

Veterans in the Classroom

NIU currently enrolls over 500 veterans, and this number is expected to increase in the near future as more veterans complete their service and seek higher education opportunities. Universities play a large role in the transition veterans make when they return to civilian life and also benefit from veterans' presence on their campuses.



Many students face challenges when they come to a university. The challenges may include how to study, manage their time, interact with their instructors and classmates, learn about campus support services, and university policies and procedures. For veterans, who are used to receiving direct orders and specific instructions, being at a large campus can be especially daunting. As students they have to interact with a civilian population and be responsible for their daily activities without having a direct chain of command to follow.

The skills and abilities that veterans bring to NIU can be an asset in many ways. Their service experience may make them more self-sufficient than other students, and their leadership skills are invaluable inside and outside the classroom. Veterans shared experiences lend a unique perspective that can enhance the learning experience for all students.

General Information about Veteran Students

During the fall 2009 semester, faculty development staff had an opportunity to meet with a group of veteran students at NIU and listen to their needs and challenges with respect to their experience at NIU. The characteristics listed below were excerpted from this meeting and from several sources that discuss the needs of veteran students in the classroom. See resources and references for more detailed information.

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- Many veterans are older and may be more mature than traditional college-age students.
- Some veterans have more responsibilities, such as married life, children, and continuing military duties compared to traditional college-age students.
- Some veterans have seen overseas combat, but not all veteran students have been in combat situations or have been overseas.
- Some veterans have experienced war, death, horror, shock, fear, etc., and some may still be experiencing the physical and/or mental after-effects of deployment.
- Veterans are, in general, very motivated and self-disciplined students, and can contribute to the classroom and campus life.

The veteran students who met with faculty development staff had only positive things to say about faculty, teaching, and the support services available to veterans at NIU. They especially appreciated the special support provided by the Military Student Services office at NIU. They acknowledged that they could not speak for all veterans as veterans are as diverse as any other group, but offered a number of general suggestions on improving their experience at NIU, which are identified in the next section.

Accommodating the Needs of Student Veterans

Accommodating the needs of veterans does not mean that we have to drastically change how we teach. However, being aware of the issues veterans face and being accommodating to their needs can ease their transition from military life to the civilian classroom, and improve the educational experience for all students. Listed below are some issues to consider in meeting the needs of veteran students at NIU:

Expect the same classroom responsibilities and performance from veteran students as non-veteran students.

- Create a trusting and caring classroom environment through your approach to all students and your teaching style so that veteran students feel comfortable to approach you and discuss their unique needs and challenges.
- Encourage veteran students to contact you if they encounter circumstances that may impact their performance in your course.
- Accommodate any special needs expressed by veteran students. This may include (but not be limited to) wanting to sit in the last row of the class to avoid exposing their backs, sitting away from windows, being hesitant initially to participate in discussions and missing class due to VA appointments or reserve-duty commitments.
- Be willing to take the time to explain course, assignment, and university policies to veteran students as they may be used to following orders without question. Veteran students may not know they can ask for permission to submit assignments late for valid reasons, appeal grades, or request special accommodations, when necessary.
- Learn about disabilities, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) some veterans may suffer so that they can be referred to appropriate campus services for necessary accommodations.
- Expect the same classroom responsibilities and performance from veteran students as non-veteran students (neither increased nor decreased expectations).
- Help veteran students to successfully work together with civilian students on team projects and interact with them effectively. Some veteran students may prefer working only with other veteran students yet it is important to help veteran students integrate with civilian students and vice versa.
- As with all students, know how to teach veteran students who have different life experiences, learning preferences and capabilities.
- Do not express in-class sentiments related to war or military personnel that could alienate veteran students or put them on the spot. All veterans deserve recognition and appreciation for their service regardless of our personal opinions.
- Involve veteran students, at their own comfort level, in course-related discussions where they can share their service experiences and enrich the learning experience of all students.
- When possible, engage veteran students in leadership opportunities to contribute to the development of other students. Veteran students can help to promote academic programs in recruitment meetings and open houses.
- Know the services available at NIU for veteran students and their academic and personal needs.

Involve veteran students, at their own comfort level, in coursework related discussions where they can share their service experiences and enrich the learning experience of all students.

Summary

Meeting the needs of NIU's veteran students is important as NIU strives to meet the needs of all its students. Everyone will benefit from veteran students' experiences and perspectives by welcoming them to the NIU community.

On Campus Services for NIU Veterans and all Students

Click on the service unit name to access its home page.

[Military Student Services](#)

Adams Hall 409
815.753.0691

[The Family Center of NIU](#)

Wirtz Hall 146
815.753.1684

[The Counseling Lab](#)

Graham Hall
815.753.9312

[The Psychological Services Center](#)

Psych-Math Building 86
815.753.0591

[The Counseling and Student Development Center](#)

Campus Life 200
815.753.1206

[NIU Veterans Club On Facebook](#)**Selected Resources**

Burns, B. (n.d.). *Helping returning veterans transition to college.*

<http://oregonstate.edu/veterans/documents/facpres2010.pdf>

Pike, H. (2009). *CCCC strives to create a 'veteran friendly' campus.*

http://www.capecod.edu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=cc16c6bf-4f8a-4377-945c-018ad0f6c4b7&groupId=33012

Veteran guidelines and best practices in the classroom. (2009). Retrieved from

<http://www.dva.wa.gov/PDF%20files/Veteran%20Best%20Practices%20in%20the%20Classroom%20.pdf>

York, B. (n.d.). *Disability services: Helping student veterans on campus.*

<http://www.unco.edu/enrollmentmanagement/PDF/DisabilityServicesVeterans.pdf>