

Top Ten Things Student Veterans Would like Faculty to Know

No two veterans are alike. For student veterans in higher education in particular, many different dynamics are at play. Each student veteran will have his or her own unique experience and we should avoid generalizing conditions or stereotyping “all veterans.” Hearing loss, one of the most common disabilities in the military, often goes formally undiagnosed or unaddressed, and can have a significant impact on students’ learning and their ability to connect and communicate with other students and instructors.

To help provide the best access to learning for all student veterans, below are ten things veterans themselves would like you to consider:

- 1. Attending college can be intimidating.** Actually, professors can sometimes feel intimidated by student veterans on campus. These students can present themselves as being very confident and at times through their posture and loud voice may even seem aggressive. In fact, this is the result of military training and the opposite is often true. Student veterans often feel that they don’t “fit in” on campus and may have reservations about this new stage in their lives. Hearing loss, or a learning or acquired disability, can add to feeling uneasy in the classroom and to concerns of how they are perceived by their peers and instructors. If student veterans do not actively participate as much as other students, it does not mean that they are disengaged. They might instead be feeling intimidated. *Try not to “call out” or “single out” student veterans, but find ways to incorporate their knowledge and skill-set into the classroom dynamics.*
- 2. “I have a VA appointment” is not the same as “I have a doctor’s appointment.”** Veterans Affairs (VA) appointments have long wait times and are scheduled based on the VA’s availability without consideration for the student’s schedule. Audiology appointments for hearing aids are known to have the longest wait times. Missing a VA appointment can result in termination of services that can negatively impact a student’s academic success. *Understanding that student veterans do not have any control over when these appointments are set and being flexible whenever possible can help avoid serious consequences.*
- 3. A classroom can feel like chaos.** Just as an officer is to be respected during a military brief, many veterans feel that a professor should be respected in the classroom. A “relaxed” classroom environment where other students seem disrespectful of the professor or course content can be stressful for student veterans. With hearing loss, an overly boisterous class or numerous side conversations can add to the confusion and inability to focus on the material. Be mindful of student behaviors, and if student veterans seem detached, nervous or unwilling to participate, small environmental changes could allow them to better focus and learn. *Consider establishing a code of conduct to help with classroom management which will also help create a welcoming environment for all students.*
- 4. Seating selection is more than just a chair.** Most students have a seating preference. However, with student veterans these preferences may be based on self-accommodation, learning style, and comfort level which can affect their ability to focus, learn, and participate in class. In particular, seating preferences for student veterans with hearing loss can depend on the instructor’s tone of voice, pace of speaking or accent, as well as the student’s affected ear or the type of assistive technology being used. Some students may also select seat locations to help ease PTSD symptoms and anxieties and to improve their general comfort in the classroom. *One-on-one conversations during office hours are appropriate places to discuss these preferences and can help to build trust with your student.*

- 5. Being accessible beyond the classroom builds connections.** Veterans come from an environment in which clear, precise communication and trust is vital for success, and even survival. Being present during office hours, being approachable before or after class, and responding to emails or phone calls in a timely manner allow students who may not feel comfortable asking questions or talking in class with a means to be heard. Being approachable beyond the classroom can make the difference in students returning to your class or dropping out. *Consider adding statements in your syllabus regarding respect for diversity, accommodations, and an open door policy for office hours that will provide you with an appropriate and confidential setting to discuss and understand each student's learning needs and background.*
- 6. Communication is key for success.** Veterans are known for making sure they understand the command and the mission. For student veterans with hearing loss, clear understanding in the classroom may require additional support and repetition. It is important to repeat questions asked by other students to ensure that all students hear the question and to have only one person speak at a time. Be aware that small group work can feel overwhelming because of the immediate need to interact with others, understand each group member, and follow multiple conversations. *Ask the student in private for ways to improve classroom communication and his/her preference for group work.*
- 7. Recording a lecture can have a positive impact.** Student veterans can often benefit from recording lectures since they may be rebuilding their academic skills after time away from the classroom. If students have recording as an approved accommodation from student disability services, then they have the legal right to do so. However, if there are times when you feel it is not appropriate you can ask students to turn off their devices. *Consider recording your lectures yourself and sharing them with students. This allows you to provide a valuable resource and have greater control over the recorded content.*
- 8. Instructional delivery style can make a difference.** STEM courses often use whiteboards and slides that show specific steps and procedures. To follow your lectures, students who are hard of hearing must continually use a combination of lip reading and nonverbal cues while simultaneously reading the board or slides. *Be cognizant of facing the class and not "talking to the board" or walking around the room to provide student veterans with the best opportunity to understand your lectures.*
- 9. Prepare, prepare, prepare!** Providing materials ahead of class makes it easier for student veterans with hearing loss to prepare for class, and captioning videos ensures that all students have access to the content. *These simple strategies help student veterans with hearing loss feel more connected, reduces anxiety, and provides support without singling them out, and are proven to benefit all students in the classroom.*
- 10. You are not alone in supporting your student veterans.** Veteran services and resource centers can serve as an important point of contact for referrals. Being able to connect student veterans to these services can be pivotal to their academic success. Student disability services can provide education and support on how to work with students with disabilities as well as how to make your curriculum and classroom more accessible for all students. Take the time to learn about military culture and the veteran transition experience, as you would about any other special student population. *Utilize the other professionals on campus to provide holistic support for your student veterans - it could save a life.*

Many of the above suggestions follow the guidelines for Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) which is an approach that provides equal access to learning for all students by designing course instruction, materials, and content that benefit students of all learning styles.

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