



Working with Military Veterans in the Classroom

By Heather Landers – TILT Learning Programs Director

NOTE: The Master Teacher Initiative (MTI) is a campus-wide program to enhance the quality of teaching within the colleges and libraries of Colorado State University. To learn more, please visit the MTI home page on The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) Web site at <http://tilt.colostate.edu/mti/>.

Military veterans are a widely diverse group of people with varying and uniquely individual experiences. In the classroom, they bring much to the table. The guidelines below have been developed as a contextual framework for thinking about how best to provide a safe, challenging, and stimulating learning experience when they are part of your classroom makeup.

You will find many of these guidelines similar to “best-practices” you already employ when working with other adult learners. Most importantly, they are suggestive, not prescriptive. Each individual and every situation is different.

Guidelines and Best Practices

- Be patient with students who are transitioning out of the military and into the university. The experience can be jarring and, at times, overwhelming. Know that they are working hard to assimilate into a system quite different than that to which they are familiar. Two major differences are:
 - In the military, there is a set time for doing almost everything, a set duty for every hour of the day. Contrast that with life as a college student, where only about 15 hours per week are scheduled. Being accustomed to a highly structured regimen, students in transition might struggle with time management and structuring their own regimen.
 - There is also a clear chain of command in the military; a hierarchical structure one navigates resolving any number of problems. Students in transition might view instructors as authorities in a similar hierarchy and come to you for guidance, support, or assistance. Familiarize yourself with the wide variety of available campus resources and be prepared to refer students to the appropriate department, organization or agency.
- Though military veterans are generally more mature and often have a broader life-experience and global perspective, they have also often not been in a traditional classroom since high school. They might need some academic support “getting up to speed.” Be familiar with the academic support services to which you can refer them should they need additional help.
- Military veterans transitioning to college from combat zones might become agitated by loud noises. Particular sounds can cause an “on alert” response. Instructional technology tools such as laser pointers—when accidentally directed at combat veterans—can lead them to some

decidedly unpleasant memories that result in automatic “trained-for-this” reactions. Be aware that they may need to leave the room due to anxiety related issues caused by such distractions. These students might also feel more comfortable at the rear of the classroom; more secure with their backs against a wall. Be sensitive to this need for security and refrain from asking that they move closer to the front. If you are concerned about a student who seems to be struggling with this sort of anxiety, request to speak with him or her in a private setting, outside of class and away from other students.

- Military veterans will often have long-standing Veterans Administration appointments—often concerning compensation and benefits—for which they have been waiting a significant amount of time. There is generally little flexibility in scheduling these appointments and rescheduling will mean a considerable delay in receiving benefits. Work with these students regarding your attendance policy to accommodate such needs.
- Like other adult learners, military veterans are generally goal-oriented and highly motivated. They tend to have high expectations of themselves and others, which can lead to frustration when placed in a group with students who do not take their studies or their role as students seriously. They are also more easily irritated by students who appear not to respect the instructor or their fellow students by talking and texting during class.
- When students identify themselves as veterans, be mindful about making assumptions, and reserve judgment about what their actual experience might have been. From being posted to combat in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, to holding administrative positions here in the United States, to assignments in any number of other countries, an individual’s military experience can range pretty far and wide.
- Be mindful also that, though some military veterans might be fairly outspoken in the classroom, they might not want to talk about their military experience, or be thanked for their service. It’s hard to judge whether or not they have positive or negative feelings about their experience; best to let the student decide whether or not to bring up that aspect of their lives. In the same vein, unless you have developed a personal relationship in which you are confident that they are comfortable, it is inappropriate to solicit their opinions regarding the politics of a war in which they were engaged.
- And lastly, asking military veterans anytime, anywhere, whether or not they have killed anyone is especially inappropriate. Nonetheless, veterans say that it is the most frequently asked question. Should it come up in your classroom, be prepared to step in quickly and disallow the inquiry. Address the deeply personal nature of the question and the need for sensitivity in such matters.
- There are many places on campus designated to support military veterans. One of the most important of these is [Adult Learner and Veteran Services](#). Their website includes links to most of the other campus and community resources available for meeting their specific needs. You may visit them online at: <http://veterans.colostate.edu>.