

**Brothers and Sisters in Arms:
The Value of Recruiting and Retaining Student Veterans in Fraternal Organizations**

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When many of us think of a potential fraternity and sorority member, it is likely we picture a traditional 18 to 20-year-old college student. However, over the past decade, the college community has changed and so should the image we have of potential members. One student population that has been overlooked but could benefit from and offer much to the fraternity/sorority community are student veterans.

In 2015, over 1 million U.S. college students utilized the benefits outlined in the Post 9-11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008, known as the Post 9-11 GI Bill, and other veteran education benefit programs, to pursue higher education (Veterans Benefit Administration, 2015). Over 80 percent of these students were at the undergraduate level. Because of this growth, many campuses have created offices to recruit and support veteran students (Gallup, Inc., 2015).

“This nontraditional student population has had different life experiences and circumstances compared to more traditional students, which can both enrich the veteran student's college experience and give rise to challenges during transition and retention” (Olsen, 2014). As with many other nontraditional student populations, veteran students have unique characteristics that are essential to understanding, recruiting, and supporting them. It is important to note not all veteran students share the same experience. There are distinct differences between military members enrolled in college while serving in the military compared to those who enroll after completing their service. They may share some needs but can differ immensely in other areas.

In general, veteran students have the following characteristics:

- Are often older than the traditional student, typically over the age of 23
- Live off campus and not in traditional residence halls
- May be supporting families at home which may include spouses and children
- May be working in addition to taking classes
- Are less involved in campus activities

Most of these characteristics do not fit into the common image of a fraternity or sorority member. However, student veterans have a lot to offer and gain from membership in fraternal organizations.

Self-sufficiency, discipline and purpose

Veteran students have spent many years of their life in an environment with high expectations about punctuality and responsibility as well as self-discipline. Therefore they are more likely to connect and adhere to policies and rules. They are also found to be more likely to arrive at class on time, meet deadlines for assignments, and be prepared for exams. The structure of the military and high expectations can help veteran students remain disciplined in their academic lives, which is a benefit to fraternal organizations focusing on academic achievement. Additionally, Gallup (2015) found veteran graduates were more likely to thrive in the area of purpose than non-veteran graduates, meaning “they like what they do each day and are motivated to achieve their goals” (p. 8).

Leadership and teamwork

Veterans are “emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders. They work tirelessly to achieve their objectives and look for ways to make meaningful contributions. They are self-

sufficient” (Lighthall, 2012, p. 88). The military is built around the concept of working as a team. Because of this, most student veterans have extensive team and leadership experience and are experienced in how to communicate effectively and manage group conflict as well as understand the dynamics of teams working toward a goal. In fact, many veteran students note a loss of the close-knit family or team once they return to civilian life. There is a great opportunity for fraternities and sororities to offer a similar type of family atmosphere to veteran students while in college and beyond.

Service to others

Military veterans not only understand the need to serve others but have experienced it, making one of the largest sacrifices possible to serve others. As Lighthall (2012) says, “They not only understand the concept of sacrifice for the greater good; they’ve lived it” (p. 88). Their commitment to service is a mindset aligning well with the values of fraternities and sororities and could inspire other members as well.

Maturity

Because many veteran students are three to five years older than traditional college students and many have experienced difficult situations, they may be more mature than other students in areas of decision making and engagement in certain types of behavior. “Typically, student veterans are older and more experienced than their freshman peers, which helps them keep things in perspective and not sweat the small stuff” (Lighthall, 2012, p. 82).

Diverse experience

Veteran students have a different perspective to bring to the classroom and conversations outside the classroom. They may have traveled globally and experienced different cultures or were exposed to a diverse population in their military unit. Additionally, their ability to bring a varied perspective into the classroom as a result of unique experiences allows them to have a different insight on topics than the traditional student (Lighthall, 2012).

Funding

The GI Bill was created in 1944 to provide financial and educational benefits to those who served in the military. The Post 9-11 version of the bill is the most comprehensive since the one that followed World War II and includes tuition, a monthly housing allowance, and book stipend. Full benefits are awarded after three years of active duty service, yet funding may differ student to student (Hamrick, 2012). A Gallup (2015) study found 54 percent of veteran student graduates were thriving financially, compared to 43 percent of non-veteran graduates, which they attribute to lower student loan debt. This could mean veteran students may be in a better place to cover dues and other membership fees for joining a fraternity or sorority.

Loyalty and legacy

Veterans have a strong understanding of the idea of loyalty, possibly more so than an 18 year old right out of high school. Because of this, they are likely to be more thoughtful and intentional in making the decision to join a fraternity or sorority and are likely to remain dedicated to the organization. The legacy of military service is one that has been around in this country since before the founding of Greek-letter organizations. It is likely organizations have a large number of older alumni who are also veterans. Having current student veterans in chapters can assist in reconnecting with those alumni (Lighthall, 2012).

While there are many obvious reasons to actively recruit military veterans for membership in fraternities and sororities, challenges do arise in bringing this unique population into fraternal organizations

Cultural and social differences

Veteran students often share a close bond with their unit due to spending large amounts of time together in high-stress situations. For some veterans, it can be difficult to transition to a college organization that does not have that type of bond. The culture of the military differs greatly from that in a college setting, specifically in the relationships between people. The assertive tone used in military setting may be seen as aggressive or rude in other settings (Olsen, 2014).

Social alienation and adjustment

All veterans, whether or not they have seen active combat, deal with transition issues to some extent when they return to civilian life. The military lifestyle is very different from the college environment and their lives at home. Many student veterans find themselves alone and disoriented when they are discharged. In the college environment, they are surrounded mostly by people who have not had the same experience as them. They have spent the past few years with a structured support system, and all of a sudden they no longer have it. "The loss of friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income is enough to push most people to their limits. Throw in an unfamiliar social system that bears no resemblance to the military...and you have a deeply alienating environment for many of them" (Lighthall, 2012, p. 82). It is important for student members and faculty/staff to try to understand veterans and connect them with others who can help ease this alienation, especially other veterans who have successfully transitioned to the college environment (Gallup, Inc., 2015; Olsen, 2014). Student veterans may have difficulties adjusting to the less structured routines of college life and may become frustrated with the lack of regimented schedules and behavior they are used to. While in combat, student veterans may have had to make life or death decisions, and now they may feel their responsibilities as a student are not as important or impactful and therefore do not deserve the same level of effort or commitment.

Financial Stress

While financial stress is something most college students experience, and veterans may be receiving benefits reducing their need for loans, financial concerns can still be a part of the veteran-student's transition. In the military, they did not have to pay bills as most expenses including food, housing, and medical needs were all provided by the military. The challenge of budgeting and managing finances can be compounded by the fact many student-veterans may also be supporting spouses and children while attending class on a full or part-time basis. Adding the stress of dues and money for t-shirts and formals to this could be difficult for some student-veterans to handle. This is something that should be discussed up front for potential members to make the best decisions for them and plan for expenses (Olsen, 2014).

Scheduling Conflicts

Some student veterans remain active in the military while taking classes through their original service or the National Guard. This may require them to attend military drill trainings or even be deployed while pursuing their degree. Chapters and campuses need to be flexible in working with these students regarding event attendance and membership status as they leave school and come back (Hamrick, 2012).

Teambuilding Techniques

While veteran students have been a part of strong and cohesive teams in the military, it is important to clarify the difference between the training and bonding necessary for the military and that of a college student organization. Many veterans have experienced hazing, but this behavior cannot be allowed in collegiate organizations. Certain techniques and approaches that may (or may not) have been appropriate for military training are not in other situations. It is important student veterans involved in new member education understand those differences and are not willing to engage in hazing activities (DiRosa, 2014).

Physical and mental health issues

While not every veteran has a physical scar or reminder of their duty, many suffer from combat trauma and mental health issues ranging from addiction and depression to PTSD from a wide range of military situations, including sexual assault (at least 22 percent of female military service personnel are assaulted during their service) (Lighthall, 2012). Do not assume they do, but be aware of potential signs and know resources available through the university or Veterans Affairs that can be offered if they show warning signs. Anxiety issues related to deployment are common. Some veterans are also making a physical transition, such as learning to live with new disabilities, which may require extra physical accommodations, like using meeting facilities with handicap accessibility or evaluating the accessibility of a chapter property.

Overall, while challenges exist in bringing veteran students into fraternities and sororities, the opportunities created by their presence typically far outweigh them. While recruiting veterans may require extra effort in reaching out to the veteran student organization or office of veteran services on campus and extra training and flexibility at the local and national level, bringing these students into the brotherhood and sisterhood of the fraternal community will impact all involved.

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