EVALUATION OF SERVICE PROVISION TO ASSIST WITH STUDENT VETERANS’ TRANSITION TO COLLEGE LIFE AT DAEMEN COLLEGE

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INTRODUCTION

Student veterans represent one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education and bring with them a unique array of experiences, expectations, and challenges. Student veterans are typically older, married, and employed full-time, and report feeling disconnected from the traditional college environment. Further, in addition to any number of physical and mental health issues resultant of their military service, the transition from military to civilian life often leaves veterans with a sense of loss of status and identity.

As a result, student veterans often report feeling socially isolated, negatively affecting retention and persistence in their degree programs. Though college campuses are making a concerted effort to assist veterans in achieving academic success, it is unclear how well those efforts are aligned with the challenges that veterans face in transitioning to civilian life on a college campus. This study will evaluate the services offered by Daemen College to address issues related to student veteran transition, adjustment, and integration.

BACKGROUND

The post-9/11 GI Bill has helped millions of veterans and active military members attend college as a gratitude for serving the country (Love, Levin, Park, 2015). Student veterans tend to be older than traditional college students, with an average age of 33 (Kirchner, 2015). Some student veterans also have full-time jobs and family obligations.

Student veterans face many issues which impede their transition process. For instance, one such issue is PTSD and its effects. PTSD has been shown to be significantly correlated with higher feelings of alienation on campus, as well as a lower GPA (Love, Levin, Park, 2015; Diedert, et. al, 2010). An estimated 13.8 percent of student veterans show symptoms of PTSD (Kirchner, 2015). One concern here is that faculty members may not be properly trained in how to respond if a student is showing symptoms of PTSD. Another issue faced by student veterans, is being identified as a veteran student on campus. Older studies have treated student veterans as a homogeneous population with the same experiences, (Vacci, Hammond, Diamond, 2017). This model prevents student veterans from being seen as individuals with different backgrounds and experiences. It is important to know that some student veterans feel very strongly about their military background. While others don’t want to be identified as a veteran.

Some student veterans have expressed that colleges use their student veteran populations as “posterboys” and are often times put on display in some way to gain recognition as a “Military Friendly” school. One way this may be the case at Daemen is The Nancy Haberman Gacioch Center, also known as the Vet Lounge. The center is a room for veterans to study and hang out with a big glass wall facing the hallway. On Daemen’s webpage, several interviews with student veterans of the college are posted. Most of the participants on the website say they feel that the Vet Lounge is a great place to help them study, still some other student veterans call the Vet Lounge a “fish bowl”, as if the Vet Lounge is a sort of exhibit.

RESEARCH AIMS

Aim 1: Assess demographic variables among Daemen College student veterans that differentiate the transition process to higher education for this population from traditional college students.

Aim 2: Assess mental and physical health related limitations that might otherwise interfere with student veterans’ academic performance.

Aim 3: Assess student veterans’ perceptions and experiences related to the transition process to college-life at Daemen College.

METHODOLOGIY

Sampling Method: A convenience sample of Daemen College faculty were recruited via an email invitation to all full-time faculty currently teaching on the Buffalo, NY campus.

Measurement: A 50-question survey, utilizing a mix of Likert-scale, closed-ended questions and open ended questions, was developed to assess student veterans’ perceptions of their expectations and experiences with regard to Daemen College’s “Military Friendly” designation.

Operationalization: Respondents were asked to rate the strength of their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements presented, with 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 4 = “Strongly Agree.”

Data Collection Procedures: Student participation was solicited via an email announcement to student veterans enrolled on the Buffalo, NY campus, as identified by the Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs. The email included a detailed letter regarding the purpose of the survey and an internet link to the survey, which was hosted on SurveyMonkey. The survey was available for interested respondents for a 3 week period and 3 additional email reminders were sent at one-week intervals, along with the addition of a $50 incentive for one randomly chosen participant to be selected at the conclusion of data collection, to boost participation.

Ethical Considerations: The researchers ensured the anonymity of respondents by avoiding the collection of any demographic data that could implicitly or explicitly identify a given respondent, whether the student veteran via the Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs, such that the identities of student veterans at Daemen College were never disclosed to the researchers. Respondents were also informed of the nature and any potential adverse effects of their participation, along with their right to not participate in the survey or cease their participation at any time.

RESULTS

Regarding respondents’ experiences at Daemen College, few were informed of veteran-specific resources available to them during orientation (17%) or of the Student Veteran Association (SVA) at Daemen College (17%), though 75% reported being aware of specific persons on campus to assist with their questions.

With regard to the classroom, though the vast majority felt comfortable discussing their military history in class (75%), slightly less than half of the respondents believed their professors were prepared to work with veterans (42%), and fewer still (17%) believed their professors would know how to handle a situation in which the veteran felt the room because of being triggered by a class topic.

Lastly, 100% of respondents indicated that it was important to them to attend a “Military Friendly” college, but only 33% believed Daemen to be sincerely concerned with the well-being of student veterans, and similarly, 33% believed that Daemen had lived up to their expectations as a “Military Friendly” campus.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with prior research, all of the respondents reported that their military background was of at least some importance to them. Also, many of the respondents reported that they were having a hard time, and had children, which is consistent with past studies of student veterans.

Overwhelmingly, student veterans reported that Daemen has not lived up to their expectations as a “Military Friendly” school. Even though most respondents felt comfortable informing their professors of their military background, most were not confident in their professors’ abilities to help them if they had to leave because of a discussion.

This research suggests that Daemen needs to do more to help student veterans in their transition to college, and faculty need to be more aware of discussion topics that may be sensitive to student veterans.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


The authors would like to thank Alvin Roberts, Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs at Daemen College, for his assistance with this project.