

Defining and Improving Success for Student Veterans

US House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

May 8th, 2014 "Defining and Improving Success for Student Veterans"

Testimony

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Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, Representative Kirkpatrick, Member (s) of the Committee, My name is Dr. Melissa Vito and I am the Senior Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management and Vice Provost for Academic Initiatives and Student Success at The University of Arizona. The University of Arizona believes it is at the forefront of on-campus support for student veterans, and is honored to share our efforts with the Committee. I would like to thank you Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Takano for your leadership on this critical issue, and especially to you, Congresswoman Kirkpatrick for the opportunity to address you today.

I want to focus today on three primary areas: 1) what The University of Arizona is doing to engage and support our student veterans and how this evolved on our campus, 2) how The University of Arizona measures success for student veterans through graduation rates, and 3) explore and suggest further measures still needed to be taken to ensure all student veterans across the United States are accomplishing their academic goals.

However, before we go further, I would like to talk briefly about why we do what we do. At The University of Arizona, we recognize and appreciate the commitment and sacrifices made by our men and women who serve and have served in the armed forces and are committed to making a college education a reality. We know that advances in technology and medicine have saved countless lives in the battlefield and we are thankful for that – but it also means that many veterans returned with physical and mental disabilities. We believe it is our responsibility to engage these and all student veterans and address the issues experienced during their time in service, and as you will see, that is a key element of the support system we have created at The University of Arizona. At the core of what we strive to accomplish, and how we define success, is to ensure our student veterans transition successfully, are retained, graduate, and obtain meaningful employment – and our data shows that we are doing this in ways that equal or exceed our non-veteran students.

First, some facts: The University of Arizona has 40,621 students of which 1,317 are student veterans or 3.2% of our overall population while The University of Arizona's current reservist population is 0.2% or 62 reservists. Since 2008, The University of

Arizona entering cohort of student veterans has doubled from 178 to 355 in 2013. Females account for about one third of our total student veteran population. Usage of our main campus VETS Center increased 31% from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 to over 10,000 visits that semester.

Until 2008, we did not know these numbers. That year we embarked on an effort to bring the unique strengths of our nationally-recognized Disability Resource Center and Adaptive Athletics Program to bear on returning *disabled* student veterans. In the process, we discovered we did not know our student veteran population well enough - how many student veterans did we have and what services did they truly need? As a result, we initiated a survey and engaged our student veterans university-wide to tell us their true needs on campus. We followed up on this assessment in September 2009 when The University of Arizona Disabled Veterans Reintegration and Education Project brought together leaders from throughout the United States for a roundtable discussion to identify best practices developed to serve military veterans seeking higher education.

Six years later, we are proud of our efforts. Our program is built around five key assets:

- The Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) offices: one large facility on main campus and another, which we believe is unique, on our Arizona Health Sciences Campus;
- Disability Resources Center and Adaptive Athletics Program, including our Disabled Veterans Reintegration and Education project;
- Partnership with the Southern Arizona VA Hospital, including the provision of on-campus counseling and medical scheduling programs;
- The Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) program, co-developed between the Southern Arizona VA Hospital and The University of Arizona, which increases retention and graduation rates;
- The University of Arizona College of Law Veterans Clinic, which engages The University of Arizona law students in support of veterans involved with the Tucson Veterans Court process, providing legal assistance to veterans, often from law students who are veterans themselves.

VETS Center as the Core

At The University of Arizona, the core of our engagement with student veterans occurs through our two Veterans Education and Transition Services Centers, or VETS Centers. One VETS Center is located in the heart of campus in the USS Arizona Student Union Memorial Center and our second VETS Center is in on our Arizona Health Sciences Center. Staffing both VETS Centers is our Assistant Dean of Students for Military and Veterans Engagement and a staff of trained student veterans that have transitioned, are knowledgeable about The University of Arizona, and are utilizing VA educational benefits. The VETS Centers offer individualized service to improve the experience of all

veterans attending The University of Arizona. We provide a step-by-step “in-processing” or “on-boarding guidance” for student veterans who are applying or have been recently admitted to the institution. The VETS Centers foster a USO atmosphere allowing veterans to study, relax, and engage with other student veterans who have walked in their same boots.

The VETS Centers partner with numerous on and off campus agencies to provide critical services for student veterans in this endeavor. Examples of partnerships include:

- Collaboration with the Office of Instruction and Assessment in the creation of a video designed for faculty to better engage student veterans. The video was initially presented during Fall 2013 faculty training;
- Importantly for the purpose of this hearing, VETS also works closely with Career Services to ensure our student veterans have the resources to apply for jobs when graduating and are aware of current hiring opportunities. Some partner employers with Career Services have provided specific outreach to student veterans including USAA, GEICO, and Enterprise to name a few;
- The Office of Admissions partners with VETS to do outreach to applying and recently admitted student veterans providing information specific to VA educational benefits, the VETS Centers, our Student Veterans of America chapter, and our Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) program which is a three-course resiliency module which I will discuss later;
- The Veterans Service Office offers online certification for all students utilizing VA educational benefits to decrease the wait to receive benefits. The Department of Veterans Services conducts periodic compliance audits to ensure school certifying officials understand and are in compliance with VA educational requirements. The University of Arizona was audited last month and received notification that we are 100% compliant;
- Finally, as part of The University of Arizona’s land grant mission, VETS and the College of Social and Behavioral Science’s (SBS) Department of Government and Public Policy are in the process of partnering with the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, the Arizona Department of Veterans’ Services, and the Arizona Coalition of Military Families. The VETS Center will host a project with the goal of engaging public and private sector organizations from the military, government, and community. The SBS Government and Public Policy Department will provide ongoing “network” training for the organizations at no charge. A project coordinator and non-University of Arizona staff will be housed in the VETS Center with the intent to create a collaborative environment among the organizations with a goal of providing more efficient services to our veterans in Southern Arizona. With the project being based in the VETS Center, The University of Arizona student veterans will benefit by having the most current access to veteran services throughout Southern Arizona.

The University of Arizona Disability Resource Center:

The University of Arizona Disability Resource Center or DRC is worth discussing more in detail. The DRC is a national model for disability services in higher education and a critical partner in helping to facilitate the successful transition of veterans to campus. The DRC procured a Congressionally-directed Department of Education grant in 2008 and since then has been a leader for disabled veterans in higher education, producing research-based best practices for use on college campuses.

In 2012, The University of Arizona's Department of Disability Studies in the College of Education, the DRC, and our Veterans Education and Transition Services area obtained a grant from the Paralyzed Veterans of America to design an adaptive athletics and college learning camp for veterans with spinal cord injury. Building upon the success of the project, we obtained another grant in 2014-2015 to replicate the college-learning component including the VETS Center and the Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) curriculum of which I will discuss later.

The DRC, through its research and engagements with disabled student veterans, has expanded our understanding that many veterans arrive on campus with a new injury or disability, and are often unfamiliar with the resources available to them. The University of Arizona's DRC works with veterans individually to determine appropriate accommodations and strategies to ensure an accessible university experience. Many frequent accommodations made are note-taking, providing extended time on exams, and electronic documents including e-texts.

Finally, with six competitive teams and an adaptive fitness center, the University of Arizona's Adaptive Athletics program is the most comprehensive in the nation, and which has allowed us to introduce over 100 disabled veterans to opportunities to for competition, health, and community through sport.

Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS):

The Southern Arizona VA Health Care System partners with the University of Arizona to provide numerous services to our student veterans including:

- A Lead Psychologist (Dr. Michael Marks) who provides individual counseling to student veterans in the VETS Center weekly;
- A female counselor who provides counseling specifically for our female student veterans in Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) weekly. We recognize our female student veterans have specific issues not identified by our male student veteran counterparts;
- A Nurse Practitioner who enrolls student veterans into the VA Health Care System in Campus Health Services (CHS) various times throughout the semester depending on request;

- The Transition Patient Advocate for OIF/OIE/OND meets with student veterans, and provides follow up to issues pertaining to VA health care, in the VETS Center various times throughout the semester.

Supportive Education for Returning Veterans:

The University of Arizona and the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) have jointly developed the Supporting Education for the Returning Veterans (SERV) program, and partner in its implementation. This cohort-based program consists of three core classes at the University of Arizona designed specifically for veterans to transition them from the military into higher education. The courses include:

- Resiliency and Human Potential
- Learn to Teach to Learn
- Leadership Principles and Practices

Additionally we have added the following:

- Transitional Resiliency, which combines the three courses above into one course with a focus on the Resiliency course.
- Resiliency Orientation (a one-day resiliency orientation course).

All courses satisfy graduation requirements and are for-credit. These classes embody a recovery model approach to increase student resiliency while increasing retention and graduation rates. Student veterans improve memory, strengthen their problem-solving skills, learn to succeed in academic settings, and build social networks for support. SERV has resulted in a retention rate of over 90 percent among participating student veterans.

The SERV program has been recognized by the VA's Office of Inspector General as a "best practice" and is one of the VA's "Strong Practices Project". It has been featured on "The American Veteran" and in conjunction with the VETS Center was featured in the Lumina Foundation magazine "Focus" in the Spring 2013 edition.

Most recently for the SERV program, VETS is partnering with University of Arizona's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) to create a thematic minor entitled "Professional Resiliency". This will be open to all University of Arizona students. Further, last month the University of Arizona hosted a "train the trainers" workshop conducted by SERV creators Dr. Michael Marks and Dr. Phil Callahan. Representatives from institutions in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado attended. *This is a program that we recommend be expanded to institutions nationwide.*

Other collaborations have added important elements to the University of Arizona's program:

Student Veterans of America (SVA):

The University of Arizona has a strong collaboration with the Student Veterans Association (SVA) national organization, as is evidenced with one current UA law student veteran Matt Randle who is on the Board of Directors of the SVA, as well as a strong relationship with our University of Arizona SVA chapter.

- On April 17, 2014 the University of Arizona Assistant Dean of Students for Military and Veterans Engagement met Student Veterans of America President and CEO D. Wayne Robinson at the Arizona Department of Veterans Services office in Phoenix with counterparts from Northern Arizona University and Arizona State University to discuss best practices and challenges in facilitating student success, not only on our respective campuses, but nationally.
- The SVA chapter at the University of Arizona works collaboratively with the University to reduce the sense of social isolation experienced by returning servicemen and women through outreach, engagement, community service, and networking functions. The SVA student leadership for academic year 2014-2015 will be meeting with VETS in early June 2014 for an on campus retreat. During this time the SVA and VETS will review the Annual Student Veteran Engagement Survey. The two will then collectively strategize, determine priorities, and plan the course of action for the academic year.

Additional Partnerships:

- The Southern Arizona Chapter of the American Red Cross, through a grant with AmeriCorps, supports five student veteran tutors in the VETS Center - tutoring other student veterans.
- VETS is developing a Bridge program with Pima Community College for student veterans attending PIMA who are intending to transfer to The University of Arizona. At the core of the bridge program will be the incorporation of our Supportive Education for Transition Services (SERV).

Measuring Success Rates

The University measures the success rate of all student veterans in the exact same way that we measure the success rates of our overall student population – by examining 4-year and 6-year graduation rates.

The appendix includes specific data and charts highlighting the graduation rates (4-year and 6-year) of student veterans as compared to all new freshmen. The University of

Arizona's student veterans consistently graduate at higher rates than the general student body (67.4% vs. 61.5%).

SERV has resulted in overall retention rates of over 90% for those student veterans not enrolled in SERV classes versus 70-80% retention for those who have not taken SERV classes.

Additionally, while we utilize graduation rates as the ultimate measure of academic success, we also regularly examine and analyze enrollment and retention figures as well as student profile statistics to inform our academic support programs. Finally, we include annual assessment of student veteran needs to continually guide our practices and support services. The 2012 survey respondents indicate services they most need The University of Arizona to provide are registration assistance (91%), registrar services/enrollment verification (88%), retention/degree completion assistance (87%), and conveniently located veterans support (86%).

We are expanding staff in Career Services to work specifically with veterans to ensure that they capture the full range of their experiences, education and skills that they bring to the job market and their careers. We have strategically located our VETS Center adjacent to our Career Services office to strengthen this relationship.

At The University of Arizona, President Ann Weaver Hart has committed through our 100% Student Engagement program that students will have an engagement experience (internship, research, study abroad, civic engagement) while enrolled to make sure that they will be career-ready when they graduate or are competitive for admission to graduate or professional schools. We are expanding staff in Career Services to work specifically with veterans to ensure that they capture the full range of their experiences, education, and skills that they bring to the job market.

There is Still Much to be Done

As we explore what measures still need to be taken to ensure our student veterans are accomplishing their academic goals, I ask you to consider that the first six months of transition are crucial, and it is exactly that transition our Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) program takes aim at addressing. *We believe the most effective steps for Institutions of Higher Education to take to increase their support for returning veterans on campus is to establish a student veterans center to bring them together, and also implement SERV course availability to enhance their prospects for academic success.* As a result, we ask that this committee be supportive of SERV and of additional SERV training across the country. Funding support is necessary to take SERV to the rest of the nation's colleges and universities and ultimately to reach more of America's student veterans – and The University of Arizona stands ready to help.

In closing, I would like to share an observation by Dr. Michael Marks, one of the co-developers of the SERV program, has observed that, *“While it is great that we, as a country, are willing to spend a million dollars a day to save a soldier's life, it will be an even better day when we will commit the same resources to give them back their lives.”* We at The University of Arizona believe that we, as an institution, have demonstrated our commitment to not only “give them back their lives,” but to assist in making them the leaders of tomorrow. We are asking this committee to support our efforts to make the academic dreams of all our nation's veterans to become a reality.

I would like to thank the Chairman, the ranking committee member, Congresswomen Kirkpatrick, and all of the members of this committee for allowing us to share what The University of Arizona has done to engage our student veterans.

Appendix

1. What percentage of The University of Arizona students are veterans?

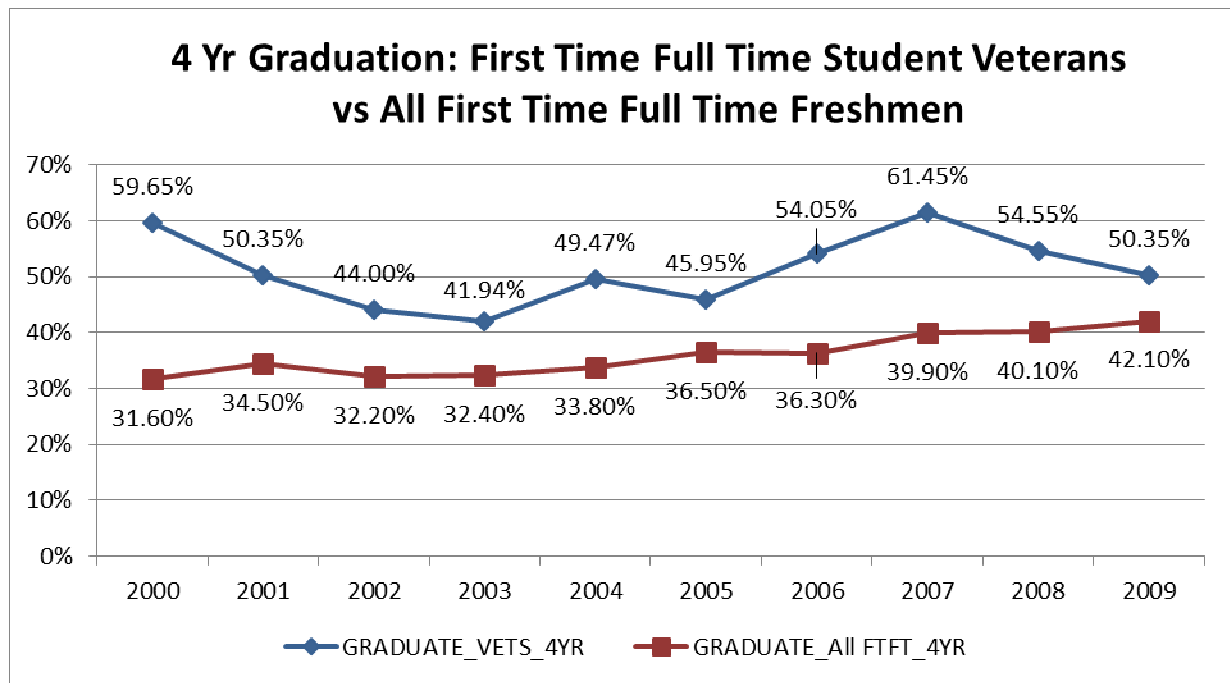
- As of Fall 2013, there were 1,317 student veterans* registered at The University of Arizona. That is 3.2% of the total student population of 40,621 total University of Arizona students.

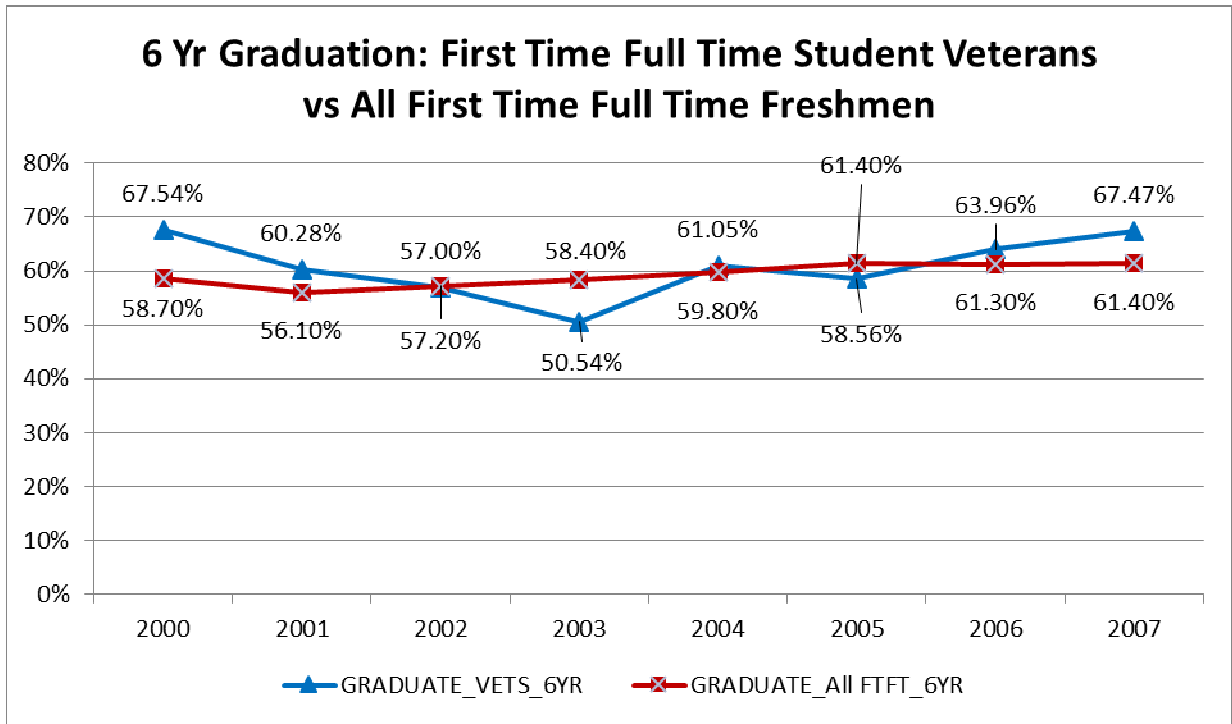
*Self-declared veterans on admission application OR received veterans education benefits.

2. Does The University of Arizona currently measure the success rates of student veterans who use the GI Bill?

The University measures the success rate of all student veterans in the exact same way that we measure the success rates of our overall student population – by examining 4-year and 6-year graduation rates.

The following three charts highlight the graduation rates (4-year and 6-year) of student veterans as compared to all new freshmen. **The University of Arizona's student veterans consistently graduate at higher rates than the general student body.**





3. What percentage of The University of Arizona's student veterans are also reservists who can be deployed to a military engagement location?

- Of the 40,621 students registered at The University of Arizona in Fall 2013, 0.2% were Reservists (62 individuals).

4. Does The University of Arizona have a program in place to assist deployed veterans with continuing their field of study?

Currently, The University of Arizona employs its Military Leave of Absence (MLOA) policy whenever a student is deployed. This policy states:

The University of Arizona supports students who are members of the United States armed forces. An undergraduate or graduate student who is a member of the U.S. Military (active duty, reservist, national guard) who is called or ordered to active duty may be granted a MLOA from the University for the period of active duty and up to one year after returning from active duty. Student with MLOA need not apply for readmission or pay readmission fees. MLOA allows those students to preregister for classes during their priority registration period prior to the term when they plan to return to campus.

The following testimonial of a University of Arizona student reservist exemplifies how the MLOA policy is effective:

A reservist attending The University of Arizona was called to active duty in early November 2003 and subsequently had to physically leave campus two weeks prior to Thanksgiving. The University worked with the student's faculty to bring closure to the student reservist's semester. Four of the five professors awarded the student his current grade as of mid-November as the final grade for the semester. The fifth professor agreed to have the student take an "Incomplete" for the course and finish the final assignment over the course of the next year. Upon return home, the reservist was able to enroll for courses consistent with MLOA policy.

Additional Policies:

- Student veterans utilizing Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits are eligible to enroll for classes during priority registration with Honors students and athletes.
- The University of Arizona participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program.
- All veterans in the state of Arizona can qualify for in-state residency classification.

5. How has The University of Arizona VETS program helped student veterans adapt to a traditional classroom environment?

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6. How has the University of Arizona collaborated with the Student Veterans of America on campus to help make sure their shared interest in facilitating student success is happening?

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