

Military-Friendliness Online Course Guide

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Abstract

The Military-Friendly Online Course Guide is a course evaluation and resource tool created to support instructors who wish to make their online and hybrid course experiences more inclusive of and successful for Veteran-affiliated students. The term “Veteran-Affiliated Students” will refer to students who are Veterans, active-duty, and eligible family members. The guide was designed by experienced e-learning educators and Veterans program administrators using feedback from student Veterans and is organized into competency tiers.

Keywords: Online Course Design, Military-Friendliness, Veterans, Course Guide

Military-Friendliness Online Course Guide

As institutions increase emphasis on inclusiveness, consideration for the military-friendliness of higher ed campuses is increasing in parallel. “Military-Friendliness” has been defined as a campus that “... identifies and removes barriers to the educational goals of veterans, creates a smooth transition from military life to college life, provides information to veterans about available benefits and services, creates campus awareness of the student veteran population, and creates proactive support programs for student veterans based on their needs” (Vacchi & Berger, 2014, p. 124). In 2018 over 650,000 Veterans used their military benefits to enroll in institutions of higher learning (PNPI Factsheets 2021). Considering the complex factors of reacclimating to civilian life, Veterans who face returning to a classroom may require multi-faceted support. In their review of the

literature regarding student Veterans and community college experiences, researchers Evans, Hoggan, and Pellegrino write, “Considering the large influx of veteran students into the community college and their characteristics as a particularly vulnerable student population, there is a need to provide support mechanisms to help them succeed” (2015). Typically, support is associated with on campus Veteran centers. However, many community colleges lack the necessary infrastructure and funding to support centers (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Sneak, 2012). Even without institutional assistance, instructors who desire to support Veteran-affiliated students may choose to do so through their own course design. Features, links and/or announcements would signal empathy and understanding from instructor to student. Communication with faculty and all that might include has been shown to play a significant role in the ways Veteran students adjust to their campus (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). Additionally, a syllabus that emphasizes belongingness and inclusion can be instrumental in creating connection between the instructor and students (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002). Currently, there is no comprehensive guide that views the best practices of online course design through the lens of Veteran-affiliated students. This guide is designed to bridge that gap.

According to the book, *Straight Talk for Veterans: A Guide to College Success*, “As veterans transition their identities, accommodating spaces and services, along with supportive personal relationships enhance campus veteran-friendliness and by extension student veteran success” (Vacchi, et al, 2019, p. 163).

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Since the spring of 2020, colleges have been attuned to the necessity and ever-increasing demand for e-learning. Even traditionally seated courses have become hybrid or at least must be prepared to hold class online with little notice. Although military-friendliness is a worthy goal for any modality, it is most effective to design a guide for online courses in a post-pandemic culture. It is worth noting that Veteran-affiliated students may be more at risk in online environments potentially separated from their communities but may also find solace by being one step removed from the bias associated with military culture. As writer Ragan Sweeney writes, “Although the switch to online classes left many veterans without their close support systems, it also improved the higher education experience of others as they did not have to manage others’ preconceived notions of their personalities and past” (HigherEdMilitary.com, 2022). This complex context requires additional consideration on the part of the instructor and institution.

Using the Course Guide

The Military-Friendliness Online Course Guide has been organized into competency tiers. The tiers are designed to afford maximum flexibility for instructors interested in creating or enhancing military-friendliness in their classrooms. Within those tiers, instructors will find actions to take within their course(s) and associated resources/tools to support those actions. Actions range in ease of implementation from the insertion of military-friendly syllabus language to more in-depth application of inclusivity principles. There are a broad range of Veterans support services that may be available at a particular college or university. Some institutions have designated Veterans Programs departments, while others have limited support, focused primarily on processing educational benefits. This guide is intended to provide suggestions for creating a military-friendly learning environment regardless of the level of Veteran services available at an institution.

Tier One: Commendable Military-Friendliness in Online Instruction

- Course includes a Military-Friendly Syllabus Statement
- Course includes Military-Friendly Student Resources and Links

Tier Two: Advanced Military-Friendliness in Online Instruction

Course includes Tier One Military-Friendly elements, plus:

- Instructor shares Up-To-Date Events, Scholarships, and/or Affinity Group Meeting Information specific to Student Veterans/Veteran-Affiliated Students
- Instructor Records Synchronous Virtual Class Meetings for Delayed Viewing.
- Instructor has completed Professional Development focused on Supporting Veteran-Affiliated Students.

Tier One Examples and Tools

Course includes a Military-Friendly Syllabus Statement

The syllabus is a foundational document in each course- one that sets a tone and makes a first impression to the learner. While some institutions have chosen to include statements regarding deployment in their syllabi, an inclusive lens asks instructors to consider how deployment might be only one part of a Veteran-affiliated students’ experience.

Military-Friendly Syllabus Statements Often Include:

- A Supportive and Inclusive Tone
- Proper Terminology When Referring to Veteran-Affiliated Students
- Capitalization of the word “Veteran”
- Contact information for Campus Veteran Support Services
- Clarification on Course Attendance Policy and Potential Training/Deployment
- An Invitation to Contact the Instructor about Concerns or Extenuating Circumstances

Examples of Military-Friendly Syllabus Language:

Some of the wording from the examples have been adapted from external sources such as the work of Lydia Wilkes in the Journal of Veterans Studies (2017) and “Tips for Making Your Syllabus Military-Friendly” (U.S. Dept. of Veteran’s Affairs). Faculty should feel comfortable using the examples “as is” or adapting with the appropriate consultation of colleagues and/or administrators.

Example #1

Veterans and active-duty military personnel with special circumstances (e.g., upcoming deployments,

drill requirements, and/or disabilities) are welcomed and encouraged to communicate these, in advance, if possible, to the instructor.

Example #2

To my Veteran-Affiliated Students, thank you for your service. Please contact me if your present or prior service makes it difficult for you to fulfill the requirements of this course. Examples may include, but are not limited to, upcoming deployments, drill requirements, family obligations, and disabilities. I am committed to assisting you on your academic journey.

Example #3

If you are deployed, active-duty military, and/or National Guard personnel and require accommodation please contact me as soon as possible after the first day of class or as soon as possible after you receive notice of a deployment. Together, we can create a customized plan for any absences that will follow our policies and position you for success.

Course includes Military-Friendly Student Resources and Links

For faculty with on-campus Veteran services, it is important to share local resources as soon as possible. Some students experience long wait times for their benefits including textbooks. Connecting them with advocates early in the semester may be critical to their confidence in completing the course. For faculty without the advantage of on-campus services, student services specialists may be contacted to determine the nearest local resources.

Types and Examples of Military-Friendly Student Resources

There are a multitude of resources available to Veteran-affiliated students that range in scope from local to national, each of which provides specific types of support Veteran-affiliated students may need. However, students may not be familiar with the range of resources. Therefore, listing and linking some key resources in the syllabus is an effective strategy for increasing awareness and access to these services.

Veterans Mental Health Resources

This type of resource focuses specifically on mental health care for Veteran-affiliated students.

- Example: Veterans Crisis Line Link: [https://](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/)

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Peer Networks

This type of resource focuses on the value of shared experiences by bringing Veteran-affiliated individuals together in various contexts.

- Example: Student Veterans of America Link: <https://studentveterans.org/>
- Example: Salute Veterans National Honor Society Link: <https://salute.colostate.edu/>
- Example: Veteran Wellness Alliance-Peer Networks Link: <https://www.bushcenter.org/veteran-wellness/peer-networks.html>

Veteran Job Support

This type of resource provides job opportunities and skills training for Veteran-affiliated students.

- Example: U.S. Dept. of Labor- Veterans Services Link: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/veterans/veterans-employment-services>
- Example: Military Skills Translator Link: <https://www.military.com/veteran-jobs/skills-translator?ESRC=welcome6.se>

National Resource Sites

This type of resource provides timely information to Veteran-affiliated students across many areas, including national benefits, initiatives, and services.

- Example: U.S. Dept. Of Veterans Affairs Link: <https://www.va.gov/>
- Example: Gary Sinise Foundation's Honor Roll Name Wall for Veterans Link: <https://www.garysinisefoundation.org/honor-roll>

Local Resource Sites

This type of resource provides information to Veteran-affiliated students that is specific to their geographic area.

- Example: American Legion – Find a Post Link: <https://mylegion.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Find-a-Post>
- Example: AMVETS- Find a Post Link: <https://www.amvets.org/find-a-post>
- Example: Marine Corp League- Detachment Locator Link: <http://www.mclnational.org/find-a-detachment.html>

Options for Providing Resource Links:

- Links may be hyperlinked within syllabus statement.

- Links may be organized within a “Student Support” section of the course LMS page.
 - ◆ Links may be listed (with description) as simple text.
 - ◆ Links may be organized in a more creative or visually pleasing fashion through collaborative cloud-based software programs such as Wakelet or Padlet.
 - ◆ Links and relevant information should follow Universal Design for Learning guidelines.
- **Zoom** Link: <http://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360059781332-Getting-started-with-Recording>
- **Skype** Link: <https://www.skype.com/en/blogs/2018-09-call-recording/>
- **MS Teams** Link: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/record-a-meeting-in-teams-34dfbe7f-b07d-4a27-b4c6-de62f1348c24>

Instructor completes Professional Development focused on Supporting Military, Veteran, or Veteran-Affiliated Students.

Green Zone Training offers campus-specific training for faculty members who wish to better understand the military, Veteran, or Veteran-affiliated student experience. If Green Zone training is not available, other virtual courses are offered at no cost. Such courses assist educators in understanding terminology, culture, and designing and implementing optimal instructional strategies. Examining personal biases associated with Veteran-affiliated students and their experiences is an example of the higher-level training provided and can prove an invaluable tool in DEI efforts.

Tier Two Examples and Tools

Instructor shares Up-To-Date Events, Scholarships, and/or Affinity Group Meeting Information specifically for Veteran-Affiliated Students. While links to Veteran resources that “live” in the online course are the first step in sharing information specific to the Veteran-affiliated community, sharing current events and new opportunities shows a present and on-going commitment to military-friendliness.

Examples of Seasonal Events and/or Opportunities to Share

- 9/11 Day of Service Events
- Campus Veterans Day and Memorial Day Events
- Conferences
- **Example:** NatCon Link: <https://web.cvent.com/event/796c176a-97bb-4de2-994e-c47592a4a4df/summary>
- Military, Veteran, or Veteran-Affiliated Scholarship Opportunities
- **Example:** AMVETS Scholarships Link: <https://amvets.org/scholarships/InstructorRecordsSynchronousVirtualClassMeetingsforDelayedViewing>.

One of the greatest challenges Student Veterans students face in synchronous online classes may be missed virtual meetings or class sessions due to training, deployment, or other life circumstances. Additionally, Student Veterans may be in a time zone that is incompatible with a scheduled class meeting time. Instructors are encouraged to record any virtual meetings or class sessions and post the links for students to review at their convenience.

Tools for Recording Virtual Class Meetings

Professional Development Examples

- Green Zone Training and Certification
- PsychArmor Institute Courses and Learning Badges Link: <https://psycharmor.org/services>
- ColumbiaX Course “Supporting Veteran Success in Higher Education.” Link: <https://tinyurl.com/mr29xfu3>

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Authors' Note

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