



Background

When our students leave the military and re-enter civilian life, the transition is often more difficult than the one they experienced when they entered the service. Many report feeling culture shock: they have had experiences that civilians do not understand, and they are trying to figure out where they fit. Their families have changed; their children may be grown, their spouse may have been serving as mom and dad, and friends might have moved away. In the military, our students were subject matter experts; now they are starting over on a new journey in a structure that is very different from what they experienced in the military. This presents multiple opportunities for us as professors, but it also can present some challenges.

Success in the military is predicated on an aptitude for learning and the ability to internalize and apply knowledge in high-stress situations so the learning environment and theoretical underpinnings of higher education do not exactly mesh with what our military students have experienced.

This handout focuses on the challenges and provides some best practices to help address them in the classroom.

Injury-related Challenges

- May have cognitive injuries causing problems concentrating in class or completing work
- Musculoskeletal and hearing loss are most likely injury. Campus and classrooms might be hard to navigate physically, hearing professors who move around may be difficult, sitting still for long periods of time may be painful

Best Practices

- Be flexible with deadlines if it's possible to accommodate any head injuries
- Allow veterans to choose their seat—might need to be able to see the door and windows, might need to be near the professor to hear
- Provide them the flexibility to get up and move around

Course Content Challenges

- Treat college like a mission so when policies are not clear or not followed, veterans will have a negative reaction
- Trained to evaluate and act, not think and talk about it—so courses are focused on reflection and discussion might not feel applicable to life or career path

- School in military is highly structured, performance standards are clearly provided and easily measured, which is not always the case in higher education
- The way education was structured and the methods they used to learn may not serve them well in higher education
- Courses like history and political science, or those that address military operations, geographical areas, leadership theory, ethics, or death and loss could be triggering
- Communication in the military is short and succinct which can come off as gruff or rude in the classroom; same is true for their writing style so adjusting to academic writing may be challenging [Army guidelines say short words (no more than 3 syllables), short sentences (no more than 15 words), and paragraphs no more than 1 inch deep]

Best Practices

- Be focused and specific regarding types of assignments, how they will be assessed, and when they are due
- Try to explain the significance of your course to help students see how your course is related to careers or life
- Be clear about what you are asking students to do, how you are asking them to do it, why that is important (how it's connected to the CLOS or what skills they will develop by completing it, how the knowledge they gain is important in class/college/life)
- If you grade with a rubric, make sure students know how it works
- If you are teaching a course with content that might trigger a veteran, let them know ahead of time, think about what you are saying and how you say it
- Explain what academic writing is and how it works—will help military students understand what they did before worked in that context but college is different.

Classroom Management Challenges

- Students who are late or distracted are difficult for veterans because that is not tolerated in the military
- Veterans are accustomed to team work— they feel cohesive and trust with their peers. This doesn't necessarily translate to group work in classes especially if their group mates are apathetic or distracted
- Veterans are used to frequent and immediate feedback—waiting weeks for grades and not getting much feedback designed for improvement will be difficult for them
- Sometimes there isn't a "right" answer

Best Practices

- In group work, be clear about what students are doing and why; make expectations for individual work clear
- Provide leadership opportunities for veterans in class when appropriate
- Be consistent with expectations and consequences for behavior—phones, side conversations, etc.
- Create an environment where students are comfortable asking questions
- Find ways for students to utilize their experiences and skills in assignments if they are related and flexible enough so and if the student is interested (literature class could assign a different reading for an essay, could allow personal reflection).

Other Important Things to Know

Reservists might have drill for an entire weekend. This means they may not have access to their course materials—they can work ahead because they know their drill schedule ahead of time, but if they don't get work assigned until a Friday or they don't have the instruction they need until Friday, having it done by Monday might not be feasible.

Benefits may not start immediately, so if veterans are relying on that to buy books, they may not have the money to do so until week 3 or 4.

Appointments at the VA are hard to get and aren't easily changed and the closest military health facility may be out of town. In that case, please be flexible with attendance and assignments.

When veterans say they had to wait months and can't change the appointment, they really mean it.

Questions? [Email Holly Wheeler at hwheeler@monroecc.edu](mailto:hwheeler@monroecc.edu)