

**Academic Adjustments for Student Veterans
with Traumatic Brain Injury and/or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Tips for Campus Faculty and Staff**

Mary Lee Vance, Ph.D.

Differences Between Students with Disabilities and Wounded Warriors

- In most instances, Veterans are new to their disabilities, without prior history or knowledge of IDEA/Section 504 eligibility. Additionally, most will be unaware of their rights as students with disabilities or how to go about receiving academic accommodations.
- Veterans with newly acquired injuries (both seen and unseen) are probably just developing an understanding of how their disability may impact learning. For example, an individual may have acquired a learning disability as a result of her Traumatic Brain Injury and had no previous history of a learning disability prior to the injury. Attending school is a huge adjustment in itself, and then on top of that, realizing that she does not or cannot learn in the same way as she did before will be a huge adjustment.
- The psychological process for accepting disability status will take time; especially given a military background, where they may at first view their disability as a sign of weakness.
- Many are facing other adjustments as well; such as re-integration into the social and family lives they held before their active duty assignments.
- Veterans are not usually the “typical” college student. Many are older and, according to the National Council on Disability, 60 percent of those deployed are married and over half have children. TBI and PTSD can significantly impact an individual’s personality and ability to cope with day-to-day activities, which puts a tremendous strain on marriage and family life.
- Common disabilities of Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in no particular order include, but are not limited to: traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of limb(s), severe burns, deafness, vision difficulties and learning disabilities.

Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Some of the cognitive difficulties associated with TBI and/or PTSD, which may impact academic performance, includes but is not limited to the following:

- Attention and concentration difficulty
- Information processing challenges
- Learning and memory deficits
- Sluggish abstract reasoning
- Slowed executive functions (problem solving, planning, insight/awareness, sequencing)

Academic Accommodations

Decisions related to whether a student is qualified to have reduced course load or service animals (to help with PTSD stress reduction), have access to specialized software, or other accommodations that go beyond the scope of what faculty can reasonably provide to all their students are made by the Disability Services professionals. Faculty should not be involved with the handling of the students’ medical documentation or diagnosis, as this is generally the responsibility of the Disability Services office.

Academic Adjustments

Providing all students with on-line class notes, using assessment criteria other than timed exams, flexibility with classroom participation are all things faculty could provide any/all students without regard to documented disability, but that would particularly benefit veterans. The more that faculty uses these universal strategies for all students in their classes, the less likely students reluctant to identify as individuals with disabilities, will become academically at-risk.

When meeting with a student Veteran who may be experiencing academic performance concerns, it may be useful to consider a couple questions. Has the student discussed the need for possible accommodations? If so, it would be useful to meet with the student privately to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations in the classroom setting. If further accommodations are required, that go beyond the scope of what one would normally provide for any of the other students, then the student may need to be referred to Disability Services for additional accommodations.

The other question to consider would be whether the student has connected with the local VA, DVA or other military department able to provide TBI or PTSD support for veterans. If not, provide the contact information.

Consider including a statement on every course syllabus inviting students with disabilities to meet with the faculty in a confidential environment to review course requirements and discuss academic adjustments or reasonable accommodations.

For example: Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact me to privately discuss accommodation needs. The University of (X) assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students (DSS). "Reasonable" means the University permits no fundamental alterations of academic standards or retroactive modifications. For more information, please consult (webs site). Should you have a disability (including unseen disabilities such as learning disabilities, psychological health injuries (PTSD) or cognitive (such as brain injuries) requiring reasonable accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services" if you have not already done so.

With advanced planning, faculty can insure that all students (student Veterans, non-native English speakers, older non-traditional students and students unwilling to self identify and/or self advocate) have access to a range of academic adjustments. Advance planning recognizes that incorporating Universal Design in the curriculum (UD) makes good teaching sense. Furthermore, usage of UD recognizes that building in flexibility into the course syllabus and course expectations up front will ultimately mean more effective learning opportunities for all students. In the long run it may also lead to less stress for students who may require accommodations, but don't necessarily identify such a need until the semester has been underway. Preparing for flexibility ultimately will lead to improved retention and student success.

What follows are some possible ways, not at all comprehensive, that faculty can incorporate into their curriculum to improve the learning opportunities for all students, especially those with PTSD and TBI. None of these academic adjustments, as identified here, need lead to reduced academic performance expectations, nor do they necessarily require Disability Services authorization if made available to all students, and are planned out well in advance.

Concentration/Memory Tips

Provide handouts in a timely manner so that those who need to convert documents electronically have time to have this done

- Permit use of laptop computers for note taking
- Be willing to wear FM microphones and/or be supportive of any other improved listening technology
- Insure that required texts are available in accessible electronic format.
- Plan ahead to insure all audio clips, videos and movies are captioned, as many veterans have experienced hearing loss, as well as can benefit from captioning keeping them on track
- Utilize electronic platforms to store lecture notes, so that students may access the information through alternative electronic formats as needed
- Permit tape recorders or micro tape players as memory aids

Test-taking Tips

- Eliminate timed tests in favor of other assessment methods that do not penalize students requiring extra time/lower distraction testing accommodations and/or attendance flexibility
- Administer tests on the computer
- Allow students to be able to use an index card with faculty-approved notes and/or build in memory joggers into the exams (if exams are necessary)
- Allow students to use index cards, blank paper and/or a ruler (to help keep their place on exams)

Experiencing Panic Attacks/Stress

- Provide students with the ability to take a short break (5-10 minute) in either a class session or testing environment when stressful situations arise.
- Provide students with flexibility in class session attendance schedules as long as it does not conflict with the core requirements of the class.