



## EDITOR'S PREFACE



The first wave of research about student veterans—conducted over the past 10 years—focused mostly on describing the phenomenon of the student veteran and their transition from military service to civilian life and the college campus. Important findings from this period included evidence that peer connections and support are vital for early student success (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009) and that colleges and universities should, if enrollment numbers justify it and where practicable, introduce a one-stop shop approach to veterans services (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Studies from this period were based mostly on small samples and typically employed qualitative methods. While these studies were data rich and of high quality, the findings were by definition not generalizable and the implications for practice were mostly speculative because they had not been empirically tested.

In early 2014, the release of findings from the Million Records Project, a cooperative research initiative of Student Veterans of America, the National Student Clearinghouse, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, signaled the beginning of a second wave of research focused on the academic success of veterans in college. Results from this project, which used sampling from approximately one million veteran education, beneficiary, enrollment, and completion records, revealed for the first time how the most recent generation of veterans are performing in higher education. As Chris Cate suggests in Chapter 8 and elsewhere (see Cate, 2014), the findings from this survey are encouraging: Veterans' completion rates are better than any other post-traditional student group and were similar to the rates for traditional college students.

The purpose of this book is to present findings from this second wave of research about student veterans, with a focus on data-driven evidence of academic success factors, including persistence, retention, degree completion, and employment after college. In an atmosphere of tight budgets and scarce resources, it is vital that decision makers are furnished with empirical evidence to make data-informed decisions that benefit students. This volume is intended

for the whole of the higher education community, but particularly those tasked with providing programs and services for student veterans and who will carry the mantle forward for the next decade.

Chapters 1 through 4 provide a framework for a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of student veterans making transitions from military service to civilian life, including barriers to academic success, mental health concerns, challenges faced by disabled students, and issues of equity in postsecondary education. Chapter 1, coauthored by Corri Zoli, Rosalinda Maury, and Daniel Fay of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University, describes key elements of veterans' transitions and shares best practices for research, which emphasizes a multichannel approach to collecting data from student veterans.

In Chapter 2, Andrew Morse and Dani Molina offer a primer for better understanding military-connected undergraduates and key factors associated with access, matriculation, financial need, and degree attainment. Their key theme is educational equity, and their data suggest that a disproportionate percentage of veterans attend for-profit institutions and community colleges. Many also have unmet financial needs and accrue debt while in college despite the educational benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Amanda Kraus, Cody Nicholls, and James Cole use mixed-methods research in Chapter 3 to investigate levels of engagement for student veterans with disabilities and present findings of interest for the higher education community, including information about the lower perceived gains that these students reported from their collegiate experiences. In Chapter 4, Adam Barry, Shawn Whiteman, and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth report on their research about mental health and academic outcomes. Among their findings is that positive mental health support from family and friends promotes coping skills and resiliency.

Section II emphasizes programs to support student veterans and key academic outcomes, such as persistence and graduation rates. Chapter 5, coauthored by Dani Molina and Tanya Ang, summarizes a decade of best practice research supported by the American Council on Education to facilitate student veteran success. Michelle Kees and colleagues from the University of Michigan provide details in Chapter 6 about the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) program that they have implemented at more than 40 schools over the past five years. Wendy Lang and Tom O'Donnell in Chapter 7 provide

data-driven findings relating to the academic success of student veterans and discuss the creation of their Graduation Probability Index, derived from data gathered by Operation College Promise and its consortium of 23 universities.

Chris Cate, senior researcher at Student Veterans of America, breaks new ground in Chapter 8 by providing details from the acclaimed Million Records Project in which large databases were merged from the National Student Clearinghouse, the premier financial aid-tracking agency, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The combined database was used to examine the academic progress of more than 100,000 veterans who have used military educational benefits, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, to pursue postsecondary education between 2002 and 2010. In Chapter 9, Ryan Van Dusen assesses the validity and usefulness of a familiar model of student retention as applied to the post-traditional, student veteran population. Wayne Miller reveals essential practices, which are detailed in Chapter 10, from his exhaustive mixed-methods study of nearly 500 student veterans enrolled in the California Community College System. Finally, Section III draws on key findings from the volume to make recommendations about the next steps for serving college student veterans.

I hope readers will consider how their own institutions support student veterans beyond their initial transitions to college while keeping in mind that the next step is a focus on academic success metrics (e.g., persistence, retention, graduation, career development, employment). The authors featured in this book provide examples that build upon the higher education tradition of developing research-based programs to support students. Now, more than a decade since the first student veterans began enrolling in college using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, many colleges and universities across the nation are indeed making efforts to not only provide services for veterans but also advocate for their academic success. However, for some schools, there is still much left to do for supporting student veterans. Ask yourself how you can provide leadership at your school in order to “serve those who have served.” As President John F. Kennedy proclaimed in 1963, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them” (Proclamation No. 3560, 1963, p. 1).

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## References

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