

# Peer Mentoring and Student Success: The Veterans Student Sponsor Program at Penn State University Park

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# The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill – Why is this important?

Post 9/11 G.I. Bill effective August 2009

- Tuition and fee payments
- Housing Stipend
- Book Stipend

Penn State saw a marked increase in their student veteran population from 2,033 in 2009 to 5,320 in 2018 (Fend, Fisk, Thornton-Roop & Van Cise, 2018).



# Our Responsibility

- While this influx of student veterans brings welcome strength and diversity to the student population, it also brings to light the numerous challenges this population faces in the transition from military to higher education.
- As a new generation of service members attends college under a more generous GI Bill, the importance of identifying and understanding the strengths and needs of this population within the higher education environment, with close analysis of effective transition and support strategies, are crucial to ensure their success.



# Transition Challenges for Student Veterans

- Research findings indicate that veterans students identify difficulty in connecting with non-military students, issues with navigating VA Benefits, credit transfers, and issues with faculty and classroom interactions when it comes to differing views on military issues (Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Barry, 2018)
- Veteran students are often older, more likely to be working, and caring for dependents than traditional age students and these additional stressors can affect their social connection and engagement on campus (Kees, Risk, Meadowbrooke, Nellett, & Spinner, 2017)
- Veteran students may also be dealing with service related injuries and changes in self-identity as they navigate the difference between military culture and academic culture (Kees et al., 2017)



# Peer Mentoring Benefits for Student Veterans

- Create a sense of connectedness and engagement with the larger university community
- Help normalize transition experiences
- Offer social support
- Reduce the stigma associated with asking for help
- Connect students to useful resources both on and off campus

(Kees et al., 2017)



# Peer Mentoring Effects on Student Success

- Peer mentoring programs foster a sense of belonging and improve academic adjustment (Campbell & Riggs, 2015)
- Assist students as they adjust to higher education and provide opportunities to build social and academic networks (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015)
- Peer mentoring programs have been shown to have positive effects on retention, comfort, persistence to improved GPA (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015)
- Peer mentoring programs are beneficial in early identification of students who maybe in danger of disengaging or failing (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015)



# Schlossberg's Transition Theory

In addition to the type of transition and the nature and context of the transition process, Schlossberg names additional resources and assets, called the “4 S’s” that influence how we manage transition:

- Situation – Includes assessment (perception) and sense of control
  - Self – Includes personal characteristics (resilience) and psychological resources
  - Support – Includes both social and institutional supports
  - Strategies – Includes self-ability to manage transition and self-advocacy
- (Gilbert, C.K. & Griffin, K.A. , p. 72)



# Overview of Sponsor Program

- Sponsor (peer mentor) is assigned between 15 – 20 incoming student veterans who they follow for the academic year
- Contact is required between sponsor and sponsees at least two times a month
- Complete an intake form to help capture what transition challenges students are facing so that program can be built around common needs or stressor
- Sponsors are required to hold office hours and be available to meet with sponsees during school hours
- Complete a service project each semester – something that will bring sponsees together or assist with their transition
- Meet monthly with program coordinator and as a group to discuss case load and learn about resources/supports available to students





# Outcomes of Sponsor Program within Schlossberg's Transition Theory Framework

- Situation –
  - Navigation of the University
  - Identification of University and community connections and/or resources
  - Understanding their GI Bill and veteran benefits Complete an intake form to help capture what transition challenges students are facing so that program can be built around common needs or stressor
- Self –
  - Peer mentors provide student veterans a resource to seek assistance “safely” while modeling/encouraging self-advocacy and effective communication skills with staff and faculty.
  - Peer mentors are trained in Mental Health First Aid to assess and refer student veterans to appropriate resources.
  - Perception of the student veteran by faculty, staff, and or the institution can tremendously affect student engagement and success (Osborne, 2013).



# Outcomes of Sponsor Program within Schlossberg's Transition Theory Framework

- Support –
  - Peer mentors serve as a more natural support to student veterans, decreasing the stigma of asking for help.
  - Peer mentors also enable institutional relationships by serving as “brokers” to the Office of Veterans Programs staff and others.
  - Student veterans’ relationships with the campus services/veterans counselors are key to their success (López, Nelson, & Springer, 2016).
- Strategies –
  - Peer mentors offer advice and encourage students to seek help
  - Peer mentors provide personal experience and guidance on addressing issues or concerns with peers, faculty, staff, and university systems



# Feedback from Students

- *I am not sure how to make it better, my interactions with my sponsor were excellent and he always made himself available to answer questions, even after he graduated he still helped with information. My experience with the program was everything I needed it to be. (2017-2018)*
- *This program was incredibly helpful, I see no issues at this moment. (2017-2018)*
- *It was perfect and more than expected. (2018-2019)*

# QUESTIONS?

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