



Thursday, November 3, 2016

**Administration**

**Military Veterans Affinity Group Program: A Proactive Intervention for Transition to Higher Education**

**Author(s)**

**Mr. Steven D Bell**

Iowa State University, Ames, IA

**Mr. Matthew E Harvey**

Iowa State University, Ames, IA

**Dr. Steven A Freeman**

Iowa State University, Ames, IA

**Need:** Returning military veterans are a rapidly growing population of non-traditional students in the United States. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has made it easier for military veterans to fund higher education costs upon discharge from the military. Student affairs support services at universities and four-year colleges, while accomplished at transitioning students who have recently finished high school, are not automatically well-positioned to address the unique non-traditional needs of military personnel. Veterans often find themselves returning home after being members of an intense and close community fortified by common experiences. Subsequent admittance into a college campus environment where veterans are surrounded by a majority of students who have no concept of the life and death conundrum that they, as veterans, leads to difficulties in assimilation and adjustment. This difficulty often results in undesirable academic performance.

**Overview:** The Military Veterans Affinity Group Program is specifically directed for recruitment and retention of veterans pursuing technology related degrees. Utilizing Schlossberg's adult learning 4S System as a framework, the four factors that persuade a person's ability to cope with transition and succeed -- situation, self, support, and strategies -- are closely tied to industry involvement. Mentoring connections that couple required internship experiences with job shadow opportunities, professional association involvement, and a network of military friendly employers are utilized to strengthen a sense of community and career resonance throughout the academic experience.

**Major Points:** Veterans transitioning into higher education require a unique support system unlike what exists for traditional direct from high school or community college transfer students. This support system should bridge institutional student affairs activities, such as those offered by campus veterans' centers, and academic affairs activities related to the fulfillment of academic degree requirements. An academic department-led Affinity Group Program serves as this bridge, building the comradery and career resonance required to support and successfully advance a veteran student's academic experience.

**Summary:** Attendees will gain an understanding of the needs of the returning military veteran and how those needs are addressed through the implementation of the Affinity Group Program. Though specific to an academic degree program and industry career opportunity, this program is suitable for use in its adaptability for meeting the unique requirements of many higher education/career pathways. The outcomes and lessons learned will be disseminated with intent to stimulate replication.