

Combat2College: Facilitating College Success for Combat Veterans

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Many US combat veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) return with mental health needs that can complicate educational achievement. In addition to specific disorders such as traumatic brain injury (TBI) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat veterans experience psychosocial disruption as they rapidly transition from the role from warrior to that of student. Our work with combat veterans has helped to identify the stresses they experience upon return to college, and to develop a comprehensive yet efficient and quite inexpensive intervention program, called Combat2College (C2C).

The core of C2C is an ongoing, “seamless” collaboration between a Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VA) and a community college to support college success for OEF/OIF veterans. C2C provides substantial and comprehensive services to faculty, staff, and students, yet remains efficient and simple because it centers on making small adjustments to existing college activities and resources, and uses close liaison to existing VA clinical services.

Design Objectives

C2C embodies specific values.

Inclusiveness

C2C emphasizes primary prevention to facilitate academic success for all OIF/OEF veterans, disabled or not. This is crucial because many veterans with post-combat adjustment difficulties will not readily admit to those problems. This “silent” group poses difficult problems to departments of special services (DSS). Standard DSS entry procedures begin with the student presenting to DSS and identifying themselves as having a problem and needing assistance. Designing methods to include and provide benefit to this large but silent group of veterans has been quite challenging, but essential.

Removal of Stigma

In keeping with the objective of serving all veterans, it has been essential to destigmatize the program. This has been done in two ways. First, the overwhelming emphasis within C2C is on identifying how military experience and training are positive assets that can be channeled towards the formation of adaptive and productive attitudes and behaviors to promote success in college. Second, the program does not emphasize PTSD, TBI, and other disorders experienced by OIF/OEF veterans. It is realistic and truthful, and notes that these are problems experienced by some veterans, and provides education regarding referral resources and positive coping skills. However, it cannot be overemphasized that the primary focus is on assisting the veteran to explore and identify how military training and combat experience can be a source of personal strength and psychological resilience that can be channeled towards a successful college experience.

Respect and Appreciation

It is difficult to quantify the benefit veterans receive from entering a college environment that conveys respect and appreciation, but there can be no question of its immense value. While specific program elements are detailed in the next section, all communicate "thank you for your service" and "welcome home." These messages are communicated early, typically before the veteran starts classes, often, and from multiple sources. Another demonstration of respect derives from the faculty training program. Knowing that the school administration has placed high value on the veteran, and that faculty have invested precious training time to learn basic information about the veteran's military and combat experiences, is an indirect but powerful communication that the school values the veteran.

Identification of Resources

The removal of stigma must be balanced with the availability of appropriate clinical and psychosocial resources for veterans in need. The stigma associated with these resources can be mitigated by disseminating knowledge of resources to all veterans, not just to those singled out as being in need. In C2C, education regarding available resources begins prior to the veteran starting classes, and, most importantly, does not wait until there is a crisis.

Camaraderie

Focus groups with combat veterans who had already experienced college entry revealed a common theme of distress and discomfort until "connecting" with other veterans on campus. C2C, therefore, includes numerous formal and informal ways for veterans to find each other. All are devoid of stigma and integrated within traditional college activities and courses.

Maximum Feasibility

A guiding objective of C2C was to have a "small footprint" on existing college programs and services. In practice, this meant utilizing existing resources, such as courses already within the curriculum, but making small adjustments to enhance relevance and usefulness to veterans. Faculty training was especially challenging and was addressed by segmenting a day-long training program (described below) into short, self-contained modules, such that multiple modules could be combined into a day-long workshop during faculty orientation week, or used singly during a departmental in-service session.

Core Program Activities

Training Material

A wealth of high quality training material incorporating cutting-edge input from leading scientists already exists and is available at no charge. This material has extremely high production values, incorporates state-of-the-art information from leading scientists, and is presented at a level suitable to students and staff. The material includes:

1. "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder New Warrior" instructional video with John McCain and Tom Brokaw, produced and distributed by the National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD)

2. "Welcome Home Pamphlet for Military Personnel," booklet produced and distributed by the NCPTSD
3. "Welcome Home Pamphlet for Family Members," booklet produced and distributed by the NCPTSD
4. "Cognition, Memory, and Brain Injury," booklet produced and distributed by the Brain Injury Association
5. "Traumatic Brain Injury," instructional video with Colin Powell, produced and distributed by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)
6. Self-instruction materials for TBI and PTSD, continuously updated, on the DVBIC and NCPTSD websites.

Training experiences are enriched by discussions of issues such as: 1) the assumptions, belief systems, sensitivities, and political views that can affect student/teacher relationships and the teaching environment for OEF/OIF veterans 2) comparisons of present veterans' return-to-home experiences to prior warrior-to-civilian transitions (e.g. Life Magazine photos of ticker-tape parades for returning World War II veterans), 3) the differences between transition from high school to college, versus transition from combat to college, and, 4) analysis of factors in the current college environment that might cause difficulty or discomfort to veterans, and exploration of how to mitigate these.

College Life

The college website has been modified to communicate an attitude of "welcome" to the veteran and to list useful resources. The entrance paperwork packet includes a pamphlet we developed reiterating and expanding this information. A Veterans' Club has been developed as part of the "normal" club structure of the college.

Formal Courses

The preponderance of community colleges have courses similar to Montgomery College's DS106 and DS 107. The course description for DS106 is: "Intended for college students of any age who want to create success both in college and in life." The course description for DS 107 is: "Student Development 107 is a one-credit course designed to assist students in adjusting to college. Topics include academic and student services available at the campus, time management techniques, career, and educational planning, financial planning and money management, building successful relationships and effective communication, physical and mental health, and self-adjustment concerns." These "how to be successful at college" courses most frequently use one of two texts, *Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life* (Downing, 2005) or *Your Guide to College Success: Strategies for Achieving Your Goals* (Santrock and Halonen, 2007), or a curriculum designed by the professor to cover similar issues and topics.

Careful review of these courses indicated that they could be made "veteran-relevant" with only minor adjustments and without interfering with the courses achieving their primary original objectives. These adjustments proved to be nearly identical for both courses and therefore are presented below as

general recommendations. The most important adjustments were: 1) adding information about veterans' resources to the sections describing general college resources for students; 2) in the sections regarding student self-exploration, exploration of how military training and combat experience can contribute positive attitudes and skills to promote success in college; 3) since this curriculum typically includes teaching students about learning disability, adding curriculum regarding PTSD, combat stress, and TBI; and 4) in the typical descriptions of the differences between high school and college cultures, add material regarding the differences between military and college cultures (shouting, curt answers, and scowling may be normative in one environment, but alienating in another).

Referral and Coordination with Department of Veterans Affairs

The Returning Veterans Outreach and Education Clinic (RVOEC) at the Washington DC VA Medical Center provides services to all returning veterans with any type of mental health issue. Services include outreach, education, assessment, and treatment. A therapist from RVOEC visits Montgomery College regularly. As noted previously, the entire range of these benefits and services, and the procedures to access them, are described in multiple formats and venues.

Summary and Conclusions

C2C demonstrates that it is possible to create a "veteran friendly" college using efficient and inexpensive interventions. The interventions do not disrupt the activities of the college, rely heavily on existing resources, and essentially have a small and non-disruptive footprint. While veterans with mental health problems so severe as to prevent effective college participation without assistance are served, the program addresses and seeks to provide benefit to all veterans, even those who deny or refuse to identify themselves as being in difficulty or needing services. Lastly, while the program is realistic regarding combat-related psychopathology, it also assists the student to self-explore ways in which military training and combat experience can be a source of strength and can be channeled towards facilitating success.