

Comparing Military-Connected and Non-Military-Connected Students' Orientation Experiences

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The purpose of this study was to compare the orientation experiences of military-connected and non-military-connected students. Specifically, this study explored the influence of an enhanced early-intervention orientation strategy for military-connected students transitioning from active duty to college. Data were collected from all transfer students participating in a university orientation program. Findings indicated that military-connected students rated the overall orientation experience significantly higher than their non-military-connected counterparts. However, they rated their connectedness to campus significantly lower. Recommendations for improving orientation practices for military-connected students are discussed.

Keywords: Military-connected students, veterans administration benefits, orientation

With the advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the drawdown of forces subsequent to the end of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, college campuses across the United States have seen a marked increase in military-connected student enrollment. Military-connected students face multiple challenges in their transition from military to college, and the road to graduation can be difficult. While greater attention has been paid to the military-connected student experience over the past decade, much of the research has noted the challenges in meeting the needs of these students. Providing tailored and specific support in order for military-connected students to be successful in higher education is of paramount importance, particularly for those who have transitioned out of combat zones (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Bissell, 2015; Coll & Weiss, 2015;

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Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). The Building Resilience and Success: Holistic Student Veteran Support project, funded by JP Morgan Chase & Company, created the opportunity for the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs (UCCS) Office of Veteran and Military Student Affairs (OVMSA) to implement new strategies and to refine existing orientation programs for military-connected students.

To provide context for the population in this study, it is necessary to understand the use of the term “military-connected students” as opposed to the traditional term “student veterans.” With the development and implementation of new educational benefit programs for military veterans, active-duty military personnel, and reservists, the term to refer to this population has expanded to “military-connected students.” For the purposes of this study, military-connected students are those who are veterans, active-duty, or reservists, but not their dependents who may be utilizing the educational benefits of a member of the armed forces, as the focus is on the unique transitional needs of those that serve or who have served in the military.

Orientation as a Strategy

As military members transition from active-duty careers to civilian life, many choose to pursue the path of higher education. Despite the fact that many military-connected students acquire leadership, discipline, and stress management skills in their military careers, they can find it difficult to translate these skills early in the college environment, particularly while balancing school with family and work for the first time (Brown & Gross, 2011; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). The UCCS OVMSA eased this time of transition through an early-intervention strategy of enhancing the orientation experience for military-connected students in the 2015-2016 academic year. This offering was designed to address challenges inherent to the military-connected student population, including transition from a highly structured environment to one dependent upon self-management and placement among less mature and potentially unrelatable classmates. Thus, an enhanced Veteran and Military Student Orientation session was offered to address the available resources specifically at UCCS, as well as to answer questions related to Veteran’s Administration (VA) benefits. Specifically, the students were educated on their rights and responsibilities related to the processing of their benefits to ensure minimal administrative issues with enrollment and tuition payments. Following the session, they participated in the remainder of the transfer orientation program with their non-military-connected peers. The enhanced orientation program resulted in increased visibility of the OVMSA, provided a reduction of misinformation regarding VA benefits, and provided critical assistance for military-connected students.

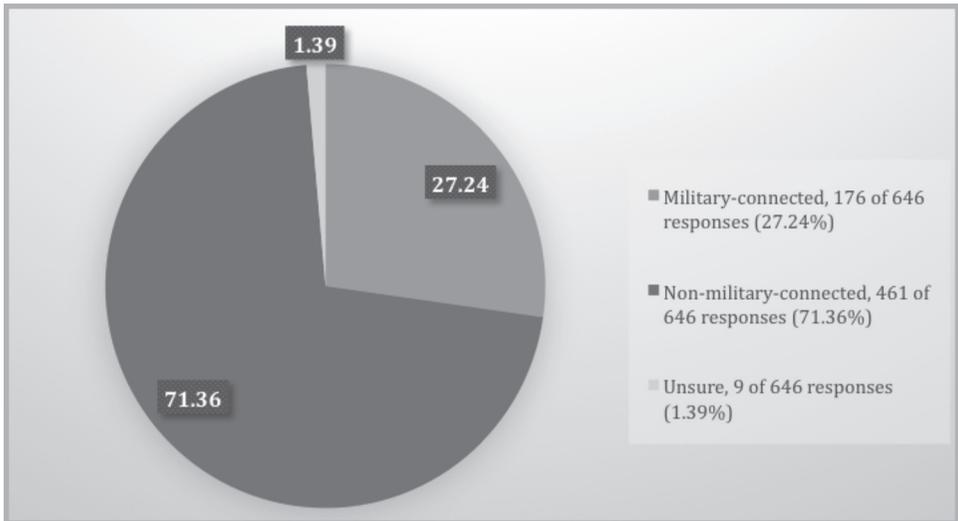
Data Collection

Because an overwhelming majority of military-connected students are entering

higher education at a non-traditional age or with previous college credits, the military-connected students participate in a transfer student orientation program at UCCS. Data were collected from all students participating in a transfer student orientation program during summer 2015. A total of 1,087 transfer students participated in an on-campus orientation, and 646 surveys were completed, yielding a 59% response rate. In order to understand the experience of military-connected students in relation to their non-military-connected peers, statistical analyses were performed on the orientation satisfaction and learning outcome assessment to compare the responses.

Figure 1

Orientation Survey Sample and Response Rate.



Findings

Two items yielded a significant difference in the mean of responses of military-connected and non-military-connected students (see Table 1).

1. A significant difference was noted in the rating of military-connected students' overall orientation experience in comparison to their non-military-connected peers. Military-connected students rated the overall orientation experience higher. (Question: Overall, how was your orientation experience?)
2. A significant difference was found in the rating of military-connected students' feelings of connectedness to the campus in comparison to their non-military-connected counterparts. Military-connected students rated their connectedness lower. (Question: Did orientation succeed in making you feel welcome and a part of the UCCS Mountain Lion Community?)

TABLE 1

Orientation Survey Results, Summer 2015

Question	Military-Connected Mean	Non-Military Connected Mean	Range
Overall, how was your orientation experience?	4.88*	4.78	1-5
Did orientation succeed in making you feel welcome and a part of the UCCS Mountain Lion Community?	.0948	.993*	0-1
Did you develop connections with other students?	.573	.531	0-1
Locate involvement opportunities	4.67	4.6	1-5
Recall who to contact in case of emergency	4.85	4.87	1-5
Apply personal safety tips and techniques while on campus	4.81	4.84	1-5
Navigate the portal to complete financial requirements (make payments, authorize COF, set up authorized payer, etc.)	4.72	4.71	1-5
Navigate the financial aid process from FAFSA to disbursement	4.7	4.66	1-5
Identify scholarships and employment opportunities	4.72	4.62	1-5
Identify resources on campus to help you succeed in and out of class	4.71	4.65	1-5
Identify, locate, and navigate your student portal, Degree Audit, and the campus website	4.79	4.78	1-5
Locate academic policies	4.65	4.55	1-5
Recognize the UCCS Compass Curriculum	4.61	4.52	1-5
Which statement best indicates your current intentions?	.92	.936	0-1

Note: * significant difference at the .05 level

Military-connected students’ first impression of college often occurs during orientation; it is vital that this experience be affirming and encouraging, as they are experiencing a major life transition. The results of the transfer student orientation survey indicated that military-connected students rated their orientation experience significantly more positive than others and indicated to a stronger degree, although not significant, that they made connections with other students. These findings are in line with best practices indicated from the literature as UCCS makes a concerted

effort to connect students with university academic, career, and VA benefits staff, as well as with other military-connected students (Hendrickson, 2014; Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013). Still, military-connected students rated orientation significantly lower than other students in making them feel welcome and a part of the university community. This rating may be a result of the abbreviated allotment of only one hour dedicated to the military-connected-specific session, which consists of a considerable amount of material and resources. As military-connected students often experience unique circumstances, individual needs may only be partially met during this period. Relative to all other transfer student orientation survey measures, military-connected and other transfer students share strong agreement that orientation programming meets the needs of students in promoting belonging, ensuring safety, encouraging involvement, and building community at UCCS.

Conclusion

During orientation, data collected from incoming military-connected students are necessary for the success of future support initiatives and to provide staff with information to track trends as they develop additional programs to meet the evolving needs of military-connected students. Continuing to develop intentional connections with and among students at orientation will contribute to their knowledge of the services dedicated to them, thus, hosting a specific military-connected student session is essential. Scheduling these sessions to occur at the beginning of the students' orientation experience is a strategic approach that eases many of the concerns of military-connected students early in the orientation process, yet for students who are unable to attend the Veteran and Military Student Orientation in person, an online orientation program is being implemented to ensure all military-connected students have a means to access this additional outreach opportunity.

Finally, while the Veteran and Military Student Orientation session provides incoming students with the resources and basics related to the use of benefits, they may not be prepared for the other personal, social, and emotional aspects of the transition for which their peers may prepare them. The incorporation of a networking option into the orientation schedule that connects new and current military-connected students may prove beneficial. Many of them value interpersonal relationships with others of the same status, as these relationships also were appreciated during their service (Kelley et al., 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Hosting a panel of military-connected peers that highlights the successes and challenges of transitioning to higher education would assist in normalizing the adjustment experiences many new students will face, as well as highlight resources available to military-connected students.

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