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# THE VETERANS INTEGRATION TO ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP (VITAL) PROGRAM: A VITAL CASE FOR EXPANDED AVAILABILITY

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the significance of the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program from the perspective of the student veteran. The VITAL program offers comprehensive support to student veterans, promoting academic excellence, mental well-being, and a successful transition to civilian life. This paper argues for increased ubiquity of the VITAL program on college campuses across the nation with more emphasis on the complete set of services offered by VITAL, highlighting its positive impact on student veterans' educational experiences and advocating for its expansion to create a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment for those returning from military service.

The transition from military service to higher education can be a challenging and overwhelming journey for many student veterans.<sup>i</sup> Transition programs are often inadequate for those seeking a transition through higher education.<sup>ii</sup> Often, the added responsibilities incumbent upon student veterans such as familial and financial responsibilities not generally shared by traditional college students, exacerbate the difficulties in this transition. Critical decisions are unsupported by extant structures within the transition space. The Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program emerged as a powerful solution, providing critical support and resources to this unique student population. This paper aims to outline the key benefits of the VITAL program and underscore its necessity for widespread implementation on college campuses nationwide.

## **The VITAL Program: An Overview**

The VITAL program is offered through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and is designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by student veterans during their academic pursuits. The program aims to provide world-class healthcare, improve mental health, and support successful veteran integration into college and university campuses.<sup>iii</sup> It offers a holistic approach that encompasses academic support, mental health services, career development, and community engagement. By combining these elements, the VITAL program aims to foster an environment where student veterans can thrive both academically and personally.

The main facilitators of the program are VITAL coordinators. These individuals are VA employees who may work full time on a college campus or make regular visits to meet with students. These coordinators can help veterans enroll in VA benefits, find affordable housing and transportation (read “meet basic needs”), manage their finances, and connect with peer mentors. Coordinators may also provide training to campus faculty and staff to help them understand the unique challenges faced by student veterans.

Individuals are eligible to participate in the program if they meet Veterans Health Administration criteria for health care services and are enrolled in the VA health care system.

## **Academic Excellence: The Core Pillar of VITAL**

Academic excellence is a primary objective of the VITAL program. Through tailored academic advising, tutoring, and mentorship, student veterans receive individualized support that enhances their learning experiences. VITAL coordinators can assist student veterans in increasing time and stress management skills, contributing to better classroom performance, and may also help the student veteran obtain appropriate accommodations such as extra time for exams or assistive technology. In addition to the general services provided by VITAL coordinators, many campuses have specific resources available such as a six-module video series on academic success created by the Salt Lake City VA.<sup>iv</sup> By addressing potential academic barriers early on, the VITAL program empowers student veterans to achieve their full potential and reach their educational goals.

## **Promoting Mental Well-being**

Student veterans often face unique mental health challenges resulting from their military experiences and the complexities of transitioning to civilian life. During the military to civilian transition, 44 to 72 percent of veterans experience high stress levels.<sup>v</sup> In a 2018 evaluation report on the VA mental health services,

authors noted that “41 percent of veterans were found to have a potential need for mental health care.”<sup>vi</sup> A more recent report identified that 14 to 16 percent individuals deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq showed signs of PTSD or depression.<sup>vii</sup> If these veterans do not get the proper support, issues are likely to worsen into more complex issues.<sup>viii</sup>

An important issue addressed by the VITAL program is the general stigma around mental health stigma among veterans.<sup>ix</sup> VITAL puts their coordinators immediately within the community of student veterans on a campus in order to change the culture and learned behavior brought from the military. Access to the VITAL program at Texas A&M-College station has created a sense within the student veteran community on campus that promotes help-seeking behavior. Student veterans on campus have responded to the available short-term mental health services available and are now encouraging one another to engage with the program.<sup>x</sup>

The VITAL program provides access to mental health counseling and support groups specifically built within a veteran context, creating a safe space where veterans can share their experiences and receive the assistance they need. The VA College Toolkit states that VITAL can help with stress and time management issues, as well as the treatment of clinical conditions like PTSD and depression.<sup>xi</sup> VITAL can also help student veterans coordinate connection to outside community resources if that is the place most suited to help the individual. Prioritizing mental well-being is not only beneficial to the veterans but also contributes to the overall campus community's welfare.

With the busy schedule of student veterans enrolled in classes, sometimes working full-time, caring for children or family members, etc., student veterans often do not prioritize leaving campus for mental healthcare.<sup>xii</sup> In the face of barriers like transportation, accommodation, and scheduling, many student veterans chose not to participate in mental health care even when they know it is available. VITAL coordinators are available on campus to conduct a variety of outpatient care options, suitable for most student veterans before, between, or after classes. As the program is designed for the student veteran, many of these barriers can be avoided, thus making services much more accessible and utilized.

### **Successful Transition to Civilian Life**

A VITAL representative in Texas says that he builds relationships immediately with new student veterans on campus each semester. He uses the space provided by the university to have conversations with incoming or current student veterans to ensure that veterans have a place to open up about issues stemming from their transition.

The VITAL program places significant emphasis on equipping student veterans with essential life skills and resources for a successful transition to civilian life. Workshops and training sessions on career development, financial management, and networking opportunities are integral components of the program. This focus on holistic growth prepares student veterans to excel in their future careers beyond the academic setting. This is part of VA's emphasis on whole health, which identifies the individual in need of care before providing that care. In this way, transition out of the military is facilitated by a whole health approach, where not only physical and mental are keys for a successful transition, but where family and social support are essential for that transition as well. The VITAL program is the whole health approach to transitioning from military service into higher education.

## **Fostering Community Engagement**

A sense of belonging and camaraderie are crucial for student veterans' successful integration into college life. The VITAL program encourages community engagement through various activities and events, fostering a supportive network that enables student veterans to connect with peers, faculty, and staff who understand their unique experiences. The program works cohesively where Student Veteran of America chapters are available and provides an otherwise unavailable resource where they are absent. The peer support that comes from someone with shared experiences or who comes from a shared culture, such as military service, helps prevent lower GPA and negative adjustments that come from the isolation prevalent in first-generation college students,<sup>xiii</sup> a group to which a majority of student veterans belong.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **VITAL and VSOC: Two Parts of a “Whole” Approach**

In service to student veterans, challenges can arise when the veteran interacts with both the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Most student veterans and all student veterans using their education benefits to complete their degree interact with VBA to process education benefits, certify their enrollment every semester, and gain access to their monthly housing allowance and book stipends. Fewer interact as immediately with the VHA, seeing health care as a secondary need to education and funding.

The VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program developed by the VBA is similar in many goals to the VITAL program. It “aims to help Veterans, Servicemembers, and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling, leading to completion of their education and preparing them to enter the labor market in viable careers.”<sup>xv</sup> Just as the VSOC program facilitates students’ use of VBA services and education benefits, fostering success in the classroom, the VITAL program creates a pathway for students enrolled in school to access VHA services. The two programs working together create wrap-around services that meet the needs of the “whole” student veteran.

While some veterans may be apprehensive of VHA services, VITAL’s strength lies in its ability to work with veterans where they are to meet their needs with access to a community of service providers.

## **The Impact of VITAL: Success Stories**

Throughout its implementation, the VITAL program has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting academic achievement and enhancing the overall well-being of student veterans. Numerous success stories stand testament to the program's positive impact on the lives of its participants. Based on direct feedback from SVA chapter members, we know the VITAL program is incredibly popular with student veterans where they have access to it. The VITAL program provides veterans with on-campus access to critical VA health resources such as clinical care for mental health issues and assistance with disability accommodations. Unfortunately, the program is woefully underfunded and underutilized, existing at merely 160 of the 19,109 schools approved for VA education benefits.<sup>xvi</sup> In other words, veterans have access to VITAL at fewer than one percent of approved schools, and at fewer than five percent of degree-granting institutions within the U.S.

Schools with strong veteran offices and thriving SVA chapters need VITAL. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas is one such university. Their UNLV Military and Veteran Services Center and Rebel Vets student organization had been looking for another way to support student veterans more holistically. Understanding that there are underlying physical, emotional, cultural, financial, academic and other challenges facing student veterans requires a multifaceted approach to service. Where a student veteran office offers support from the academic institution and an SVA chapter offers support through shared-experience peer relationships, VITAL can provide the essential services needed for transitioning veterans backed by the power of the VA.

The VITAL office at Texas A&M University at College Station has been incorporated within the university office for long enough that the coordinator has been able to build relationships with not only the campus community, which has allowed more immediate campus connections, but also the local VA medical facility. These relationships provide direct connection to offices and personnel who can provide immediate assistance to student veterans. The need for this reduction in navigation time and errors supports the busy schedule of student veterans, who often balance school with family and work obligations. Their newest efforts surround academic accommodations for student veterans with disabilities acquired from service who enroll in classes but need accommodations in order to be successful in the course <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **Advocating for Ubiquity: The Case for Widespread Implementation**

An oft-overlooked program that quietly excels, VITAL is a Veterans Health Administration (VHA) program that provides on-campus mental healthcare and support services to student veterans and, when needed, coordinates with VHA, VBA, and community care providers. In addition, VITAL provides education and training on student veteran-specific needs for campus faculty and staff to further aid schools in creating a more welcoming community for transitioning student veterans through cultural competency guidance.

When viewed in the light of VA's "Whole Health" treatment objective, VITAL's broad portfolio of services stands out as well-designed, flexible, and responsive to the day-to-day needs of student veterans. Based on public opinion surveys conducted by SVA and from stories like those above, one can see how important programs like this are to student veterans. In those surveys healthcare and mental healthcare services have been identified as the top two issue areas on which veteran service organizations should focus their advocacy efforts.

Unfortunately, in its current state the VITAL program cannot reach its full potential. First, there are currently not enough VITAL program sites to support the number of student veterans making the transition to civilian life through higher education. Second, the distribution of the sites that do exist leaves many states and entire geographical regions without access to the program. The figure below displays the distribution of sites by state as given by the VA College Toolkit website.

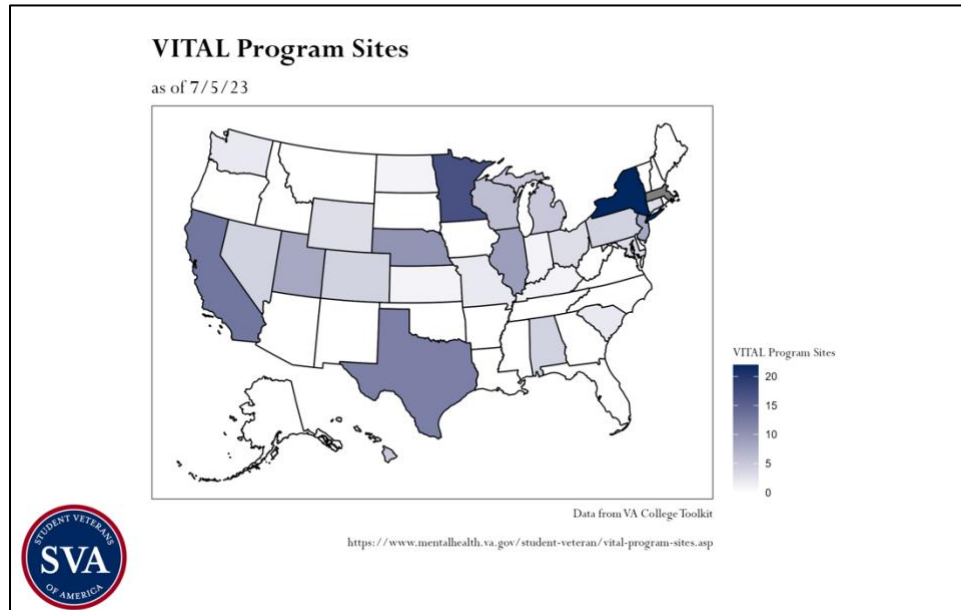


FIGURE 1 . LOCATIONS AND SIZES OF VA VITAL AVAILABILITY .

Third, the types of services offered are not consistent across different sites. Many offices focus almost solely on helping the student veteran gain access to clinical mental health help, while providing fewer services for other health supports. This greatly diminishes the utility of the VITAL program.

SVA would like to see VITAL program capabilities expanded on campuses across the country through increases in annual funding and by making on-campus access to VA Healthcare, including the use of telehealth technology, and coordination with community care providers a top agency priority. This could not only increase student veteran access to VA healthcare, but access for veterans in the broader community as well, empowering veterans of all stripes to seek and receive the health care services they need.

The G.I. Bill can be a gateway to VA healthcare for Post-9/11 veterans, one of the groups VA struggles most to reach, because of the portion of transitioning Post-9/11 veterans who choose higher education after service. However, many student veterans only engage with the VA during enrollment certification because that is the only time they are primed to do so. VITAL can be the usher to escort those veterans through that gateway and into more of the institution, with access to not just education benefits, but also home loans, healthcare, and more.

### **Implementing VITAL on campus: A case study in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

In 2015, Hawai'i Senator Mazie Hirono voiced her desire for the VA's PTSD Clinical Team to participate in the VITAL program to serve as a link between the VA and local university campuses. As a result, the VA approved two full-time psychologists to begin work on developing sites at local campuses to better support the integration and success of student veterans. The VITAL therapists established official Memorandums of Understanding with private, public, two-year, and four-year campuses based on O'ahu.

The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Leeward Community College (part of the University of Hawai‘i system), and Hawai‘i Pacific University were selected based on the high number of student veterans enrolled on their campuses.

Initially, the VA offered a six-area approach to serving these students:

- On-campus clinical counseling for student veterans with PTSD or other concerns.
- Assisting the veterans with understanding and accessing VA healthcare and other veterans’ benefits.
- Providing information about PTSD and VA services to University of Hawai‘i staff and faculty.
- Working with professors in an attempt to enhance student veterans’ potential for academic success.
- Offering to serve as a guest lecturer on topics such as PTSD, the VA’s role as a healthcare provider, or other related military or mental health concerns.
- Collaboration with counselors currently located on campus in other offices.

The UH Mānoa Vice Chancellor for Students, Dean of Students, Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, and Counseling Center Director were all involved in the collaborative effort to establish this program. In order to bring the program on campus, the VA had very minimal requests. They required an office space where student veterans could be seen for individual or group counseling, a secure data connection for integration with VA systems, and a telephone to take calls and schedule appointments. On a campus where vacant office space is rare, the biggest challenge was identifying an appropriate safe and confidential location for the therapists. An ideal space was identified that was near, but not in the Office of Veteran Student Services and adjacent to the Counseling Center, to maintain the privacy of other UH Mānoa students seeking mental health services.

The relationship between the University and the VA required more than just sharing space and personnel. Mutual responsibilities were developed around quality assurance, risk management, and safety. After consultation with Information Technology Departments and General Council, mutual obligations to safeguard information security and personal data were created to protect student data and personally identifiable information. The University required VA employees to comply with the policies and standards of the University of Hawai‘i Information Security Plan concerning school policies, security incident reporting, and authorized information technology equipment. VA employees remained subject to Federal statutes and regulations concerning the protection of data and personal information.

Developing a successful working partnership between the two organizations required understanding and flexibility of two large bureaucracies that are both committed to the success of student veterans. It took orientation sessions, consistent outreach, tabling events, and special programs on campus before many student veterans utilized VITAL, but the impact of the presence of a VA therapist on campus has been seen, and the service provides the student veteran community important options for mental health and well-being.

One student veteran said, “Having a reliable support system and engaging with trustworthy professionals who understand our veteran experiences has been invaluable to our mental health program.”

## Conclusion

On campuses, VITAL can assist colleges in building a more veteran-inclusive culture by “[i]mproving understanding of Veterans' unique strengths and challenges through education and training delivered to the campus community.”<sup>xvii</sup>

The VITAL program is a crucial support in enhancing the return on investment for student veterans in the following ways:

***Enhancing Campus Diversity:*** The VITAL program's integration would contribute to a more diverse and inclusive campus community, where the experiences and perspectives of student veterans are acknowledged and valued.

***Improving Success Outcomes:*** By providing the necessary support and resources, the VITAL program can positively impact student retention and graduation rates among veterans, helping them complete their degrees and achieve their educational aspirations.

***Strengthening Communities:*** Through school and after graduation, student veterans become leaders, professionals, and advocates within their communities, utilizing the skills acquired through the VITAL program to positively influence society and their communities.

The VITAL program is a pivotal initiative that enhances the educational experiences of student veterans and fosters their successful integration into civilian life. This white paper underscores the importance of widespread implementation of the VITAL program on college campuses across the nation, emphasizing its positive impact on academic success, mental well-being, and overall community growth. By advocating for the ubiquity of the VITAL program, colleges and universities can embrace a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment that honors and empowers those who have served our nation.

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