

PROMISING PRACTICE

Implementing a Specialized Student Success Course for Veterans and Military-Connected Students

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<https://doi.org/10.36896/5.1pp2>

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the 1985 Montgomery G.I. Bill, and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill all represent a commitment of higher education to support a unique population of students—namely—student veterans (Vacchi et al., 2017). To assist with improving the types of support offered to student veterans, there has been a small surge in research being conducted with this student population in the recent decade (e.g., Demers, 2011; Diamond, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011; Hammond, 2015; Jones, 2013; Sansone & Segura, 2020). Researchers point to several obstacles in higher education that can impact student veterans. For example, for some, learning to seek help when needed is often a challenge. According to Vacchi (2012), student veterans may feel they must live up to a false expectation and not burden others with their problems. He also found that student veterans have indicated challenges with interactions with faculty and difficulty with disability accommodations. Other researchers suggest that student veterans struggle with being more mature, being impatient with their traditional-age civilian student peers (DiRamio et al., 2008), and having a student life that is less structured than military life (Rumann et al., 2011).

Regarding student veteran services, Texas State University (TXST) is ranked 7th in the Southwest by Military Times (Military Times, n.d.), 5th for Tier 2 research institutions (Military Friendly, n.d.), and received the 2021 Veteran Education Excellence Recognition Award from the Texas Veterans Commission (TXST, n.d.-b). TXST offers a wide array of support for veteran and military-connected students (i.e., dependents and family members of veterans), which includes a Veteran Advisory Council and a Veteran Academic Success Center (VASC) (TXST, n.d.-b); college credit for military training (Military Friendly, n.d.); specialized orientation, mentoring, and onboarding programs (Military Friendly, n.d.); and university policies that remove penalties for re-enrollment after returning from deployment (Military Friendly, n.d.). Amongst the many services aimed at student veterans is the Educational Psychology 2150: Strategic Learning (EDP 2150) course offered as a 1-credit hour student success course specifically designed for veteran and military-connected students. This article describes this unique student success course structure, content, theoretical underpinnings, marketing, and ways to implement a similar course specifically for veterans and military-connected students.

Learning Frameworks Courses

In Texas, one type of a student success course is titled *learning frameworks*, which is typically offered

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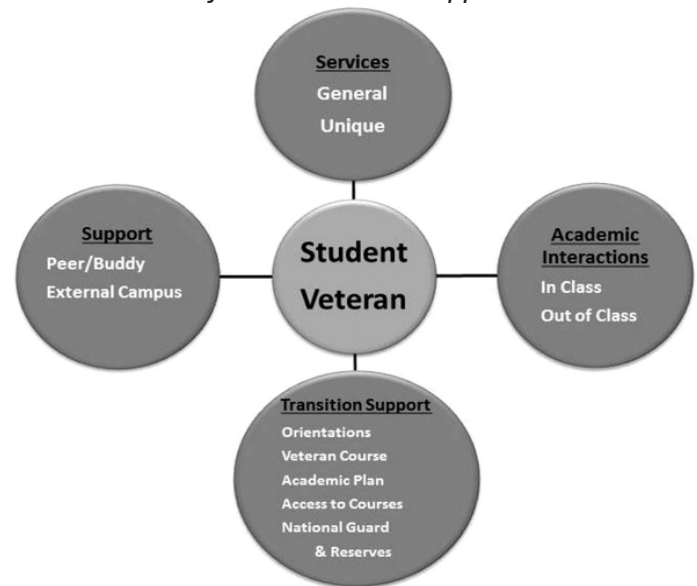
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in 1-, 2-, or 3-credit hour formats and provides a curriculum to instruct students in the process of collegiate learning and instructs students in both the theoretical underpinnings of strategic learning and the application of learning strategies. The curriculum is also designed to foster students' abilities to monitor and regulate their own learning, foster self-regulation, self-efficacy, and positive study behavioral changes (Hodges et al., 2019). Through the use and understanding of metacognitive theory, students are able to better think critically about themselves, their identity, and their specific needs as a student (R. Hodges, personal communication, May 27, 2022).

Learning frameworks courses were authorized in 1999 by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to generate formula funding for up to three semester credit hours per student as long as the courses focus on: 1) research and theory in the psychology of learning, cognition, and motivation, 2) factors that impact learning, and 3) application of learning strategies (Hill, 2000, p. 1). The critical characteristic of such a course, according to the THECB, "is the presence of theoretical models as the curricular core" (Hill, 2000, p. 1).

TXST's EDP 2150 is a 1-credit hour learning frameworks course specifically designed with a greater focus on theories and instructional models from student veteran literature. One such model is David Vacchi's (2017) model of student veteran support (see Figure 1). Vacchi emphasized the necessity to have a model that attempts to recognize the needs of student veterans in a way that does not treat them as a homogenous population. The vertical axis of the model represents traditional services (e.g., processing and accessing benefits, classroom accommodations, etc.) and transition supports (e.g., orientations or academic planning specific to veterans, etc.) offered to student veterans. Though there is some consensus that many of these services are helpful to student veterans, they come with the caveat that individual student veterans are unique and still require more holistic support. The horizontal axis of the model represents the kinds of experiences (both academic and social) that have a significant impact on the success of student veterans in college. Whereas the vertical axis houses the service and transition support areas, the horizontal axis houses the personal support (e.g., peer-to-peer support, personal support options off campus, and the like) and academic interactions (e.g., engagements inside and outside the classroom with faculty and peers, among others). The model deemphasizes a deficit model for student veterans and centers around the importance of interactions with peers and faculty (Vacchi et al., 2017). EDP 2150 curriculum relies on all four aspects of Vacchi's model (services, transitional support, personal support, and academic interactions) by offering holistic support for student veterans at TXST.

Figure 1
Vacchi's model of student veteran support



Note. Reprinted with permission from *Straight Talk for Veterans: A Guide for Success in College* (p. 22), David Vacchi (Ed.), 2020, BookBaby. Copyright 2020 by David Vacchi.

EDP 2150 Course Competencies

The TXST course catalog describes the course as follows: "Theoretical models of strategic learning, cognition and motivation serve as the conceptual basis for college-level academic strategies. Students use assessments to help them identify their own strengths and weaknesses as strategic learners" (TXST, n.d.-a). The course content consists of three major components: self-assessment, cognitive theories, and self-regulation strategies. Course competencies include (a) exploring educational goals through analysis of self-assessment data; (b) identifying and describing theories of learning, cognition, and motivation; and (c) identifying and describing factors that impact learning (Reyes, 2021).

Course Characteristics Specific to Student Veterans and Military-Connected Students

EDP 2150 focuses on specific academic success strategies and the resources available to student veterans and military-connected students while supplementing information about general student resources such as advising. Resources for students such as the Veteran Academic Success Center (VASC), the Writing Center, Career Services, and the Texas Veterans Commission are posted in the syllabus and discussed at various points during the semester. Additionally, invited guests promote available veteran and military-connected resources or programs near or on campus. For example, representatives from Texas State's Office of Veteran Affairs and the local chapter of Project Healing Waters—a nationwide

rehabilitation and recreation program for veterans with disabilities—are frequent guest speakers in the course. A participation grade is also created to incentivize student participation in any of the off-campus resources advertised through guest speakers, as well as any the students have identified; however, nudging students through graded participation is rarely necessary. Students in this population tend to want to engage with these off-campus resources on their own. By representing both traditional student services and on-campus military-connected services, the course fulfills the services and transition sections on the vertical axis of Vacchi's (2020) model. However, the course also offers access to the kinds of external resources that exemplify the holistic types of support that the model's horizontal axis highlights. Furthermore, through the external veteran support programs advertised in the course, students can engage with the peer/buddy section of the model of student veteran support (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Working with other supports on campus proves to be highly beneficial when considering embedded support for EDP 2150. The VASC maintains a roster of student veterans, military-connected students, and social work interns as employees—called *guides*—each fall and spring semester. Guides participate in weekly class sessions, assist with communication between students and instructors when needed, help provide military-connected student relevant examples for course topics, and provide a consistent peer presence in the structure of the course. Although guides are a primary part of the VASC office on campus, embedding them in the course helps to orient their role away from the traditional service-focused vertical axis of Vacchi's (2020) model and more toward the holistic horizontal axis. Thus, the guides fulfill the peer/buddy support role of the model. Additionally, having military-connected guides enhances the in-class interactions between instructors and students, which is another necessary portion of the model of veteran support.

Regarding further instructor interactions, Vacchi et al. (2017) noted that the frequency and the types of interactions that student veterans have with faculty are key to ensuring an accommodating environment. To this end, the instructor of the course would typically arrive a half-hour before the class began each week, which encouraged students to engage prior to class and to answer questions about the course or homework. Embedded guides from the VASC, teaching assistants, and the EDP course coordinator were also accessible before and during class.

The instructor also accompanied students across campus to the VASC after class sessions to facilitate out-of-class engagement, which Vacchi (2020) also emphasized in his model. However, not all students were able to engage with instructors after class due to other engagements. Therefore, students were required to have a minimum of two office meetings with the instructor during the semester to discuss course progress and their reflections on the course and those involved.

Course Content

The theories underpinning the various learning strategies (both from lecture and the textbook) connect to Vacchi's (2020) second key area "to help student veterans overcome obstacles during the transition to and through college" (p. 35). In fact, Cook and Kim (2009) identified the possibility of a student veteran-focused transition type course that would help with persistence and college success. EDP 2150 provides exactly that. Academic success strategies such as effective note-taking, goal setting, self-regulatory skills, cognition and memory skills, and effective time and task management strategies are taught alongside the various behavioral, motivation, and cognitive theories that support them. To this end, EDP 2150 uses the textbook *Academic Transformation: The Road to College Success* by Sellers et al. (2015) as the basis for its curriculum and activities. The textbook also includes various case study examples to help students engage with the types of scenarios they may face inside or outside of the classroom and—most importantly—decide which types of skills and strategies would be most beneficial to use in the given scenario.

The goal of the textbook, and indeed the course itself, is to build on the strengths that students bring with them to the classroom. By building on these strengths, instructors help students become self-directed learners who are capable of navigating the plethora of obstacles that higher education contains. Additionally, the strength-focused nature of the course steers away from the deficit model of veteran support that is commonly found in higher education (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Due to the textbook being created for any population of students in general, instructors used the textbook material in a way that allowed student veterans to supplement discussion with examples they found were more relevant to their unique experience. For instance, the EDP 2150 curriculum discussed stress management. In addition to covering some of the examples from the text, students

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and the VASC guide were allowed time to get into groups and discuss their own stressors. Students were free to self-generate any stressors they believed to be relevant, which opened the door to conversations about academic stressors and stressors from transitioning to civilian life as well. Students then applied the stress management theories and skills to their particular situations for the remainder of the class. By giving student veterans the power to utilize their own examples rather than just the ones provided in the textbook, the course and its instructors embraced the uniqueness of this population, which is often ignored by more traditional college supports (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Additionally, the course covered brain-based learning. Brain-based learning highlighted the physical characteristics of the brain and how that relates to learning new information. For example, one principle of brain-based learning was learning to relate new information to existing information (Sellers et al., 2015). Students were given the time and space to practice relating new information to topics that they already have a significant grasp on, both within and external to the military. Some students related new information to their military experiences or knowledge more than other student veterans, further highlighting the uniqueness of the students in this population (Vacchi et al., 2017).

Military-Connected Students

Rather than focus solely on student veterans, the course enrollment has broadened to include service members' dependents and family members. Though these students are not veterans, many of them grew up on military bases or in military households and may find themselves more closely identifying with student veteran peers than their non-student veteran peers. Additionally, military-connected course fees are paid through benefits they receive as dependents of a veteran.

Military-connected students are often used to the same rigorous schedules that some student veterans still attempt to keep as they transition back to civilian life. They also often identify closely with some of the terms and themes that student veterans use, given their experiences being raised by veterans. For example, the term *battle buddy* is commonly used in partnering with another service member to reach a common goal. In EDP 2150, students often collaborated in battle buddy pairs to think-pair-share and maintained accountability with their battle buddy in goal-setting activities.

Military-connected students often bond with their student veteran classmates over other common military-type stressors (e.g., time management, strong regiment, strict discipline, and other related themes). The inclusion of military-connected students in the course clearly aligns with the model of student veteran support (Vacchi, 2020) in that it allows student veterans access to more peer support and engagement, as well as potential access to various external (non-university) programs and supports that military-connected students may or may not be aware of as they have typically lived in the area.

Marketing

Marketing EDP 2150 revolves largely around the VASC, which offers tutoring and additional academic resources and is housed inside the Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC). Posters and flyers are distributed and some students with GPAs of 2.6 and below are contacted by the VASC staff. GPA is especially important for military-connected students because of the GPA minimum requirements for benefit eligibility. Outreach by email begins several months before the start of each semester and follow-up messages are sent thereafter, with similar messaging: explanation of being a military-connected student, the course goal of assisting in the transition, course objectives, class times, and a link to register for the course. In the recruitment emails, students are made aware that the course is certified (approved) by the university Veteran Affairs Office. Although education or military benefits are likely available to pay for the course, students are first referred to their advisors to ensure enrollment in the course would not conflict with excessive hours rules connected to veteran and military-connected student funding.

Suggestions to Guide Instructors

This article is meant to serve as a guide for practitioners rather than a model to be replicated. If an institution or faculty member(s) are interested in creating a similar support course for student veterans or military-connected students, then the process and resources may look drastically different than that of what has occurred with EDP 2150. With that in mind, here are some suggestions to consider when trying to implement this type of support at another institution:

- Follow the literature. The course design referenced here implemented the model

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of student veteran support (Vacchi et al., 2020) thought best for TXST, and that model was found to be successful for the population. However, there are other conceptual models of student veteran support and experiences available (see other models in Vacchi, 2020 and Vacchi et al., 2017). Pick research and literature-supported models that best suits your resources and students.

- Explore local resources. Groups near San Marcos, like Project Healing Waters and Restoration Ranch, were excellent partnerships conveniently located and accessible to TXST veterans. Create similar partnerships with military-connected programs and groups near your own campus.
- Understand your students. The barriers for TXST student veterans may have similarities with other campuses (stress management, study skills, engagement with faculty), but some barriers may be unique to a geographic area. Utilize focus groups or surveys distributed to student veterans at your campus to determine their specific needs.
- Recruit academically-focused staff such as advisors and academic coaches.. Not only are these individuals a wonderful resource for advertising courses that focus on special populations, but also, they have access to a student's degree plan. Though courses like EDP 2150 can be covered by the campus Veteran Affairs Office, the federal G.I. Bill, or state funded veteran education services, credit hour completion is always a factor in whether or not students can take a course. Because of financial aid restrictions that can happen if students have completed too many credit hours (or a future risk of completing too many hours), it is always best to have students meet with their advisor before enrolling. Additionally, having flexible credit hour options for sections of the course (or even non-credit options) can be beneficial.
- Above all, remain open and be willing to adapt as the course progresses. The needs of any special population on campus can change at any time depending on world events, policies, and institutional growth. When attempting to meet the unique needs of students enrolling in your course, flexibility and a willingness to adapt will benefit the students and instructors alike.

Conclusion

Texas State University has had success with creating and implementing this learning frameworks course for student veterans and military-connected students. Course evaluations and

feedback have been extremely positive as student veterans have indicated they have become more self-directed learners with the tools to persist in college, doing so in a way that is focused on their needs inside and outside the classroom, and both on and off-campus.

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