

Why Student Veteran Success Depends on University-Wide Collaboration

By Dr. LeNaya Hezel, Keynote Speaker, 17th Annual Military-Affiliated Symposium at Texas A&M University; Chief Programs Officer at Warrior-Scholar Project

Transitioning from the military to civilian life is a fluctuating time for service members. It's more than a career change; it's a reorientation of self, purpose, and oftentimes, community. [Warrior-Scholar Project](#) (WSP), the nonprofit organization I work with, exists to guide enlisted service members and veterans through this season of change, and our most powerful work happens not on military installations or in veteran-only spaces, but on college and university campuses.

At WSP, we've helped thousands of veterans successfully navigate the transition to the classroom through our immersive, one-week academic boot camps held in partnership with colleges and universities nationwide. Academic environments are central to WSP's model because they physically embody the next chapter of opportunity for veterans. While the GI Bill was designed to create a bridge to higher education, helping to make colleges accessible and serving as a meaningful tool for transition, we've learned that access alone is not enough — veterans still need support in navigating the higher education landscape, which differs widely from the structure the military provides.

That's why WSP intentionally partners with colleges and universities to bring our program on campus, allowing participants to immerse themselves in the academic ecosystem — from the classroom to libraries, dining halls, and student centers — so they can envision themselves thriving there.

Theoretically, we could rent a hotel conference room and teach our academic curriculum anywhere. But it's the experience of being on campus that's proved so transformative for WSP participants. It allows veterans to see what's possible, interact with faculty and students, and build connections that make college feel not only accessible, but attainable. It is in these spaces that the transition doesn't just bloom — it takes root.

Building Strong Partnerships

The types of schools that WSP partners with range from large public institutions to small liberal arts colleges to world-renowned research universities. That's because there isn't a single type of school that best serves student veterans. Instead, we look for partners who demonstrate the commitment and intentionality behind not just supporting military-connected students, but all students. This approach requires a holistic evaluation that considers factors such as overall graduation rates, participation in programs like Yellow Ribbon, and the strength of student support services. While a dedicated veterans resource center is valuable, it's not required; what matters most is that the campus culture is inclusive of both traditional and nontraditional students, and that the institution is genuinely motivated to support student veterans.

One of the most meaningful ways I've seen how this approach adds value is with a partnership at a competitive research university in California. In our first year on campus, a civilian

stakeholder unaffiliated with the veterans resource center was deeply committed to hosting WSP and was very hands-on in the planning required to bring a WSP cohort to campus. At the end of the boot camp, participants surprised this stakeholder with a signed university flag as a token of gratitude. That moment reflected something profound: Not only did these participants feel comfortable and confident engaging with civilians, but they also saw someone who invested in them and genuinely cared about their success. This interaction underscores why transition to college is not a one-way exchange; rather, it's a shared journey of respect and recognition.

Supporting Veterans with Awareness & Empathy

Beyond WSP partnerships, university faculty and staff play a critical role in shaping veterans' experiences on campus. Most of a student veteran's time isn't spent in a resource center — it's in the classroom with their professors. Thoughtful inclusions, like having an activation leave of absence policy in a syllabus or simply recognizing that, as nontraditional students, veterans often have obligations that their younger peers don't yet have, can go a long way. These measures are centered around awareness and empathy rather than treating some students differently.

Similarly, university staff in other departments don't need to be experts. A persistent misconception within academia is that only veterans can effectively support military-connected students. Too often, if a veteran calls an admissions office with a question, for example, they're automatically referred to the veterans' office — even if the inquiry isn't service-related. This reflex stems from a well-meaning but misplaced belief that “I'm not a veteran, so I can't help.” In reality, shared human experiences are universal points of connection.

In this scenario, rather than automatically referring them to the veterans' office (which creates additional hurdles), perhaps commonalities can be identified between the veteran's request and the questions one typically receives, so the student can get answers without having to jump through additional hoops. This shift in everyday interactions can go a long way toward building a welcoming campus culture while fostering a sense of belonging without singling out veterans or burdening them with stereotypes.

Shared Responsibility = Meaningful Support

Veteran success in higher education does not “belong” to a single office or resource; it requires a holistic, university-wide commitment that spans academic departments, student services, advising, and everyday classroom interactions. Small, intentional choices signal inclusion and go a long way in helping student veterans build confidence and connection. When campuses recognize the different experiences veterans bring, they create environments where resilience, perspective, and leadership can truly flourish. Ultimately, by embracing shared responsibility, we ensure the transition from the military to college is not only possible but enriching for everyone involved.

Dr. LeNaya Hezel is the chief programs officer at [Warrior-Scholar Project](#), a nonprofit whose mission is to ensure that every degree-seeking enlisted veteran succeeds in their pursuit of higher education.