

Colleges' Experiences Integrating Support Services for Military Veterans

The Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008 expanded previous tuition benefits in order to make college an accessible post-service option for veterans. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 1.5 million individuals used the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits between 2009 and 2015 (Worley, 2015). However, as with all emergent policies and programs, there is room for improvement. Although military-connected individuals are using their education benefits, not all are earning a postsecondary credential that could help them transition into the civilian workforce (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

To improve the educational experiences and outcomes of student veterans, in 2015 the Kisco Foundation developed the Kohlberg Prize. Two cohorts of colleges were awarded competitive grants to enhance their veterans services. All grantees were leading-edge colleges committed to serving student veterans. In addition, because the grant aimed to leverage institutional reform to make community colleges more appealing to and effective for student veterans, the colleges selected were engaged in or considering broader institutional reforms common in the community college sector, such as guided pathways redesigns (see, e.g., Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) or developmental education reforms.

There were five grantees in each cohort. The first cohort included Chabot College, Las Positas College, Suffolk County Community College, the Community College of Baltimore County, and Chemeketa Community College. The second cohort included Cuyahoga Community College, El Paso Community College, Harper College, Front Range Community College, and Delaware Valley University.

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) was engaged as a knowledge development and strategic assistance partner in this endeavor. As part of this work, we have summarized lessons learned over the course of the project in a series of short pieces drawing on information from standard application and narrative templates that the grantees completed as part of their annual reporting. The first publication (Karp & Klempin, 2016a) focused on the first cohort's plans for using the grants, particularly colleges' desire to create "one-stop shops" that integrate multiple veterans services in a single location. The second (Karp & Klempin, 2016b) examined the experiences of the colleges in the first cohort as they worked to create such centers.

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This piece, the final in the series, further examines the process of creating integrated services for student veterans. Drawing from the experiences of both cohorts, we identify key challenges inherent in integrating services. Some of these—for instance, those related to budgets and staffing—are practical. Others are philosophical, highlighting different approaches to service integration and perhaps calling into question the best way to serve specific populations within complex institutions and communities. Thus, the lessons here are relevant beyond the sphere of veterans services, as our observations raise questions about the broader community college trend of integrating and streamlining services and curricular delivery for all students.

We examine the process of creating integrated services for student veterans. Drawing on the experiences of 10 leading-edge colleges, we identify key challenges inherent in integrating services.

Service Integration

In our first brief (Karp & Klempin, 2016a), we identified four types of support services typically provided to student veterans: benefits-focused, academic, nonacademic, and career. Grantees' reports indicate that they sought to enhance all four of these service types.

Many colleges, including Chabot College and Suffolk County Community College, expanded their benefits staff to help broaden service provision and improve benefits compliance. Hiring staff focused specifically on benefits freed up other personnel to spend time on improving other service delivery functions.

Nonacademic support enhancements included the development of veterans-focused student success courses (Community College of Baltimore County, Harper College, Las Positas College) and new student orientations (El Paso Community College). Colleges also worked to create relationships among student veterans and between college personnel and student veterans via special events, affinity groups, networking opportunities, and workshops. Most developed a robust calendar of events to provide veteran students with opportunities to connect with others who understand the experience of being a military veteran in higher education.

Colleges enhanced academic support through strategies such as offering course sections specifically for veterans in key subjects (Las Positas College) and tracking student progress using early-alert systems (El Paso Community College). Career services were provided through focused internship opportunities (Delaware Valley University) and partnerships with community organizations (Cuyahoga Community College, Chemeketa Community College). Though academic and career activities were less prominent at other colleges, many grantees implied that they would begin focusing their work on these services once more immediate needs, such as the institutionalization of their veterans resource centers, were addressed.

Grantees nearly unanimously believed that merely providing the four types of services is insufficient. They emphasized that there need to be greater connections among those services, such that students experience a coherent set of supports rather than fragmented activities. Asking student veterans to navigate multiple offices to meet with different service providers creates frustration and—for those already intimidated by or unfamiliar with higher education—may impede persistence.

Thus, Kohlberg Prize winners sought to integrate the four types of services. Nearly all aimed to do so by creating a one-stop center, usually referred to as a veterans resource center, in which all four types of services would be co-located. For example, the veterans resource center at Chabot College offers snacks; hosts special events; and provides access to computers and library services, counseling, benefits processing, and visits from community service providers—all in a single location. Students need only come to the center to get assistance, regardless of the type of assistance they

need at any given time. Center staff, meanwhile, get to know students through their repeat visits and can provide them with personalized assistance across multiple types of support.

Kohlberg Prize winners indicated that as hubs of service delivery, the centers help students navigate college resources while simultaneously creating relationships critical to students' success in college. Harper College described this setup as helping to solve the “way-finding problem” faced by many student veterans, in which they have difficulty accessing services because they are spread across the college campus.

The centers and their lounges also help veterans create meaningful connections with other students and staff, and to feel that there are people on campus who understand their unique needs and experiences. El Paso Community College's report described the critical nonacademic support provided by these spaces: “The [veterans resource center] has allowed veteran students to make connections with men and women who have the same shared experiences, challenges, and successes. But most importantly it has allowed them to associate with people they can trust.”

For all these centers' promise, however, integrating service delivery was not without challenges. The colleges' responses in their annual reports, along with the activities they chose to engage in, suggest that there is a distinct order of operations to be followed in establishing integrated service delivery. First, colleges must find space, bring on staff, and gather resources in order to set up the resource centers. Next, they must identify veteran students and engage them in the center's offerings. Typically, this means making connections with students by offering “fun” or “special” activities that serve as inviting first points of contact with the center. Once students are engaged and the centers are institutionalized as critical touch points, staff can turn to providing a more holistic web of services incorporating all four types of support.

Practical Challenges to Service Integration

Kohlberg Prize winners reported practical challenges to integrating services and creating one-stop centers. First, as described above, launching integrated service provision is a multiphase process that occurs over time. It took grantees time to establish a veterans resource center with enough services to integrate. Many of the grantees, though leaders in working with veteran students, were just establishing their one-stop centers. Thus, they were focused on expanding their offerings—for example, planning events, launching affinity groups, creating relationships with service providers, and publicizing the center so veterans know it exists. Weaving together these offerings had to wait until programs were up and running. As one college noted, there can only be a “web of support” if there are enough activities and enough participants to populate that web. We expect that once grantees have their centers up and running, service integration will become more of a focus, as it was among the few colleges that had one-stop centers established prior to winning the grant.

Second, securing adequate funding and staffing to support this work was an ongoing challenge. Holistic and integrated service provision, colleges said, requires full-time staffing—often at higher levels than anticipated. Finding funds for those staff and then navigating the often long and bureaucratic hiring processes substantially delayed many colleges' work over the course of the grant period. One college with an established one-stop center, for example, found its efforts to enhance its offerings (including the development of a first-year seminar for student veterans) delayed due to procedural hurdles. Another college pointed out that hiring delays not only impede innovation but reduce the capacity of existing staff to engage in non-core activities. These resource-related chal-

lenges meant that colleges were limited to engaging in the earliest phase of the work—building out services—rather than the more sophisticated and impactful work of integration.

Philosophical Challenges—Managing Multiple Interests

All Kohlberg Prize winners believed that integrating veterans services is critical to ensuring the success of student veterans. But the colleges had less uniform beliefs about the extent to which veterans services should connect with external services, initiatives, or stakeholders. In other words, to what extent should integrated veterans services be self-contained versus outward-looking? Colleges answered this question in different ways, leading to different emphases within their one-stop centers—both in the relationship between the centers and the rest of the college, and in the extent to which they aim to reach non-enrolled veterans.

First, colleges took different approaches to if and how they connected their one-stop centers to other initiatives and services on campus. Some colleges used the centers to bring many types of services directly to their student veterans. These were one-stop shops in the truest sense: When service integration was complete, student veterans would not need to leave the one-stop center for any type of service. In this way, campus navigation and cultural challenges could be avoided by ensuring that all supports would be delivered within a single office focused on the needs of student veterans.

Harper College, for example, explicitly sought to bring other services to the one-stop center. The college described its approach by saying, “With the establishment of the center, we will host rotating office hours for administrators to provide services specifically targeted to military-connected interests, such as counseling services and financial-assistance advising.” This approach aimed to reduce students’ need to visit other offices to receive support services.

Other colleges took a hub-and-spoke approach. These schools focused on finding ways to integrate the activities of the veterans resource center with other initiatives on campus. Student veterans could rely on the one-stop center for support upon their initial entry into college. Later, they would be guided to other offices, initiatives, or activities elsewhere within the institution while continuing to use the veterans resource center as a home base. In this way, one-stop centers are not completely self-contained but help connect students to other parts of the college. Student veterans receive holistic support in a culturally responsive environment where their unique needs are understood, but they also benefit from activities within the broader institution.

For example, the Community College of Baltimore County uses work-study students to escort student veterans to other campus resources, providing student veterans with a guide as they engage with the complexities of the institution. Suffolk County Community College uses a similar approach, deliberately connecting offerings at its one-stop shop with services provided elsewhere on the campus. The college’s rationale for this approach underscores the tricky balance between serving student veterans in a culturally responsive environment and ensuring they are prepared to thrive in other settings:

Implementing the Kohlberg Prize Planning Grant taught SCCC the need to offer a continuum of services to veterans so they can benefit from the full col-

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lege experience as opposed to being in a silo or segregated. . . . SCCC believes that this model will assist veterans as they transition to civilian life as well as prepare them for transfer to a four-year institution or directly to the workforce.

Colleges also varied in the extent to which they integrated their services with efforts to serve the broader community. Some colleges focused on serving student veterans enrolled in the college. Others, however, aimed to integrate their services with the needs of military-connected individuals throughout their communities. Chabot College, for example, aims to work with any veteran in the community from pre-application onward. Not only does this help the college serve military families more generally, but it also supports the college's goal of increasing institutional enrollment.

Similarly, Cuyahoga Community College explicitly provides services to all military-connected individuals in its community, whether they are enrolled in the college or not. Any military-connected individual can use the veterans resource center to access a range of services, including counseling, group meetings, computers, and other resources. Though the hope is that some of these military-connected individuals will ultimately enroll at the college, the goal of the veterans resource center at Cuyahoga Community College is to serve military-connected individuals more broadly. As a result, its activities are designed to meet the needs of the broader community and to connect with veterans services offered by other organizations.

Conclusion

The Kohlberg Prize winners—all leaders in serving military-connected students—have focused their work on integrating support services for student veterans. The colleges' experiences, as described in their narratives, illustrate a number of challenges to this work, some of which are logistical while others are philosophical.

With regard to the philosophical challenges, it is not clear if any one approach to integrating veterans services is better than another. There are strong reasons, for example, to ensure that student veterans are able to continuously interact with others who understand their experiences. There are also reasons to ensure that student veterans become part of the larger college community. Similarly, there are reasons to focus on enrolled students, but there are also reasons to focus on the community at large.

In all likelihood, all of these approaches make sense at different times, in different contexts, and for different students. As colleges are able to engage in in-depth case management with their students, they may find that sometimes it makes sense to integrate a service, while at other times it makes sense to connect students to services located elsewhere. Determining the best approach in a given situation—making sure to meet students where they are—is likely a next-generation challenge the colleges will face.

It is also not clear which approach students themselves prefer. To our knowledge, even colleges that regularly survey their students about their satisfaction do not ask students how they would like to receive services. Considering the student voice when deciding the best way to provide integrated support could be an important next step for colleges working to deliver services in a culturally responsive and integrated way. Similarly, surveying military-connected community members could help colleges understand which services make sense to deliver to non-enrolled students, and when it makes sense to focus on the college population.

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The experiences of the Kohlberg Prize winners reveal the multiple roles that veterans resource centers fill. They also illustrate the challenges faced by colleges when integrating services—not only logistical challenges but also questions about the underlying philosophy that should guide service delivery. Their experiences underscore the tangible benefits that funding—especially competitively earned and flexible funding like the Kohlberg Prize—can bring. Grantees noted that the prestige of the prize garnered goodwill, attention, and in some cases commitments to find funding for veterans services despite tight budgets. In many cases, the grant provided necessary seed funds and momentum to start veterans-focused centers that could not have been launched otherwise, and enabled colleges to begin institutionalizing these centers so that they would persist after the end of the grant period.

More broadly, the experience of Kohlberg Prize winners provides a useful framework for colleges to use when launching their own veterans resource centers. Understanding different approaches to service integration and the challenges encountered by the Kohlberg Prize winners can help other community colleges think through the best ways to support their own military-connected students. And recognizing that there is a predictable order of activities in establishing veterans resource centers—starting with logistics, then moving to student recruitment, with the addition of services and integration occurring later—can help set expectations and provide a roadmap for colleges' work.

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Community College Research Center
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street, Box 174
New York, New York 10027
Tel: 212.678.3091 Fax: 212.678.3699
ccrc@columbia.edu
<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu>