

Applying Appreciative Advising to Assisting Student Veterans

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Abstract

When returning to civilian life after military service, increasing numbers of veterans have decided to pursue higher education. Student veterans may face unique challenges during the transition to college. Currently, there is limited information about how institutional representatives can use the Appreciative Advising framework to enhance their interactions with student veterans. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to share how the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework can be used by advisors and other college personnel to assist student veterans.

Keywords

Student veterans, Appreciative Advising, Appreciative Education

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2020), “In 2018, 669,922 Veterans used VA education and vocational rehabilitation benefits to further their education” (para. 1). Hunter-Johnson et al. (2021) found that most student veterans believe that completing higher education degrees and certifications will result in better opportunities for employment. Student veteran demographics are different from those of traditional college students (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020); thus, student veterans are generally considered “non-traditional students” (Falkey, 2016, p. 29). More specifically, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2020) reported that as of 2017, veterans are typically 24-40 years old, 62% are first-generation college students, 47.3% are married, 47% have children, and 75% are attending school full-time.

The transition from military to college life can be challenging for student veterans. For instance, they may have military-related visible and/or invisible disabilities. Some of the specific invisible disabilities can include “post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, or other behavioral disorders” (Flink, 2017, p. 110). Also, student veterans “may be coping with a new physical disability, such as the loss of a limb, mobility issues, or the lifelong impact of other war-related injuries” (Oberweis & Bradford, 2017, p. 108). Another challenge student veterans may face in transitioning from the military to college is that their civilian peers may stereotype military veterans and not understand their experiences and disabilities. For student veterans, “experiences and perspectives, coupled with battling stereotypes and entering an unstructured college setting, contribute toward what can be a difficult transition” (Kirchner, 2015, p. 116). These factors can contribute to student veterans having feelings of not belonging and/or not being able to relate to other students.

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Additionally, student veterans may have difficulty adjusting because “it is crucial to understand that military culture relies on a starkly different set of expectations than civilian culture” (Dobson et al., 2019, p. 340). The military enforces a rigid, structured environment in which members have fewer options, which contrasts with the more independent nature of higher education. Also, “student veterans on college campuses face administrative, academic, and social challenges” (Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020, p. 53). While providing traditional services, such as academic advising and career services offerings, many higher education institutions also have established offices to support student veterans in navigating higher education. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework to higher education personnel for building relationships with student veterans and assisting them to successfully graduate from the institution.

Appreciative Advising

Appreciative Advising is a beneficial framework for assisting student veterans because of its individualized, supportive, and positive nature. Appreciative Advising encourages professionals to use generative, open-ended questions to learn about the strengths, stories, and dreams of each student before co-creating a plan to help them accomplish their goals (Bloom et al., 2013). The six phases of Appreciative Advising (i.e., Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle) will be addressed with examples of questions and specific strategies for higher education professionals to use to enhance their interactions with student veterans.

Disarm

The first phase of Appreciative Advising, Disarm, involves working to intentionally create a warm, welcoming environment (Bloom et al., 2013). Some ways to help student veterans feel comfortable might be to decorate offices with military décor or to hang posters that share services available to student veterans. Student veterans may be hesitant to ask for assistance because of their learned military culture and training (Messerschmitt-Coen, 2021). Asking Disarm questions may encourage student veterans to open up more freely and not only give answers they think they are supposed to provide. Questions related to their lived military experiences are intended to help the student veterans gain self-confidence. Examples of Disarm phase questions could include:

1. Why did you initially decide to join/enlist in the military?
2. Why did you select the branch of military that you joined?
3. Who was someone that inspired you during your military experience and why?

Discover

In the Discover phase, “advisors use positive, open-ended questions to learn about students and their stories” (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 86). Many student veterans have lived experiences that influence their way of thinking, feeling, and functioning. Advisors need to be sensitive and ask thought-provoking questions to learn more about the experiences of student veterans and how they can support them (Messerschmitt-Coen, 2021). One of the key characteristics of the Discover phase is active listening. Higher education professionals need to listen carefully to the student veterans’ responses to assist in identifying their “strengths, skills, and abilities” (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 86). Some examples of Discover questions that higher education professionals can ask student veterans include:

1. At what point did you decide to pursue a higher education degree after you completed your military service?

2. How did you decide which higher education institution to attend after your separation from the military?
3. How has your military experience helped you make the transition to college?
4. What skill(s) did you learn in the military that you think will help you be successful in your classes?

Dream

After initial rapport has been established with the student veteran during the Disarm and Discover phases, it is time to embark upon the Dream phase (Bloom et al., 2013). The Dream phase involves providing a framework for student veterans to dream by asking questions related to their academic, career, and life goals. In the Dream phase, the student veteran would have an opportunity to share what they envision for themselves based on their own aspirations. Notably, student veterans may initially have difficulty relating to this phase because of the military culture of following orders rather than expressing their own dreams. Higher education professionals can help encourage student veterans by giving them time and space to think about their goals and providing suggestions based on experiences shared by other student veterans. Examples of Dream phase questions could include:

1. If you could pursue any career tomorrow, what would it be and why?
2. How, if at all, has your military training impacted your career aspirations?

Design

After the student veteran has shared their dreams for the future, the advisor and student collaborate in the Design phase to co-create a plan (Bloom et al., 2013). Although student veterans have experience in executing plans and orders, they may not have had as much involvement in the actual planning stages. It is essential for the advisor to guide the student veteran in developing a plan that draws upon their interests and attributes. Sample Design questions include:

1. What did the best plans consist of that you executed during your military experiences?
2. Who might you be able to talk to for assistance to help you accomplish your goals?
3. What strengths and skills that you learned from the military might help you accomplish your goals?

Deliver

In the Deliver phase (Bloom et al., 2013), the student veteran carries out the co-created plan(s). This phase may be a strength for student veterans because of their experiences with military orders. However, this situation will be different because the student veterans will have participated in their own customized plans for themselves. While the student veteran works on delivering the plan, the advisor reassures them that they will be there for continued support. Together, both the advisor and student veteran acknowledge what went well and revisit any areas that may need to be addressed for the student's success. The following questions are sample Deliver questions that advisors can use when working with student veterans:

1. What type of experiences did you have in the military of carrying out missions or goals?

2. How might your experience with missions when you were in the military help you to carry out this plan?
3. What is an example of a time from your military experiences that may have not gone exactly to plan, but you found an alternative option to still complete your mission?

Don't Settle

The Don't Settle phase is focused on the importance of continuing to grow and evolve (Bloom et al., 2013). Although the military is task-oriented and frequently raises expectations through military orders, student veterans may need encouragement to continue to raise their own internal bar of expectations. Don't Settle questions are typically asked in follow-up appointments to motivate student veterans to improve and continue to move forward after the goals have been met. Here are some sample Don't Settle questions:

1. What is an example of a time during your military service that you went above and beyond what was expected of you?
2. You have accomplished a lot so far! What is something that you would really want to focus on next?
3. How can you use your past experiences to become your best self?

Conclusion

With the growing numbers of student veterans in colleges and universities, specialized support services are needed to aid in the transition from the military service to civilian life as students. Appreciative Advising is a theory-to-practice framework that higher educational professionals can use to optimize interactions with student veterans by asking open-ended, generative questions. This positive, individualized, and supportive Appreciative Advising approach would be valuable in assisting student veterans as they navigate higher education and develop plans to achieve their hopes and dreams.

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