Supporting Student Veterans in the Classroom

San Francisco VA Medical Center    CCSF Student Veteran Health Program
Keith Armstrong, LCSW
Director, Student Veteran Health Program
Clinical Professor, UCSF Department of Psychiatry
Outline

- Educational Strengths and Challenges for Student Vets
- Considerations for the Classroom
- CCSF Student Veteran Health Program
- Resources
Ever deployed to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) / Operation New Dawn (OND)

• 2.5 million troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001
OEF/OIF/OND Veterans as College Students

- The Post-9/11 GI Bill, passed by Congress in 2008, greatly expanded educational benefits for Veterans who served in the Armed Forces on or after 9/11/01

Participants in VA Education Programs by Fiscal Year (in thousands)

1 Million as of Nov. 2013
Overview of Educational Strengths and Challenges for Student Vets
Transitioning from Military to Academic Life

- Do I belong here? (may be older, self identify as different from other students, different life experience)
- Change in the level of structure
- Loss of identity, close relationships, camaraderie and support
- Ambivalence about revealing military/vet status
- Maintaining grades to keep GI Bill
- Balancing multiple roles
More on Balancing Multiple Roles

• Career and educational anxieties
• Marriage, family and work stressors
• Burdened with other responsibilities: work, mortgages, families, health issues etc.
• School conflicts with guard / reserve duties
• Multiple deployments
Strengths of Military Service

- Pride
- Responsibility, especially during war time
- Sense of competence & accomplishment
- Sense of meaning and of belonging
- Development of close relationships
- VA and GI Bill benefits
- Other?
Student Veteran Strengths

In the classroom student vets are frequently:

- Serious
- Respectful
- Disciplined / Diligent
- On time
- Demonstrate Leadership Skills
- Student vets tend to look out for / support other student veterans
Student Veteran Characteristics

“Student-veterans are motivated, hard-working, and outspoken leaders among their peers...usually the type of student a professor would enjoy having in their classroom.”

Bay Area University Professor
Considerations in the Classroom

- “Freedom of speech” culture on college campus different from military culture

- Range of ideas expressed about war, military, etc. can be challenging / triggering for veterans

- Mandatory drill weekends for Reservists, National Guard may affect attendance

- Vets / military don’t typically ask for help and are often more willing to help other veterans than themselves
Special considerations:

PTS and TBI (traumatic brain injury)*

• Seating arrangement

• Attention / concentration issues

• Hyper-vigilance / arousal / sleep difficulties

• Difficulties with hearing, memory, etc.

* Note: majority of OEF/OIF/OND student veterans face readjustment issues, but do not have PTS or TBI
Peer Challenges

- Questions from peers about military service, combat, political views, etc.
- Peers may be unaware of military issues, recent wars
- Not “serious” enough, not “pulling their weight” especially on group projects
- Texting during class
- Not taking advantage of opportunities
- Developmental stage (age difference)
Practical tips for educators

• Consider flexibility in attendance policy for “government appointments” (VA appointments or mandatory trainings for Natl Guard or Reserves that can not be rescheduled)

• Allow students to opt out of course assignments (readings, films, etc) with violence or war themes

• Offer less triggering alternatives to assignments

• Be sensitive regarding comments about military in class

• Don’t assume anything about a veteran’s political beliefs, attitudes toward war/ the military, etc.
Practical tips for educators (cont’d)

• Don’t try to “diagnose” a mental health problem

• Be aware of resources to share with vets who are struggling (use discretion)

• If you ask a question, be ready for the answer (i.e. how are you doing?)

• Encourage vets to seek academic support as needed
On campus services

40 Hours per week
5 clinicians
    Keith Armstrong, LCSW
    Ellen Herbst, MD
    Bridget Leach, LCSW
    Shannon McCaslin, Ph.D
    Andrea Vanderlaught, LCSW

2 Staff/clinicians
    (events, speaker series)
    Gerard Choucroun, MSW
    Brandina Jersky, MFT
Student Veteran Health Program at City College of San Francisco

Crisis intervention
Medication management
Individual therapy
Couples therapy
Speaker series
Setting up medical appointments
Smoking cessation
Enrollment in VA health care
Resume writing
Housing referrals
.....and more
Student Veteran Health Program at City College of San Francisco

• Presentations to vets and staff such as:
  - Post-deployment adjustment to civilian/student life
  - Obtaining employment
  - PTSD and TBI (traumatic brain injury)
  - Smoking Cessation
  - Suicide Prevention
  - Wellness and Fitness through Recreational Therapy
Student Veteran Health Program at City College of San Francisco

Established August 2010

SF VA’s CCSF Veterans Outreach Program
Proudly Presents

Wellness and Fitness
by Chris Geronimo, Recreational Therapist

Wednesday, April 13 @ 1:00pm
Veterans Resource Center
Cloud Hall, Room 332

SF VA’s CCSF Veterans Outreach Program
Proudly Presents

How to Be a Friend to Your Friend in Need:
Learn the Warning Signs of Suicide
by Mark Stalmaker, PhD
from the SF VA Medical Center

Thursday, May 12th @ 12:00pm
Veterans Resource Center & Lounge
Cloud Hall, Room 332
Thank you

Keith Armstrong, LCSW
SF VA’s Student Veteran Health Program at CCSF
Cloud Hall, Room 333
(415) 452-5253
keith.armstrong@va.gov