

## **Veterans with Disabilities: Transition from Combat to College**

### **Things to consider:**

- About 56% of individuals who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan will be returning as individuals with disabilities.
- Per the 2008 Rand estimates, 54% of these veterans will have mental health conditions and Traumatic Brain Injuries.
- Due to the improvements and advancements in medical care, there are more survivors of war trauma and injuries than any other war, making the numbers of returning vets with disabilities higher.
- Many veterans will begin their higher education experience with the community colleges.
- Most injuries are the result of IEDs and explosions. Common disabilities of veterans of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, in no particular order and not limited to:
  - Traumatic Brain Injury
  - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Loss of limb(s)
  - Severe burns
  - Deafness
  - Vision disabilities
  - And learning disabilities

**It is important to understand the perspective of a veteran with a disability as much as possible given that most of us have never been in their situation. One cannot comprehend the physical and mental impact of combat unless one has been in that situation. Their struggles returning to civilian and school life are very complex.**

- In most instances, veterans are new to their disabilities, without prior history or knowledge of IDEA/Section 504 eligibility.
- They may be unaware of the rights of students with disabilities or how to go about getting accommodations.
- They are just developing an understanding of how their disability may impact their learning. For example, an individual may have acquired a learning disability as a result of her Traumatic Brain Injury and had no previous history of a learning disability prior to the injury. Coming back to school is a huge adjustment in itself, and then on top of that, realizing that she does not or cannot learn in the same way as she did before will be a huge adjustment.
- The psychological process for accepting disability status will take time; especially given their military background, where they may at first view their disability as a sign of weakness.
- Many are facing other adjustments as well, such as re-integration into the social and family lives they held before their active duty assignments.
  - 50% of all veterans have children, and 50% of all marriages dissolve upon return due to the stressors of adjustment.

- TBI and PTSD can significantly impact an individual's personality and ability to cope with day to day activities. This puts tremendous strain on marriages and family life.
- It is difficult for those who have never gone through a traumatic war experience to understand what the veterans may be reliving on a daily basis.

**How can we, as higher education professionals, help these veteran students with disabilities?**

- Make yourself available for questions regarding academic accommodations.
- Include information in your syllabi about Student ACCESS and the accommodation process.
- Be mindful of the potential level of discomfort they may be feeling as a new student, and one with a disability.
- Understand the benefits that veterans bring to campus, including their experience and extensive training gaining skills they don't already have. This work ethic could really benefit themselves and others in the classroom. This discipline and attitude could make an impact on and inspire others.
- Engage in the accommodation process with the veteran student. Collaborate with the campus offices that may help answer some of their questions.
- Help the veteran student understand the goals of the class and what they can get out of it. Make yourself available to meet with the veteran student during office hours to discuss their progress or any concerns they may be having about the class and work assignments.
- Make sure they are active with an academic advisor or counselor who can guide them in the registration process.

**Resources:**

- Dr. Nadine Shigezawa, Veterans Administration Pacific Islands Health Care System

<http://www.kutztown.edu/veterans>

<https://www.washington.edu/doit/programs/accesscollege/veterans-center/resources>

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/back-to-school-2008.html>

<https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/>