A New Era for Data Capture and Success Measures for Military-Connected Students

May 2018

Military veterans have used veterans' benefits to pay for higher education for nearly 75 years now. Despite this long history, good data about veterans in higher education hasn't been readily accessible due to inconsistent data collection methods used in federal agencies and at individual institutions. Colleges and universities cannot assert to be veteran-ready until they can accurately identify their population of military-connected students and objectively evaluate activities that maximize success for this unique population. This brief outlines sources of data on military-connected students and closes with recommended strategies for institutional data capture and success tracking.

Sources of Data on Military-Connected Populations

✫ The U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD) Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) offers robust data catalogues on the history of personnel in the military for purposes of forecasting healthcare, retirement funding, and other administrative needs.

✫ The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) also offers several robust data repositories:
- Veterans Benefits Administration
- VA's Open Data Portal
- National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics
- GI Bill Comparison Tool – interactive college search tool for veterans

✫ The United States Census Bureau presents snapshots of military-connected citizens. Especially interesting are the state briefs. Click here to download the latest report on Michigan's veteran population from 2015.

✫ The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) captures information about military-connected students in the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS). Since 2014-2015 institutions have been required to submit data on federal benefits used by military-connected students. A data dictionary on these fields is available here. Educators can query institutional data as well as comparative data on military benefit users, primarily the GI Bill and DoD Tuition Assistance (TA) users. IPEDS also makes available a report on Services and Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions and has issued special briefs on the topic including the *A Profile of Military Service Members and Veterans Enrolled in Undergraduate Education*.

✫ Michigan institutions are required to participate in CEPI's (Center for Educational Performance and Information) STARR (Student Transcript and Academic Record Repository) data collection process. Several years ago, institutions could report military status on an *optional basis* using the following categories: 1) Veteran; 2) Active Member of the Military; 3) Member of the National Guard or Military Reserves; 4) Spouse or Dependent of a Veteran; 5) Spouse or Dependent of an Active Member of the Military; 6) Spouse or Dependent of a Member of the National Guard or Military Reserves. Approved individuals with access to Pathways Files can view these data.

Identifying Military-Connected Students at Michigan's Postsecondary Institutions

Several years ago, the Michigan legislature amended the State School Aid Act requiring community colleges and universities to add questions about military status to their admissions applications. Educators can review the legislature's expectations for community colleges here and those for the universities here. In addition to the admissions application, institutions capture data about these students from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and Michigan National Guard certifying processes as well as students' self-disclosure in academic or service environments. While there are many sources of information about military-connected populations, institutions of higher education need a plan to make these data useful.

Suggesting a Way Forward

During a May 8, 2018 virtual workshop, CMVE featured Dr. Dion Daly and Dr. Bonnie Fox Garrity of the Veteran and Military Affiliated Research Center at D'Youville College who showcased their work highlighted in chapter three of the New Directions for Institutional Research issue on *Student Veteran Data in Higher Education*. The article discusses how campuses **define and verify** military-connected students, the roles and **responsibilities** of institutional offices, addresses issues with **data sharing**, and considers an **action plan** for institutions to consider.

In addition to the featured presentation, participating campuses received a facilitated discussion guide to help them assess current practices and plan for possible improvements around military-connected student data collection and success tracking. These action-oriented questions focus on: defining data elements, data verification, institutional unit responsibilities, producing actionable data, considerations around data sharing, and identifying action toward change. Institutions should convene discussion groups including institutional researchers, enrollment managers, and veterans services staff who are stakeholders in campus processes around data tracking for military connected students to consider process improvements.