

Dustin Schultz

VETERAN SPECIALIST

Military

2006-2012

U.S. Army National Guard – 384th Military Police, Bloomington, Indiana

2009-2010

U.S. Army – Deployed with Sixth Squadron, Ninth United States Cavalry, Operation Iraqi Freedom

Order of the Combat Spur // Combat Action Badge

Education

2017-2018

Western Technical College
Associate of Applied Science

Criminal Justice

2019-2020

Viterbo University
Bachelor of Science

Criminal and Community Justice
Minor in Substance Abuse Counseling

Professional affiliations

2018-Present

Thomas Rooney VFW Post 1530 La Crosse, WI
Adjutant

My name is Dustin Schultz, and I am a Veteran Specialist for Western Technical College. As a Veteran specialist, I am also a School Certifying Official and have been in this position for almost 3 years. Prior to my current role, I was a Veteran Service Officer and a former nonprofit Director of a Veteran Mentorship Program where we worked with our local Veterans Treatment Court and justice involved veterans. Lastly, I am also an honorably discharged US Army Veteran and served overseas during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

My first concern is that much of the Transition Assistance Program, or the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program is aligned with helping servicemembers as they move into their next role, whether that is Education or Employment. Unfortunately, I have seen many newly transitioning service members rush into one of these two pathways, and in some cases face tremendous hardship and failure. When it comes to education, senior leadership are typically beyond this stage in their life. An officer already has a college degree, and senior noncommissioned officers may elect to transfer their education benefits to their dependents. Retiring service members may not choose to return to the workforce at all. This is a critical disconnect between those leading these preventative services and the lower enlisted service members who do not share the same circumstances.

Veterans often refer to Transition Assistance Programs and Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Programs as a series of "check boxes" positioned between them and their release from the military. Because of this, it can be rushed, or service members are not honest about what issues they may have to deal with upon their return. Or worse, they do not understand the challenges ahead of them.

One issue a service member might encounter as they return to civilian life is returning to a home where parents, a spouse, or other loved ones have taken on some of their responsibilities in their absence. This can be a point of hardship as the service member may struggle to find their role in the home leading to relationship issues like divorce and thus compounding emotional, financial, and social hardship. I believe there should be more services tailored to addressing this, not just for the service members but also for their families who are critical to the overall success of transition.

As a prior service member, I can attest to the fundamental process in military basic training that replaces the image of oneself with a mentality of selfless service and the role of a member of a team. The statistical success of veterans in comparison to their counterparts is testament to the lingering impact of the core values instilled in military training and culture. For instance, Post 9/11 veterans are 1.4 times more likely to complete their programs than all adult learners. They also have a higher average GPA of 3.34 compared to traditional students at 2.94, yet the VA reports that only 40% of veterans use the education benefits they are eligible for (1). I believe this to be attributed to the disconnect between military and civilian culture, and overall sense of belonging.

Here at Western Technical College, we have gone to great lengths to create a physical space specifically for military connected students and a culture that provides a sense of belonging but hope to see them move on and integrate fully with their counterparts and civilian life. Successful transition is paramount. We've all heard quotes on the number of veteran suicides each day, but even these alarming figures do not encompass those that die of accidental death due to other things like poor decision making, recklessness or unintentional drug overdose. I believe the issue is much, much more profound.

Selfless service is an ideology that is not easily changed, and if we sit idle waiting for service members to ask for help, it will almost always be too late. It doesn't seem to make sense when the military spends between 8 and 13 weeks to turn a person into a Soldier, Sailor, Airman, Marine, Guardian or Coast Guardsman yet often only invests a few days to turn them back into civilians – often after years of service. I believe we need more of a case management approach that is proactively assessing the service members and their families as they transition back into civilian life: a system that incorporates all effective forms of support such as faith-based programs, peer support and other services that positively improve transition for the individual.

Ultimately, I believe our veterans provide an overwhelmingly positive value to society due to their experiences in the military, but we cannot ignore the ways in which their sacrifice has changed them negatively.