

The Green Zone: A Program to Support Military Students on Campus

Like many institutions of higher education, Virginia Commonwealth University has seen an increase in the number of military students. Ann Nichols-Casebolt describes one strategy the university has implemented to respond to the needs of this important group.

By Ann Nichols-Casebolt

Note: Throughout this column, the terms veterans and military students will be used interchangeably to refer to all those students who have served in the military. Some of these men and women have completed their military service, whereas others are in the National Guard or reserves and have been, and still could be, called into active-duty service.

WITH THE ADVENT OF THE NEW POST-9/11 GI BILL, many colleges and universities have seen significant growth in the numbers of veterans and other military students on their campuses. Along with this increased population has come a growing recognition that while these students share many of the same struggles as other students, their service in the military—often in a combat environment—can make them feel isolated and uncertain in the academic setting. In addition, wounds of war that are experienced by some of these students, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and physical injuries, can make the adjustment even more difficult.

Personal accounts and research studies have documented the numerous issues faced by veterans in their transition from “combat to classroom.” These issues

range from problems with accessing their GI Bill benefits to trouble concentrating in their classes to not feeling welcome on campus. In their interviews of student veterans, David DiRamio, Robert Ackerman, and Regina L. Mitchell found that one of the consistent messages they received was that faculty need to be more knowledgeable about who these students are and the particular needs they have. In addition, although often struggling as students, as reported by Sara Lipka in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement found that veterans reported feeling less support on campus than nonveteran students.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), witnessing its own growth in the numbers of veterans and military students on campus and concerned about their successful transition, began planning how it could better meet the needs of this unique group of students. While various administrative strategies were identified (and subsequently implemented), it was clear that knowledge about, and support of, military students on campus needed to extend throughout the institution if VCU was going to be seen as veteran-friendly. The goal was to develop a very visible network of faculty and staff in all schools/colleges and administrative units to whom these students could go to receive assistance. Thus was born the “Green Zone” (GZ) program.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

MODELED ON THE “SAFE ZONE” PROGRAM designed to provide “safe spaces” for LGBT students, the premise of the GZ program is that knowledgeable and supportive contacts throughout the institution will create a more veteran-friendly environment, which in turn will have a positive effect on the success of these military students. Safe Zone program assessments have indicated that the model can positively impact the climate for students to whom they are directed. Melinda J. Finkel, Ragnar D. Storaasli, Anthony Bandele, and Vivian Schaefer found in their study of the Safe Zone that it had a positive impact on creating a more affirming environment for LGBT students in a psychology graduate program, and Kerry Poynter and Nancy Tubbs, reporting on assessments of the Safe Zone programs at Iowa State and Duke Universities, noted that the programs increased visibility, improved the environment, and improved conversations related to LGBT issues.

Drawing on the Safe Zone program model, the development of the GZ program was guided by three key requirements for all participants: (1) willingness to work with military students needing assistance; (2) attendance at a training session; and (3) agreement to publicly acknowledge they are military student-friendly. The first requirement meant that GZ participants needed to be volunteers who were genuinely interested in assisting these students. Although we would be willing to provide training and information about military students to anyone on campus, only those who voluntarily wanted to participate in the program would be designated as a GZ volunteer. The requirement for attendance at a training session assured that all GZ volunteers would have basic knowledge about the concerns and issues facing military students and the resources available to assist them, and public acknowledgment required participants to be willing to display a visible sign identifying them as a GZ volunteer.

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and enter the workforce, and the Virginia Wounded Warriors Program, the planning of the Green Zone program began in July of 2010. A first step in the process was to hire a recently graduated veteran to assist with program development. This individual had been active with the Student Veterans’ Association at VCU, and, as a veteran himself, was well acquainted with the transition issues of combat to classroom. Although his stated role was to assist with all the administrative tasks related to the planning of the GZ program, one of his most important functions became communicating on a regular basis with the student veterans on campus. These informal connections became a conduit for eliciting input into program design and implementation, and keeping the students informed about the program’s progress. He also worked closely with our student veterans to select a name for the program and design the logo that is being used to designate individuals as GZ volunteers. The name “Green Zone” was selected because it is a location recognized by post-9/11 military personnel as a safe place, and the logo is a universal image for all branches of the military. The logo is an important part of the GZ, as it becomes the symbol placed on the door/space of each volunteer to let everyone know that the space within is a safe place for discussing issues, and that the individuals within have knowledge and resources to assist the student.



A key component of the GZ program is to assure that volunteers have basic knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by student veterans, as well as information about the resources available on campus and in the community to assist them. To accomplish this, a training program for GZ volunteers was developed. Consultants with special expertise in working with combat veterans were hired to create a PowerPoint slide presentation to train volunteers. The slides included background demographic data on VCU military students, information about common issues faced by these students, resources available, and opportunities for discussion.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

VOLUNTEERS WERE RECRUITED through the distribution of specially designed brochures highlighting the program, email notices publicizing the training sessions to all faculty and staff, and informa-

tion posted on the VCU website. Recruitment was facilitated by the enthusiasm and support of the provost, who worked to assure that information about the program was placed on the main VCU webpage and that publicity about the program was distributed widely across the institution. The provost also encouraged the staff under the auspices of her office to become trained as GZ volunteers. These individuals included all the administrative heads of the key student-related offices on campus (e.g., enrollment services, financial aid, student affairs, etc.). Many of these individuals had already been involved in the development and pretesting of the training, but the provost's support sent a strong message that VCU was committed to being a veteran-friendly institution. There was also considerable support from the university student advising center, who sent all advisors for freshman students to the training.

In addition to these specialized training sessions, only two general training sessions were initially scheduled for other potential volunteers on campus, since it was unclear how well received this program would be. However, the response was overwhelming and immediate, requiring the scheduling of several more sessions to accommodate all those who wanted the training.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The training is designed as a two-hour interactive session. The first hour consists primarily of a presentation of information on such topics as the military experience, the emotional cycle of deployment, issues in transitioning from base to campus, special needs of student veterans with disabilities, strategies for easing the transition, and available resources. It is emphasized that GZ volunteers are not expected to become experts on these topics. They are expected to be a sympathetic ear and to work with the student to help them solve their own problems.

The second hour of the training session is devoted to small group discussions focused on scenarios related to issues military students face. Below are a couple of examples of the types of scenarios that participants discuss:

- A student veteran comes to you because he feels very alone on campus. He was used to being constantly surrounded by individuals who share his goals and values. Since he has come to campus, he has not met anyone like that. He feels isolated and alone.
- A reservist sees the "Green Zone" sticker on your door and comes in because she has just received orders for a week-long training that will occur during the middle of the semester.

She has an exam during that week, and her professor states in the syllabus that there are absolutely no make-up exams.

A major strength of the discussion sessions (as reported by participants in their evaluations of the program) is the inclusion of student veterans in the small groups. These students provide personal accounts of their transition struggles from combat to campus, and enrich the discussion of how GZ volunteers might assist student veterans in addressing these issues. Some of the grant dollars received to support the development of the program were used to pay a small stipend to the student participants. However, all the student veterans who participated indicated that the money was not an important factor in their willingness to contribute to this initiative.

Those who complete the training are provided with a GZ logo "sticker" and asked to display it prominently on their door. In addition, they get an electronic copy of the presentation, which has numerous links to resources. They are also enrolled in a GZ volunteer listserv, through which volunteers receive and send periodic messages about relevant resources and notices about upcoming events related to our student veterans. Information about the GZ program and resources available to assist student veterans is also available on the VCU website.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

To assess military student views of the GZ program, an anonymous web-based survey of all military students was conducted. At the time of the survey, 356 students were identified as military. The response rate among our military students was 42 percent (150 students), which is a relatively strong response rate for a web-based survey among students. The survey asked several demographic questions (e.g., age, marital status, etc.), as well as questions about their transition from the military to VCU and their perception of the environment and services at VCU for military students. Responses to many of the questions will be used to guide our future initiatives, but some were also asked to gauge the potential impact of the GZ program (and other) efforts to better serve military students during this past year.

Students were asked if they were aware of the Green Zone program, and almost 48 percent responded yes. In their comments, a few noted that they heard about it in passing but didn't really know its purpose and how it would help student veterans. This suggests that we need to be more assertive in our outreach to student veterans about the program. The

survey also asked if they had an issue/concern that was affecting them as a student did they know any individuals at VCU to whom they could turn. Among those who responded, 70 percent said yes.

When asked about their satisfaction with the transition from the military to VCU, over 25 percent were very satisfied and almost 65 percent were either very or moderately satisfied. Of the 11 percent who were either moderately or very dissatisfied, several noted issues with credit transfer, so this is an area on which we are working. We also asked students if they thought VCU had become more veteran-friendly over the past year—a full 70 percent responded yes, suggesting that efforts to improve our support and services to this population are being recognized.

The goal of the GZ program was to create a more “veteran-friendly” environment at VCU by training a cadre of individuals throughout the institution who were supportive and knowledgeable about issues facing our military students and the various resources available to assist them. It is evident that we have been successful in training such a cadre—with over 150 faculty and staff from across campus identifying as GZ volunteers, and more waiting to be trained. These volunteers are not only available to military students who seek them out to discuss a specific issue, but they also bring the knowledge they

have gained to their other roles on campus: as instructors, advisors, and service providers to military students. They have an understanding of the issues these students may face, and of the resources on campus and in the community to whom they might direct a student who is struggling. GZ logo stickers can be seen in almost every academic building on campus. As one of our military students said, “Even if I don’t need any assistance, it makes me feel good to see the Green Zone sticker on someone’s door.”

For more information or copies of the training program and any other program materials, please contact Ann Nichols-Casebolt at acasebol@vcu.edu.

NOTES

- DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R. L. (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 73–102.
- Finkel, M. J., Storaasli, R. D., Bandele, A., & Schaefer, V. (2003). Diversity training in graduate school: An exploratory evaluation of the Safe Zone project. *Professional Psychology, Research & Practice*, 34, 555–561.
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