



# Quarterly Update

## Disabled Veterans in Higher Education

Increasing numbers of veterans are entering or returning to higher education with disabilities such as limb loss, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Further exacerbating the situation, these disabilities may occur simultaneously. To help disabled veterans adapt to the school environment and to accommodate their special needs, it is essential for faculty and disability service providers to understand the characteristics associated with these disabilities.

### Limb Loss

Modern munitions combined with modern medicine and technology have resulted in soldiers surviving injuries that were once considered fatal. However, the injuries are still extensive and can lead to limb loss. The pain that occurs after limb loss can endure for years following the initial trauma. Residual limb pain may be due to infection, hematoma (blood collection), edema (swelling of soft tissues), bone spurs, neuroma (swelling of nerves), and ill-fitting prosthetics. Pain in other areas of the body can occur due to overuse and compensation for the limb loss. In addition to the physical pains of limb loss, secondary conditions such as depression and lowered self-esteem can occur.

#### *Possible Accommodations and Considerations*

- Service animal
- Adaptive technologies
- Extended time for examinations
- Flexible attendance requirements

### Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that typically follows an event in which fear, horror, and helplessness have been experienced. Individuals with PTSD continue to experience the traumatic event through flashbacks, nightmares, memories, or re-enactments. Memory deficits, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, concentration difficulty, emotional detachment, hyper-vigilance, exaggerated startle response, intrusive recollection, and avoidance behaviors are all typical symptoms of PTSD. The onset of PTSD can be immediate or delayed. It is estimated that 1 in 8 returning soldiers have PTSD. Campus staff and faculty can help by making the appropriate referrals both on and off campus.

#### *Possible Accommodations and Considerations*

- Notetakers
- Electronic assignments and course materials
- Flexible attendance requirements
- Reduced distraction testing environment
- Individual / private feedback
- Referrals for treatment

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## Traumatic Brain Injury

A Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a blow or jolt to the head or penetrating head injury that disrupts the normal functioning of the brain. Explosions are the leading cause of TBI for soldiers in war zones. Not all TBIs result in outwardly visible injuries. In fact, many mild TBIs are a result of closed head injuries. TBI has many similar symptoms as PTSD, such as sleep problems, impaired memory, depression, and anxiety. However, TBIs also may cause physical symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, excessive fatigue, ringing in the ears, and vision impairments.

### *Possible Accommodations and Considerations*

- Utilize universal design principles
- Promote communication among students and faculty
- Individual/private feedback
- Provide syllabus and handouts in advance
- Provide opportunities for students to submit assignments for feedback prior to the final grade

## The Role of the Disability Services Office

Disability Services Offices can be a point of contact for veterans with disabilities to discover other potential resources on and off campus. For example, there are many methods of care available through the Veterans Administration: education, coping skills, exposure therapy, cognitive restructuring, outpatient treatment, and inpatient hospitalization.

### *Strategies Related to Supporting Transition from Active Duty to Education*

- Identify local resources that may be of assistance to veterans (e.g., VFW)
- Develop student groups made up of veterans, with or without disabilities, who are available to mentor veterans with disabilities
- Provide leadership by forming a committee to examine best practices in serving veterans
- Seek local veterans to serve on an advisory committee to provide insights into veterans' needs
- Provide in-person and online trainings for faculty and staff on topics such as cultural and identify issues often expressed by veterans, teaching and communication strategies appropriate for this population, and promoting an environment that encourages communication and empathy

## Resources

Amputee Coalition of American. (2005). Managing pain. *Military In-Step*. Retrieved from <http://www.amputee-coalition.org/military-instep/index.html>

Association on Higher Education and Disability. (2007). The transition of returning disabled veterans: "Easy as apple pie?" Retrieved August 18, 2008, from <http://www.nysdsc.org/resources/AHEAD07-PTSD.ppt>

Church, T. E. (2008, February). *From combat to classes: Serving veterans with disabilities in higher education*. West Palm Beach, FL: LRP Publications.

Sindylek, B. (2008, June). *Disabled veterans in higher education: Students with PTSD/TBI*. Presentation at the Disability Training Network Summer Institute, Galveston, TX.

