The new Post 9/11 GI Bill constitutes a major expansion of veterans’ education benefits that is in turn driving military-connected student enrollment. As this population continues to grow and institutions compete for the GI Bill dollars they bring with them, it’s essential to understand how the characteristics and background of veteran students shape their college experience. In this Q&A, Dr. Karina Money discusses some of the unique considerations to tailor support for student veterans as they transition from military to civilian life.

Q: What are some of the characteristics that comprise today’s student veterans and how should we be thinking about their role within higher education?

In 2009, there were nearly 500,000 student veterans and beneficiaries receiving education benefits. By 2013, their enrollment grew to more than one million (Characteristics of Student Veterans/VA Campus Toolkit Handout, 2014). This growth has only continued, making them one of the largest sub-categories of the post-traditional student body.

Seventy-three percent are male; 27 percent are female; 62 percent are first-generation college students; only 15 percent of student veterans are traditionally aged college students (18–23). The majority are between the ages of 24 and 40. A large number of student veterans have families; 47 percent of student veterans have children; and 47.3 percent of student veterans are married (Characteristics of Student Veterans/VA Campus Toolkit Handout, 2014).

Returning student veterans are mature with major life experiences, cross-cultural awareness and a strong motivation to serve others. The experience, expertise and perspective they bring should be viewed as incredibly valuable. The institutions who successfully recruit, retain, engage, and graduate student veterans will gain a distinct competitive advantage both for the learning environment they’re able to create for all students and the financial boon of all the GI Bill dollars that will be redeemed in the coming years.

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<td>of student veterans have children and/or are married</td>
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Q: Your approach focuses heavily on the initial transition to college, not unlike focusing on the first year experience for traditional college students. How is this transition similar and different for returning veterans compared to the typical first-year experience considerations?

Returning to civilian life is not simply a matter of going back to school upon return from military duty. In addition to learning how to navigate the institution itself, it is a matter of maneuvering through a complex bureaucratic system of accessing benefits, transfer credits, registration and career advice. There needs to be a greater understanding of the military experience on the part of the institutions themselves.

Similar to many other students, issues of belonging and questioning whether or not they are “college material” are also major issues that surface in the first year. This is especially true for students who originally entered the military as an alternative to college. If they didn’t feel like college material before enlisting, those feelings will likely resurface. Fortunately, the reality is that most of these students are entirely capable of completing their degrees, but without early, proactive support they may not give themselves the chance to do so.

Q: That’s where your work comes in. What have you learned through your research and coaching about how military students experience college?

They definitely experience college differently than other student populations. They tend to retain their values from the military where there’s a strong emphasis on clarity of purpose and structure. When they get to college they find it chaotic, unstructured and less authoritative, which can be disorienting and frustrating for them.

Without the structure and camaraderie of a brigade, battalion, company, platoon, squad, team or battle buddy, they can feel very isolated on a college campus that bears no resemblance to the social structure of the military. They’re also incredibly diverse, that can make it difficult for faculty and staff to know how to support them. Surrounded on all sides by those who cannot fathom the student veterans’ experiences can result in an alienating environment for many student veterans.

Q: How do you recommend institutions and student support personnel learn from and incorporate the military experience to tailor support for student veterans?

The military experience takes civilians from all walks of life and transforms them into a cohesive team that is capable of accomplishing complex and dangerous missions in turbulent environments. They achieve this through instilling shared core values and education with a purpose in order to improve performance, and achieve excellence in mission completion. By understanding how this might shape a veteran student’s perspective on the learning process, faculty and staff can be better equipped to build meaningful connections and help them transition.

Within the military, education with a purpose involves: basic training (teaching core values and skills needed), advanced training (different schools within the military with specific expertise i.e., finance, engineering and health care), crawl-walk-run (different activities that are low in resources and that are separated out to discreet actions that proceed to complexity, making them as close to real life as possible), and inclination for action (the military trains to act). Therein lies the main difference between the military and higher education. The military trains to act, while higher education trains to reflect. To successfully help student veterans, institutions need to incorporate the military philosophy and integrate it with the reflective ideologies of higher education.
Q: What do you recommend military students do to adapt to different higher education environments and situations they are likely to encounter?

Taking time to build self-awareness and understand how their unique personality and preferences shape their experience is a proven effective approach to improve success and retention. When students discover their learning preferences, they can identify specific coping skills to handle situations when they must perform tasks that are not their preference.

Another big issue they face is not being in the right major from the beginning, that results in inefficient pathways to graduation and potentially drying up their GI benefits before satisfying the degree requirement. To avoid this, it’s essential that a veteran student’s career aspirations are addressed and explored from the very beginning. Defining these goals early in conjunction with a student’s personality type, past military experience and unique strengths put them in control of their transition to their civilian career.

Finally, some veterans struggle as a result of readjustment issues, others struggle because they are not properly equipped to handle the transition to academia and some veterans believe they can resolve issue on their own and do not ask for help. For all of these scenarios, using personality typing to help students understand their learning style and choose the right major are effective best practices to ensure a successful transition.

Karina Money, Ed.D. is an educational consultant, career coach and nationally recognized speaker at conferences and universities. She is the founder and president of Right Path New England, LLC, Managing Director of Veterans Program Development, innovative educator and higher education strategic specialist, student success expert in the areas of student achievement and retention. She regularly consults with colleges in designing and implementing transition courses for student veterans.

Dr. Money is an expert in helping veterans transition their military experience to civilian careers and education endeavors. Specifically, Dr. Money uses personality trait evaluations tailored toward military personnel and focuses on providing veterans with the tools to transcend their military training and skills into civilian career opportunities. Dr. Money is a nationally recognized speaker in the area of student veteran transition and the co-author of The Transitioning Veteran — A textbook and reference guide of best practices for finding your civilian career through academic success to be released Fall 2016.

Dr. Money is a member of the American Counseling Association (ACA) — Military & Veteran Counseling, American Psychological Association (APA), International Association of Coaching (IAC), National Career Development Association (NCDA), and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).