



Article

We've Been Here Before: Meeting the Needs of Student-Veterans

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Using the 1944 work of E. G. Williamson, then president of ACPA, this essay provides historical and comparative analysis of campus efforts surrounding student-veterans. Emphasis is placed on Williamson's five efforts, which alerted colleges to the immediate needs of veterans returning from the Second World War and enrolling in college. The current work applies Williamson's five efforts to contemporary higher education and the student-veterans enrolled therein. Recommendations for practice are offered.

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From 1941 to 1945, E. G. Williamson served as President of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Students of higher education history will immediately note the significance of this time period as millions of American men and women, unified by purpose, were dedicated to the national and international efforts surrounding the Second World War. Between 1940 and 1945, 16 million military personnel were involved in the Second World War, a number that far eclipses any other conflict in United States history (Mettler, 2005). Beyond the military effort, another 10 million civilians were involved in the state-side war effort, producing munitions and other war related employment (Mettler, 2005). Although the collective social sentiments regarding the war and the American military personnel were largely positive, the nation was fearful of another national depression once 26 million military personnel and civilians were released from war efforts and returned to the labor market. In addition, the nation had not yet forgotten a post-First World War incident involving the “Bonus Army” that marched on Washington and protested President Hoover’s unwillingness to give financial assistance to veterans from the First World War. This incident illuminated to the nation “the dirty secret of veteran mistreatment” which evoked “revulsion at what the government had done” (Humes, 2006, p. 17). Hilliard (1943) wrote in anticipation of returning Second World War veterans that “in comparison with the First World War, the American people seem to be considerably more interested in doing some thinking about post-war conditions” (p. 92) by actively facilitating the veterans’ successful resumption of civilian life.

As a result of these collective forces – and collective fears – in 1944 the federal government enacted the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act – often referred to as the GI Bill (Mettler, 2005). This legislation was intended to both ameliorate national concern and provide opportunities for the millions of returning veterans who had served a grateful nation. The effect

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of the GI Bill was widespread as it allowed every veteran, regardless of age, socioeconomic background, minority status, or other previously limiting factors, the opportunity to earn a baccalaureate degree or receive vocational or technical training (Blair, 1999; Nam, 1964; Roach, 1997; Wilson, 1994). Nam (1964) noted that “in the fall of 1947, 1.2 million, or seven out of ten, of the men enrolled in colleges or universities were veterans of World War II” (p. 28). A decade after the close of the Second World War, “2.2 million veterans had attended college under the law’s provisions” (Mettler, 2005, p. 7). The presence of veterans on American campuses stretched college enrollment by almost 70%, from a pre-war number of 1.3 million in 1939 to a postwar number of more than 2.2 million in 1949 (Bound & Turner, 2002). Clearly the GI Bill had a substantial impact on post-secondary educational access for the returning veteran and it had an equally substantial impact on the institutions themselves.

So why was Williamson’s tenure as ACPA president so important? Why, at least in our view, is it not simply a notation embedded within the long history of ACPA? In October of 1944, a scant four months after the GI Bill was signed into law, Williamson penned an essay concerning the return of the veteran and “his” enrollment on campuses throughout the country. Williamson’s efforts show a true vision, a true desire to proactively consider the challenges faced by veterans as they transitioned from combat to campuses. Perhaps most important, and decidedly different compared to today’s returning veterans, was that Williamson thought deeply about this group *before* they came back. Using his national platform, and juxtaposed with his substantial counseling background, Williamson posited six specific adjustments that service personnel would be challenged with (What to do, how to finance training, educational credit for military experience, new curricula for old, segregation, morale) and coupled them with “five efforts” colleges should consider to help veterans address these challenges. These “five efforts,”

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though situated during the Second World War, make as much sense today – and have as much application today – as they did more than 60 years ago. With this context in mind, the current essay examines the historical significance of Williamson’s “five efforts” offered to colleges in relation to the transition of veterans and applies them to contemporary student service members.

Effort 1: Develop Policies to Grant Credit for Military Training and Experience

To a large degree, Williamson was referring to the loss of time experienced by veterans, some of whom stopped out of college, as a result of the draft or through voluntary enlistment during the Second World War. Still others enlisted immediately out of high school and served until the conflict was resolved, thus interrupting their possible path to college. Regardless of the precise route, all veterans lost time, and it is exactly this time that veterans sought to make up once returned to civilian life. By developing policies that allowed for the review and, where feasible, award of academic credit for service and experience, colleges assuaged, even if only in a small way, this common concern of returning veterans. It was also a tacit acknowledgement from the colleges that the military training and experience received by these veterans was in fact *worth* something, even after the Second World War was concluded; that there was real academic merit to their efforts.

This loss of time is something that contemporary student-veterans also report (Bauman, 2009). Students who are Reserve and National Guard members activated for service in the Middle East and elsewhere must stop-out of college for an extended period of time, sometimes up to two years (Bauman, 2009). As a result, student-veterans find themselves in classes with a younger group of peers, many of whom are perceived to be less mature and with less life experience (Bauman, 2009). There is, of course, no way to make up all of the time that is lost. And frankly, after working with veterans for the last few years, we suspect that most would not

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trade their military experiences for a more timely graduation. But the question for colleges to consider is this: How do we review military experience and military training and provide, where applicable, some measure of academic credit as Williamson suggested?

Generally, each veteran has completed both initial training (Basic Training or “boot camp”) along with job-specific training, and many have completed advanced training in his or her respective specialties. Easing the burden on colleges for individualized review, the American Council on Education (2011) has published the *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services* for more than 50 years. Even a quick search of the database reveals an extremely robust analysis of thousands of military programs, coupled with a detailed explanation of the recommended academic credit. Colleges should assertively utilize tools such as the ACE Guide and strongly encourage student-veterans to meet with an appropriate college official so that such a review can occur. Working in concert with ACE, the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium (2012) boasts 1900 colleges and universities as its membership. These member institutions have, among other things, agreed to use the ACE Guide “in evaluating and awarding academic credit for military training and experience” (SOC Consortium, 2012, para. 7).

Using these tools together, student-veterans can make an informed selection regarding their initial enrollment – or re-enrollment – opting for institutions that are most likely to examine a service record and award appropriate academic credit. On the surface, this consortium of 1900 schools seems strong – and for those schools in the consortium, it certainly is. But remember that in the United States there are more than 4,000 public and private, two- and four-year colleges and universities, which means less than half of the nation’s colleges are employing these

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key resources. Colleges should consider Williamson's charge regarding academic credit as its relevance is as real today as it was 67 years ago.

Effort 2: More Effective Health and Mental-Hygiene Facilities Must be Made Available

While the term mental-hygiene facility is outdated, Williamson (1944) goes on to say that "military psychiatrists report that we may expect many individuals who need psychiatric assistance" (p. 93). At its core, his charge is related to the availability and the effectiveness of mental health services on the nation's campuses. Given Williamson's academic and professional background, this charge is not surprising. However, it is to some degree counter to some of the sentiment surrounding war wounds. For example, through the First World War, what we might consider today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was referred to as "shell-shock" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 2). Lazarus (1993) further explained that the perspective from the First World War had been "neurological rather than psychological" (p. 2). Termed "shell-shock," this disorder "expressed a vague but erroneous notion that the dysfunction resulted from brain damage created by the sound of exploding shells" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 2). Parrish (2001), who penned a reference manual for military veterans and PTSD, argued that up until the 1980s – and in some cases into the 1990s – that

most combat veterans were diagnosed with "shell shock," which didn't warrant long term treatment. Other combat veterans were merely diagnosed with "bad nerves" which not only didn't warrant long term treatment, but also induced a "get over it" attitude from the military and medical communities. (p. 3)

Williamson's charge, then, could be considered progressive given the larger context, culture and history surrounding mental health and the military, a charge that remains relevant today. Auchterlonie, Hoge, and Milliken (2006), indicated that almost 18 % of Army Soldiers

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and Marines returning from Iraq have screened positive for PTSD. In a follow-up study, the authors showed a substantial increase in the presence of PTSD, noting that between 30 and 35 % of returning veterans screened positive for PTSD (Auchterlonie, Hoge, & Milliken, 2007). More broadly, Auchterlonie et al. (2007) reported that 20.3 % of active duty and 42.4 % of reserve and National Guard veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated an overall mental health risk as shown on the military's screening instrument. Britt, Castro, and Greene-Shortridge (2007) found similar results, reporting that "30 % of troops returning home from the Iraq war have experienced some type of mental health problem" (p. 157).

Clearly a need exists for accessible and sustained mental health care for these veterans, some of whom are *student*-veterans. But this need does not neutralize often long-standing barriers to this care, especially within military culture. In a 2007 study of mental health stigma in the military, Britt et al. concluded that demobilized service members are uncomfortable seeking mental health assistance, are concerned with the perceived stigma, and are less willing to discuss their problems. In their comprehensive review of the mental health and medical literature, Parker-Konkle, Parker, and Reeves (2005) noted that demobilized military members are generally uncomfortable in sharing their wartime experiences.

In addition to the perceived stigma attached to receiving mental health service, Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cotting, and Koffman (2004) found several other barriers to mental health care for returning veterans. These authors reported that 59% of veterans who met the screening criteria for a mental health disorder did not seek treatment because "members of my unit might have less confidence in me" (p. 21). Sixty-three percent of this same group (N=731) did not seek help because they feared their "leadership" would treat them differently. Sixty-five percent responded by saying they did not seek treatment because "they would be seen as weak"

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(Hoge et al., 2004, p. 21). Perhaps more critically, in this study approximately 20 % of the respondents defined *themselves* as having a “moderate or severe mental health problem” (p. 20). These findings indicate a clear disconnect between those who need mental health services and their willingness to access those services.

Given this context, campus counseling centers, along with other campus support services, are uniquely positioned to assist the returning student-veteran precisely because they are not affiliated with the military. It is this disconnection, coupled with genuine and informed outreach from campus support programs, which can facilitate rather than hinder a student-veteran’s interest and willingness to discuss concerns (Kudler & Straits-Troster, 2008). To this end, we would encourage those campus support areas (e.g. Counseling Centers, Advisement Centers, Deans of Students Offices, Career Development) to *intentionally* connect to student-veterans, apprise them of services, and insure confidentiality.

The University of Arizona (<http://vets.arizona.edu/>) created a comprehensive program for its veterans which served close to 900 students as of spring, 2010. The Veterans Education and Transition Services office (University of Arizona, n.d.b) “incorporates academics, institutional access, student involvement and research not only to support the success of enrolled student veterans, but to understand their experiences more authentically and maintain a program that is effective and dynamic” (para. 1). Of particular note at University of Arizona (2011) is its Disabled Veterans Reintegration Project (DVRP) which is a congressionally directed grant designed to

develop a research-based, replicable model for higher education that will recommend various programs, services, and strategies to create an inclusive campus environment accessible to student veterans, many of whom will have disabilities. This project uses a

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multifaceted approach to understand the impact of disability within the student veterans' community and implications for higher education. (para. 1)

Colleges should review research and programs such as DVRP and other best practices and consider implementing elements of these successful efforts.

Effort 3: Each Institution Should Now Plan and Establish Effective Orientation Programs, Including How-to-Study Courses, Occupational Orientation Courses, and Refresher Courses in Certain Basic Subjects.

As with the second point, Williamson's language is dated, but his central thesis remains current: As a nation of campuses, we need to consider the distinct needs of veterans in the delivery of academic and student affairs programs. There is evidence from the Second World War era that academic and student life entities actively planned for the return of the veteran. Howard L. Bevis (1944), former President of The Ohio State University, wrote that "for more than a year our University Committee on Postwar Planning has been at work" (p. 84). This committee sought to address the comprehensive needs of the "demobilized student." As a result of this planning, OSU faculty offered a number of course selections designed to fit the unique needs of demobilized students. Bevis cited the creation of a Twilight School offering a full slate of university coursework in the evenings. Similarly, Goodier (1946) noted that faculty groups on the Illinois State Normal University campus actively sought to educate themselves on issues surrounding veterans' needs. Additionally, the creation of an organization of veterans at Illinois State University, entitled Golden Eagle, provided support to incoming student service personnel by their fellow veterans (Goodier, 1946). A sample of the historical literature reveals that significant attention was also given to housing issues (Shaw, 1947), curricular changes (Bevis, 1944; McGrath, 1945; Reglein, 1943), counseling and mental health services (McGrath, 1945;

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Ritchie, 1945; Williamson, 1944), and student personnel services (Cuninggim, 1944). In response to the returning veterans, many campus leaders, administrators, faculty, and others attempted to improve or adjust services and programs so that veterans' social and academic transitions to college life would be successful.

Contemporary efforts to address Williamson's charge, though present, do not yet show themselves in the form of a national movement. Whereas during the Second World War, the nation's campuses were largely unified and timely in their approach to veterans, today's efforts appear largely up to the individual efforts of concerned campus personnel. Disjointed though the efforts may be, that is not to say that individual institutions are not making strong, innovative progress in this area. Once again the University of Arizona provides an excellent example of curricular adjustments as evidenced by their Supportive Education Programs for Returning Veterans (SERV) initiative. The SERV approach is a "cohort-based veterans education [program] composed of three three-credit courses addressing resiliency, learning-teaching, and leadership" (University of Arizona, n.d.a, para. 1). Initial data have shown strong gains by participating veterans in each of the three targeted areas (resiliency, learning-teaching, and leadership) and institutional retention from the fall 2009 term to the spring 2010 term was 96% (23 of 24 student-veterans). Though SERV is a newer program, these and other strong results clearly show promise in addressing the comprehensive needs of returning student-veterans (Markel, Trujillo, Callahan, & Marks, 2010).

Williamson charged campuses to plan and establish effective orientation programs, including how-to-study courses, occupational orientation courses, and refresher courses in certain basic subjects. Examples of such efforts do exist as evidenced by University of Arizona

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and San Diego State University. But at the national level, in terms of the broad movement advocated for by Williamson, we have yet to fully realize this objective.

Effort 4: More Effective Counseling Programs Must be Constructed

Williamson again shows his progressive nature by asserting that colleges must intentionally plan and develop counseling programs. But a careful reading of the text illuminates Williamson's broad definition of counseling, bearing in mind that the term counseling has evolved over time to mean many things.

Each institution must free select members of the faculty from other duties so that they may have sufficient time and incentive to develop effectiveness in counseling students. Counseling is no longer limited to approving the student's choice of subjects. It involves assisting the student to make the most of his opportunities in college, and helping him remove obstacles in learning how to use his aptitudes effectively. (Williamson, 1944, p. 94)

Thus stated, Williamson is speaking more about the general and comprehensive nature of advising, of creating and developing a relationship within a helping framework. In more modern terms, Williamson's fourth effort speaks to the institutional climate, a concept often associated with race, gender, sexual orientation, or other protected groups. However, climate also includes the general atmosphere, sense of openness, and programmatic efforts intentionally directed towards student-veterans, much like we direct programs and services to other groups of students that we know might face some challenges. In this way, Williamson's fourth effort reflects the work of Manning and Stage (1992), which advanced the idea of a multicultural campus, where institutions and their individuals are responsive to all people. We encourage institutions of

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higher education to extend their conception of cultural groups to include veterans, enhancing their efforts towards a fully inclusive and multicultural campus.

Accomplishing the multicultural campus envisioned by Manning and Stage (1992) must first begin with understanding – understanding military culture generally and the student-veteran experience in particular, aspects of which are sometimes regarded as invisible to others (Livingston, 2011). By offering educational sessions to the broader campus community, institutions draw positive and thoughtful attention to student veterans. From this increased awareness, institutional personnel can be more intentionally inclusive, thereby striving toward Manning and Stage's (1992) conceptualization of a multicultural campus.

In 2009, San Diego State University (<http://arweb.sdsu.edu/es/veterans/>) took the bold step of converting a former fraternity house to living quarters for veterans, an effort that, at the time, was the first in the nation (Jacobs, 2009). Coupled with a vigorous Veterans Center and a 500 member student veterans organization, San Diego State has gone a long way to creating a culturally competent campus (Manning & Stage, 1992) – one that includes veterans as part of this competence, and one that aligns well with Williamson's vision.

Effort 5: More Effective Administrative Organization of Counseling and Personnel Work for Veterans is Needed in all Colleges

In his fifth effort, Williamson (1944) addressed several related items concerning approaches to providing veterans with guidance and support in ways that they will find palatable. He pointed out that, at that time, counseling and guidance services were offered passively. College personnel have become more assertive in offering supportive services, especially to students identified as “at risk,” actively and intentionally reaching out to connect these students with available resources. As noted previously, military personnel may hesitate to seek

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counseling for fear of stigma and perceived repercussions. Therefore, institutions can play a more persistently active role to connect student-veterans to available support services.

Endorsing an interventionist approach on the part of university staff, Williamson (1944) recommended that colleges intentionally and directly interact with each veteran in the early months of their college work. He noted that such an effort requires available staff that are appropriately trained and supported. Today, any campus that accepts the GI Bill must identify at least one staff member to administer these benefits (Farrell, 2005). These individuals are most commonly tasked with aiding student-veterans in navigating the world of military and do not necessarily focus on other pressing needs that student-veterans face in their adjustment to college life. Although many larger campuses boast a staff member or entire departments dedicated to veteran's services, this approach may not be financially practical for all institutions. Nor can even a well-staffed office meet the moment-to-moment needs of our student veterans as they go about their lives in myriad locations on campus.

Surely Williamson would appreciate the Veterans Safe Zone program (<http://www.whatcom.ctc.edu/student-services/student-support/veterans/>) developed by student veterans and staff of Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington. Faculty and staff members at Whatcom are invited to publicly display a specific badge marking their office as a Veteran Safe Zone which indicates that the faculty or staff member is willing to support student veterans. "A person displaying this symbol is one who will be understanding, supportive, and trustworthy if a veteran needs help, advice, or just someone with whom they can talk" (Whatcom Community College, n.d.). In addition to supplementing the services provided by counseling and related staff, the Veterans Safe Zone program offers assistance to student veterans where they need it, be it a classroom, hallway, or administrative building, from

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individuals who are likely to understand the demands of military service, combat, and the transition to student life. This localized and personalized approach is more likely to appeal to student veterans who may fear stigma but also understand the power and importance of close, personal relationships. A further benefit of the Safe Zone program has been greater awareness of the presence and unique needs of student-veterans (J. Corbitt, personal communication, January 10, 2012). Interest in this program has resulted in its implementation at four-year institutions in Washington state, extending the web of support to universities that Whatcom students typically transfer to for the completion of a bachelor's degree (J. Corbitt, personal communication, January 10, 2012). In keeping with Williamson's edicts, a Veterans Safe Zone program might include training opportunities for participants and should be tailored to the unique needs of the student veteran population on your campus as well as the various issues routinely encountered by individual student veterans.

Conclusion

There are heartening examples of individual colleges and universities taking up the student-veteran cause, and a few of those examples are contained within these pages. That they exist at all is surely the result of thoughtful and caring campus leaders buttressed, in many cases, by the grass-roots energies of the student-veterans themselves. These efforts, beneficial though they may be, are generally singular in nature, existing without a cohesive national movement. That is not to say, however, that national efforts are absent. Publications, conferences and even grant funding geared towards student-veterans has been made available. But lacking thus far is a sense of a *widespread, deep* and, perhaps most importantly, *sustainable* movement. In the post-Second World War colleges, the GI Bill generated the so-called veteran bulge, comprised of 2.2

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million veterans over a 10 year period. Led by Williamson and others, colleges, both through individual effort and a sense of collective, national obligation, embraced the returning veteran.

It is our opinion that colleges have been less assertive relative to their post-Second World War peers. The first empirical publication came in 2008, a full five years after the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts began. By comparison, Williamson's essay arrived four months after the signing of the GI Bill. Auspiciously, since 2008 there has been a steady increase in the attention afforded to student-veterans. And though it has taken time – *perhaps too much time* – for colleges to respond, we are clearly moving in the right direction.

Before us stands another opportunity. In the coming months and years, colleges and universities have yet another occasion to serve those who serve us. With the forthcoming draw down in Afghanistan, an already reduced force in Iraq, and further support from the improved, post-9/11 GI Bill, veteran enrollment is projected to increase substantially (Gayheart, 2009). Gayheart noted that “the University of Kentucky has seen a 60% increase in veteran enrollment from the spring 2009 semester” (2009, p. 4). Similarly, from 2008 to 2010, Minneapolis Community and Technical College saw an 89% increase (Minneapolis Community & Technical College, 2012). More broadly, in Minnesota state colleges and universities “10, 644 veterans and service members were enrolled in one of the system's 31 institutions” (Minneapolis Community & Technical College, 2012, para. 1) which reflects a 57% increase since 2008.

The veteran bulge of our generation is nearly upon us. Institutions that have not already done so are encouraged to use history as a guide in considering present-day interventions. As Williamson noted 67 years ago, student-veterans must be regarded holistically, much as we might regard any other defined group. Although the effort of any one individual institution is important, we should endeavor to generate a sustainable, national movement that truly has the

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gumption to propel us well in to the future. Without both the individual and collective efforts of the nation's colleges and universities, we will have lost an opportunity to serve those who have served us.

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