and inclusive set of procedures.

- **Ask questions and make referrals to campus and community partners.** Remember, the housing contract is just one part of the withdrawal and re-entry process. Lorene Cox, veterans benefits and programs coordinator at the G.V. Sonny Montgomery Center for America’s Veterans at Mississippi State University, recognizes the importance of several other components of the process, such as academic credit and financial aid. Seeing the big picture - the entirety of the process - will more easily allow housing professionals to provide the kind of integrated support that is needed. They can help veterans understand what the next step in the process is by asking them what offices they have already visited and where they plan to go after leaving the housing office.

- **Make the process simple and expedient.** As Rampey says, “Make the process as painless as possible.” Be ready to work with each student veteran’s unique set of circumstances. Realize that these students can be deployed multiple times. Be sensitive to their orders and be flexible with them regarding move-in and move-out and the refund of housing fees. Try not to let rigid policy get in the way of the right decision.

Residence halls offer an ideal environment for supporting students. Learning communities could also be created to provide a positive environment for this veteran support, according to DiRamio, who suggests that student affairs administrators and academic affairs work together to create these communities. Housing professionals are already committed to providing services and programs that enrich the college or university experience and promote the academic success of all students; ensuring the enrichment and success of student veterans in particular is simply an extension of this commitment. Some institutions may be making plans for a veterans community a priority, but even if they are not, DiRamio comments, “the installation of a bona fide veterans coordinator interested in serving the whole student” should be.

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