

## **Military Cultural Competency: Understanding How to Serve Those Who Serve**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to define and describe the different constituents of the military population, and present the challenges this demographic faces when pursuing higher education. The essay also discusses key aspects higher education professionals must understand in order to better serve military populations, such as federal regulations and military structures. After reviewing several reports from the government and organizations that support military populations, the authors found more research is needed in order to better understand the unique challenges of civilian male spouses of active duty service members, and both male and female spouses of disabled veterans and military retirees, as research and reports have historically excluded these populations. The authors conclude by presenting best practices higher education institutions can put into practice to better serve military populations.

**Key words:** Military student, service member, military spouse, veteran, higher education, online education, competence

### **Introduction**

Most institutions of higher education support a military student population; according to the 2014 report on military education by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Queen, & Lewis), 96% of institutions reported enrolling military service members, veterans, or military family members. Of these institutions, 89% of them identified military population students via the receipt of military and veterans education assistance, 74% identified military population students via questions on the admissions application, and 59% indicated self-report methods other than via admissions. However, according to the same report, while the majority of institutions of higher education enroll and support military population students, the services offered may vary dramatically. For instance, while 82% of institutions report having a dedicated point of contact for military service members and veterans (such as a staff member or office), and 76% of institutions award academic credit for military training received during active duty, only 14 % of institutions offer any form of military population mentoring, and only 36% offer any form of student military organization. As such, services which are available may be more beneficial and

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targeted to active duty and veteran populations, without specific services available for smaller populations with unique challenges, such as disabled veterans or military family members.

With most institutions of higher education providing service to military populations, it is important that institutions be prepared to understand the needs and challenges of a military population. Military students bring with them a unique set of experiences, insights, challenges, and skills. Each one of them has been exposed to and influenced by their branch of service, rank structure, and military operations. Defining these various influences and the military population will lay the foundation for training, development, and programmatic support at the institution. However, developing a plan to do this effectively may present a unique challenge for a predominantly civilian academic environment. Just 0.5% of the American population serves in the armed forces (Eikenberry & Kennedy, 2013). According to a Gallup poll survey on military service (Newport, 2012), only 12.7% of adults in the US are veterans. Among adult women, only 2% have prior military service. Twenty-four percent of adult men are veterans, but only 12% of men aged 25 – 34 are veterans, and only 14% of men aged 35 – 39 are veterans. The higher overall percentage of men with prior military status reflects the larger proportion of older men who served via the draft during prior conflicts such as World War II, Korea, and Vietnam (among men over age 65, more than 50% have prior military service, and among men aged 85 – 89, 80% have prior military service). It is helpful for staff and faculty at institutions of higher education who serve military population to have at least basic understanding of the military and of military populations, in order to better serve military populations. In fact, as most institutions work on cultivating cultural competency within their staff and faculty bodies, it may be helpful to think of the military as another culture for which to develop competence.

A primary challenge for institutions of higher education who serve a military population is to better understand who these students are and what makes them unique and different in terms of higher education. How do the requirements of a military population translate into the services offered by the administration and the strategies used within the classroom? The intent of this article is to provide a brief overview of military culture and military populations, to support the development of “military cultural competency” for institutions of higher education, and to offer practical strategies for implementing improved support of military students.

### **Federal Regulations: Only the Beginning**

Those who offer higher education to military populations need to clearly understand the guidelines and regulations provided by the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and other military and veteran service organizations. While the staff member or office on campus who supports service members and veterans likely has familiarity with these regulations, leadership and faculty should also be informed, in order to ensure policies and programmatic support are in place for military students.

In April 2012, President Obama instituted Executive Order 13607 (2012), which establishes principles of excellence for educational institutions serving service members, veterans, spouses, and other military family members. The Executive Order was developed to

make sure there are protections for these individuals as they enter into programs of higher education. The Executive Order indicates that, after the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill became law, some educational institutions have used aggressive and deceptive targeting of service members, veterans, and their families. The Executive Order also addressed a concern that students were not receiving necessary financial guidance. Instead, the Executive Order claims that military students were not receiving important counseling on their veterans and tuition assistance funding, as well as student loans. Institutions are now required to ensure military students receive this information and guidance prior to enrollment and that they will have a specific representative available to support them with their questions.

Following the Executive Order, several other organizations provided their own guidelines on how to best serve and support military students. Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) published their *Military Students Bill of Rights* and the White House announced their *8 Keys to Veterans Success* initiative (Baker, 2013). These resources will support institutions of higher education in understanding how to build programs to support military students. However, as beneficial as they are, it is imperative that higher education administrators, academic leaders, and faculty members further their own education with an understanding of military culture.

### **Military Structure: A Primer**

There are key components to military structure which may impact how the military student engages within the online classroom. It is helpful both for leaders at the institutional level and for instructors at the individual student level to have basic understanding of general military structure, and to also consider the specific demographics and requirements of the military student(s) at your institution. For instance, while institutions often lump all military students into one demographic category, there are fundamental differences between the five primary branches of service. The Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines each have a unique culture and an individual affiliated with each of these branches of service will likely reflect the culture of their own branch of service. Furthermore, rank structure affects personal identity within the service, with different norms and standards for enlisted, non-commission officers (i.e., senior enlisted) and officer ranks.

There are also differences in the lived military experience for those who are active duty versus those who are in the reserves (where the military experience may be confined to specific training weekends and weeks). Reserve service members may likewise experience differences based on reserve status, particularly for those reserve service members who are on permanent active duty or those who are called to active duty during times of combat or deployment. Further, cultural differences based on basic military structure will affect all of those within the culture, so even family members may experience and reflect those difference; the experiences of an "Army Spouse" may be fundamentally different from the experiences of a "Marine Corps Spouse," just as the experiences of the spouse of an enlisted service member will be distinct of those of an officer spouse, and family members of active versus reserve service members will likewise have unique challenges. In addition, within the spouse population, civilian female spouses of military service members will experience different challenges than will civilian male spouses of military service members, as will military service members who are married to another service member.

## Defining a Military Population

There are aspects of military life and military employment which will affect all individuals within the military, regardless of their specific subgroup. For instance, recurring and even frequent moves (i.e., PCS, or Permanent Change of Station) are common to military life, and occur whenever a service member is reassigned to another location. Frequent moves can create challenges for higher education completion, which makes online learning particularly attractive to a military population, since it allows education to continue in spite of frequent moves.

However, when you are teaching or serving a “military student,” the needs and experiences of that student may vary dramatically, based on the student’s unique military affiliation. For instance, active duty military (including both enlisted and officers), prior service veterans, disabled veterans, retirees (individuals who served on active duty for at least 20 years or were medically retired), and military family members (which may include spouses, children up to the age of 26, as well as extended family members such as parents who have been legally established as financially dependent on the service member--although, extended family members will have limited benefits provided by the military) may all have distinct needs, experience unique challenges, and offer specific opportunities to contribute to the online learning environment. It is important both at the institutional level and at the individual instructor level to understand the differences between these populations, as well as unique support challenges they may face when engaged in online learning.

**Service Members.** For service members, the basic organizational and leadership structure of the military can make military service members a unique population in higher education. Within the military, even the lowest ranks and very young soldiers have a great deal of responsibility and autonomy. New officers often are responsible for small groups of enlisted soldiers, including soldiers who are much older and more experienced than the new officer. During a period of extended combat, such as the extended combat of the past decade, many service members will have deployed (i.e., served overseas in a combat zone) and will have first-hand direct experience with concerns for personal safety, injury, and death, including the loss of peers, supervisors, or direct reports. The broad category of service members will include the specific populations of active duty service members, and prior service members; within prior service members, there are distinct characteristics to the subgroups of disabled veterans and retirees.

**Active duty service members.** Service members who are serving on an active duty status (Title 10) have very unique challenges when attempting to pursue higher education. Their number one priority is to serve their unit, their comrades, and the military. They live and work in a very structured environment with little to no control over their schedule and how they spend their time. To add to this, they also face frequent moves (called Permanent Change of Station, or PCS, temporary training missions (called Temporary Duty, or TDY), and deployments (duty in a combat zone). In some cases, service members with family members will be able to take their families with them, even overseas, if they are moving to a relatively safe or stable region; this is an accompanied tour. In an unaccompanied tour, the service member must leave his or her family in a different location, generally near a military base or with other family members within the continental United States, due to a duty assignment or deployment to a less stable and safe region, or a location with limited support resources (i.e., lack of housing, schools, and medical services for civilians).

Although their educational goals are important to the development of their military careers, due to the nature of their military employment, their educational goals often are a secondary priority. It can be quite difficult, at times, to engage in a classroom environment, due to time constraints and physical constraint. Given the transient nature of the military lifestyle and the availability of online education in overseas locations, as well as the capacity to continue education with one institution in spite of the frequent relocation, many military members and their families choose to study at online institutions. For instance, according to *Business Week* (Zolmek, 2014), among elite B-school MBA programs, veterans are approximately 5% of students and active duty military are less than 1% of students. However, among comparable programs from the same institutions for their online MBA programs, active duty military make up between 15% and 25% of students. Regardless of service location, from within the continental US to deployed in Afghanistan or Iraq, students can use their off-duty time to log into an online platform and continue their studies. Faculty members might encounter students taking courses from combat locations, and therefore may experience these students dropping in and out of the online classroom as mission and technology impact their ability to participate.

**Prior service veterans.** Anyone who has previously served in the military and is no longer on active duty or reserve status is a prior service veteran. In addition, anyone who has served in a combat environment and has returned home is considered a veteran of a foreign war. Veterans can separate from the military in a variety of ways; they can serve 20 or more years and become a retired veteran, they can be medically retired due to a service-connected injury, or they can simply choose to leave when their commission or enlistment requirements are complete (assuming there is no stop loss in place). When a stop loss is in place, for instance during a period of combat, the military may require individuals to stay on duty, even after their formal service requirement has been completed (see Henning, 2009). During periods of combat and need, after completing a commitment, service members are held within the ready reserve for a certain period of time, and may be called back to duty, if needed and indicated by the branch of service. While prior service veterans will no longer experience the disruptions in time and location that active duty service members will, they will still reflect many of the same population characteristics. Prior service veterans may have served in situations of danger, and may experience challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Younger prior service veterans have likely completed extensive training and held positions of responsibility, and will expect more respect and consideration than other young adults who are experiencing college as their first experience. For instance, military veterans report being frustrated by professors who don't respect them or treat them as professionals and equals (Flaherty, 2014).

**Disabled veterans.** Service members who have sustained an injury while serving in the military are referred to as a disabled veteran; if the injuries were sustained in combat, the individual is often referred to as a wounded warrior. Due to improvements in both medical expertise and technology, soldiers in combat may survive far more extensive injuries than soldiers in prior conflicts such as Vietnam and Korea, who likely would have died on the battlefield. According to the Wounded Warrior Project's 2014 Alumni Survey, for service members who have been in the military post 9/11/2001, blasts are the most common injury. Experiencing a blast due to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) or vehicular accident is often the cause of both Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). In fact, according to Dr. Terry Rauch, Program Director for Defense Medical Research and Development, Department of Defense, PTSD and TBI are two of the most devastating injuries suffered by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Thompson, 2012). Although these injuries don't affect all of veterans who return to higher education, some disabled veterans may pursue higher education, and may need additional support and assistance in order to successfully complete their degrees.

Veterans with these service-connected injuries have the challenge of understanding how their “new normal” impacts them cognitively. Learning can prove to be more difficult and a slower process, bringing new and unfamiliar territory. These students may not be aware of disability services offices or the support and assistance that can be provided to them. In addition, they may be hesitant to seek out help or not know who they should reach out to. Institutions should be prepared to support this population and reach out to them proactively to help ensure their successful transition to academia. Collaborative efforts by campus veterans/military offices and campus disability services offices may be required in order to optimally support these students in achieving academic success.

**Military retirees.** Individuals who have retired from the military have served twenty years or more in the armed forces. They were indoctrinated into the military environment at a relatively young age and have spent an entire professional career within the military context and in military uniform. Facing a transition out into the civilian population can be quite daunting, and in fact, many military organizations, such as the Military Officers Association of America, address this topic regularly and offer transition programs for these service members. Most military installations also offer training and support programs to address a variety of topics, including civilian dress, resume writing, and job interviewing.

In many cases, military occupational specialties (MOS) may not translate well into civilian employment, and military retirees need assistance with job searching, resume writing, and networking. In addition, they may seek education as a way to gain new skills and become marketable in a civilian workforce. Faculty and staff at colleges and universities may notice these nontraditional students, who are older than traditional students and have extensive work and life experiences, entering their schools. Military retirees may also experience challenges in the classroom, since they have moved from a position of authority to a position of receptivity, and this is another skill set which must be learned. Military support offices on campus may consider offering academic support classes specifically geared toward study skills and student success practices, which may help military students, particularly those with extensive prior service, in re-learning how to be effective students. Moreover, older retirees may have limited computer and technology training, depending on their particular branch of military service and the timeframe of their service, and may not have any prior experience with online learning management systems (LMS). Higher education institutions, particularly online institutions, should offer student orientation training which specifically addresses learning the LMS, to support these students in their return to higher education.

**Military family members.** Generally, military family members include those individuals living in the home with an active duty service member, although some reports include family members of veterans and retirees, as well as extended family members. Inclusion of extended family members of disabled veterans may be particularly relevant, since these individuals may provide caretaking support in some role or function for their family member, whether or not they are actually residing in the same home. The largest populations of military family members include spouses and children under the age of 26, who can retain military family member benefits until the age of 21, and until the age of 26 as long as they are enrolled fulltime at an institution of higher education. Historically, military family members were called “military dependents;” although, language has shifted over the past two decades to refer to family members as family members, rather than “dependents,” which can seem like demeaning terminology, particularly for spouses.

The Department of Defense Manpower Data Center reported that, as of 2010, there were more than 725,000 military spouses and more than 413,000 spouses of reserve and National Guard service members. The Veterans Administration reported there are more than 15 million veterans' spouses and more than 5.8 million surviving spouses of veterans within the U.S. According to a large scale survey of military spouses by the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA, 2013), the demographics of active duty military spouses reflect that the "average" military spouse is female (95% - this does reflect that the stereotype of the "Army Wife" ignores the 5% of male military spouses), relatively younger than the average age of civilian spouses (age 33), and more likely to have children at home under the age of 18 (74% vs. 59% of civilian female spouses). MOAA reported that active duty military spouses reflect a larger proportion of racial and ethnic minorities than do the general population. Educational attainment among military spouses reflects a wide range, with 22% having a high school diploma or less, 33% having some college credit, 12% having an earned associates degree, and 25% having a bachelor's degree.

Studies by both RAND (Harrell, Lim, Castaneda, & Golinelli, 2004) and the Military Officers Association of America (2013) reported that female Armed Forces spouses are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than female civilian spouses; matched comparisons between female spouses of similar characteristics (including education and experience) show that working female spouses of service members earn less than do women whose spouses have civilian employment. Unemployment among military spouses age 25 - 44 years old was 15%, which was three times higher than their civilian counterparts, and those who were employed made 38% less than civilian counterparts (MOAA, 2013). A full 90% of military spouses with employment are underemployed when compared with their educational attainment and level of experience (MOAA, 2013).

As discussed previously, military populations may be subject to frequent moves; a Department of the Treasury and Department of Defense 2012 study reported that military spouses were ten times more likely to have moved across state lines within the prior year as compared to civilian counterparts; 79% have moved at least once in the prior five-year period. According to the MOAA survey, most military spouses (85%) indicated challenges in getting hired. Employers may be reluctant to hire military spouses, knowing that they will have to rehire within a few years; the first author has personally heard of anecdotes of employers in military areas using multiple positions in diverse states as a screening tool on resumes to discriminate against military spouses. Frequent moves and disruption impact job continuity and opportunities to seek promotions; they also negatively impact the nearly 35% of military spouses whose professions require certification or licensure, as not all states offer reciprocity for credentials earned or achieved in other states.

Further research is needed to better understand the unique challenges of civilian male spouses of active duty service members, and both male and female spouses of disabled veterans and military retirees. The MOAA 2013 report excluded these populations from their initial dataset, focusing instead on civilian female spouses of active duty service members (who made up 78% of their respondents); MOAA indicates that future analysis will focus on these two unique subgroups within the military spouse population.

Institutions of higher education should, in particular, seek to better understand how to support military spouses in educational attainment, particularly in portable careers which may offer military spouses the opportunity for viable employment in spite of frequent relocations. MOAA's survey (2013) showed that most military spouses complete their education while service

members are on active duty (66%), with the majority seeking distance learning opportunities (64%) and attending more than one school to complete their degree (28% attending at least two institutions of higher education, and 23 % attending three or more). Also, institutions of higher education addressing support needs for military spouses, and individual instructors for these students, should consider the unique stresses of life as a military spouse; for instance, military spouses may often function as single parents over extended periods of time due to deployment and TDY. Children may act out behaviorally during periods of the service member's deployment, creating additional stress and needs for additional support by the military spouse. Moreover, in addition to the challenges of completing an education and building a career across multiple moves, frequent and multiple moves also make maintaining a social support network challenging, so military spouses may not have support for childcare and other needs. This may impact their ability to attend class and complete work during periods of stress.

### **Practical Implications: Putting Best Practices into Practice**

Understanding the military community and their unique culture is essential for an institution that wants to create a welcoming environment in which service members, veterans, and their families will thrive. Pairing an understanding of military culture – a sense of military cultural competence - with government regulations, guidelines from veteran's service organizations, and best practices from institutions that have a history of working with the military, can assist an online institution of higher education in creating programmatic support.

The American Council on Education (ACE) has created a Veterans Program to help institutions understand the needs of veterans and to provide promising practices to support the more than 2 million veterans and their families who are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill (2014). The Veterans Program suggests the following best practices for assisting service members in school;

- Create a smooth pathway from service to school and then into the workforce.
- Provide one-on-one academic advising, specializing in military student's needs.
- Consolidate communications and support; provide a one-stop-shop.

In addition to the promising practices provided by ACE, institutions can utilize the following resources to understand how to best support military students: the *8 Keys for Veterans Success* (Baker, 2013), *Standards of good practice for servicemembers Opportunity Colleges* (SOC), and the *Military Student Bill of Rights* (SOC). The guidelines presented in each of these resources, in combination with military cultural competency, will allow the staff, faculty, and leadership to provide the support military students and their families may need to be successful as they pursue their higher educational goals.

Critically, institutions of higher education need to understand both the broad characteristics of military students, and the specific population of military students at their institution. Instructors at the institution should have the opportunity for training and development with regard to support for military students, along with how to refer students to appropriate campus resources, including disability services, counseling services, career services, and student support



services, such as tutoring, academic skills, and success training. In many cases, GI Bill benefits will offer financial support for additional tutoring services when warranted, but students may not be aware of these types of supports, and the institution should provide a network to ensure that students are aware of and can access all of the resources which are available to promote their academic successful completion.

Institutions should offer clear policies which provide support for military students when their service impacts their education; for instance, during their own deployment or during the deployment of the service member (for military family members). Instructors should be trained in how to refer students for support when needed, and the appropriate strategies for offering extensions on work, and incomplete grades as appropriate. At the individual level, each student should be afforded the opportunity for support services and resources, and be recognized both as a part of the broader military culture, but also as an individual with unique needs and experiences, as well as benefits and opportunities to bring to the classroom. Overall, as institutions of higher education that provide educational opportunities to military populations, we have an obligation to provide high quality service across the spectrum to this population. The foundation for that is military cultural competence by our leaders, our faculty, and our staff, to ensure all points of contact provide supportive service to those who have served.

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