Suggestions for Teaching Student Veterans... and Other Students

Course Structure and Design

1. Faculty should develop attendance and class participation policies that do not penalize student veterans who have to miss class because of VA appointments.
2. Assignments should be clearly defined in the syllabus, e.g.:
   a. Use rubrics and assignment templates to provide clarity.
   b. Consider scaffolding longer assignments, such as term papers, as a series of several smaller tasks with specific deadlines.
3. Consider random (self-selected) rather than assigned classroom seating. Many veterans who have served in a war zone prefer to sit in the back of the classroom with their back against the wall.
4. Student veterans benefit from a course structure that encourages them to take their time with assignments and to be deliberately thoughtful in their activities.
5. Faculty should know how the process of granting accommodation works at their institution. This is especially true for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD).
6. Use the principles of Universal Design to better serve all students with disabilities. This includes making course materials available in a variety of formats and assessing students through a variety of measures.

Learning Activities

1. Because they are typically older, many student veterans are interested in practical and hands-on types of activities, such as case studies, simulations, field research, and service learning projects.
2. A supportive environment for student veterans with disabilities should emphasize collaboration, not competition and isolation.
3. Construct a wide variety of assignments within each course, such as oral presentations, writing assignments, self-assessments, study guides, weekly question cards, and small-group multimedia projects.
4. Consider using social media and online collaborative writing tools to provide an engaging learning experience.
5. Veterans may find small group discussion and group decision-making processes difficult. Survival in the military depended upon decisions being made quickly, by a superior, or by the individual when circumstance demanded. For a while some veterans may see group decision making processes as a waste of time.
6. Course content such as personal writing assignments, videos, and certain discussion topics may lead some veterans to experience painful memories and create emotional discomfort. We have found that asking about sleep problems, depression, anxiety, ideas about self-harm, can lead the veteran to finding the help needed.
Classroom Environment (both Physical and Emotional)

1. Faculty may wish to devise nonintrusive ways of identifying student veterans in their classes—perhaps by collecting information from all students on note cards.
2. Unless the course content dictates talking about military service or the war, it is best to refrain from expressing such opinions in class.
3. Veterans are serious about college. Hearing the complaints of other students over due dates, the need for more time to prepare for an exam or homework, or about the difficulty of a course may frustrate them. The lack of commitment by other students toward learning can be a source of conflict and frustration.
4. Survival in the military depends upon discipline, obedience, and conformity. In higher education on the other hand, students are expected to think independently, process abstract material, think in terms of more grey than black and white.
5. During Vietnam and other wars, one of the most insensitive questions asked of returning veterans was, “Did you kill anyone?” This question should never be asked and if another student asks it in your classroom, you need to be ready to say that this is not something we bring up in this context.

This information was adapted from the WDVA PTSD/War Program PTSD/War Trauma Program’s Higher Education Outreach and Consultation Project (see also: http://www.udel.edu/students/pdf/veterans_guidelines-print.pdf), and from B. Kelley, E. Fox, J. Smith & L. Wittenhagen’s article “Forty Percent of 2 Million: Preparing to Serve Our Veterans with Disabilities. In: To Improve the Academy, vol. 30, 2011.

For more information on veterans services at NEIU, go to:

http://www.neiu.edu/future-students/veterans-services

Call: 773-442-4050, or
E-mail Weston Polaski (Coordinator of Veterans Services):
w-polaski@neiu.edu, D-building, room 130