

# Ask & Connect in Practice:

## Mary, a Single-Parent Student Veteran

### Activity 5a: Identifying Opportunities for Engaging Individual Students

**Instructions:** Please read the first two vignettes below. The first vignette describes an experience from the student's perspective, and the second describes the same experience from the college's perspective. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns. The student vignette is based on the experience of actual students.<sup>1</sup>

#### Student Experience



Mary is a veteran and a single parent of two young children. She enlisted in the U.S. Navy immediately after high school and recently left after 12 years of service. She is currently working part-time as an office assistant but ultimately wants to obtain a bachelor's degree to build a path to a career offering greater financial stability. Excited to start a new chapter in her life, she enrolled at her local community college using her GI Bill benefits. Her enthusiasm, however, was quickly dampened by a number of setbacks.

After her first semester, Mary still has not declared a major and is confused about what program to choose. She would like to do something related to engineering that allows her to use the knowledge she gained as an aviation technician in the Navy but is unsure which program would be the best fit for her skills or which courses are best suited for transfer. She thinks some of her prior military experience and training might qualify as credit for prior learning but does not know how to have it certified. In addition, applying for GI Bill benefits was more complicated than she anticipated. Because she hasn't declared a major yet, it is unclear which courses her GI Bill benefits do and do not cover and what she needs to do to maintain her benefits. She knows there are staff at the veteran's resource center who should be able to help with all of these issues. A flier on campus informed her that the veteran's resource center

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Student Veterans of America. (2017). *I am a post-9/11 student veteran*. <https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/I-AM-A-POST-911-Student-Veteran-REPORT.pdf>

Michaels, D. (2020). *Female student veterans' transition to college* [Master's thesis, Eastern Illinois University]. The Keep. <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/4775><https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/4775>





offers academic advising and assistance with tuition benefits. She would like to schedule appointments with both an academic advisor and the GI Bill benefits certifying official but has been unable to find time to do so because the center is only open 9 am–5 pm Monday through Friday. Between juggling her work schedule and the availability of child care, the only time she would be able to visit the center is after her classes end at 5:30 pm, when the center is closed.

The transition to civilian life is also proving challenging. Although Mary is proud of her service, she does not want to be defined solely by her status as a veteran. At the same time, she has a hard time relating to non-military and non-veteran students who don't understand her experiences. Thinking that it would help to connect with other student veterans, she stopped by the lounge created for veterans on campus (which is open beyond standard business hours whenever campus facilities are open). However, she was discouraged when she was confronted by a roomful of male veterans who ignored her, and she does not plan to return. The incident reminded her of the gender discrimination she faced during her time in the Navy, where oftentimes men with the same level of experience were respected and listened to while she was questioned and excluded.

At home, Mary is struggling to find time for coursework while attending classes full-time, working part-time, driving her children to and from daycare and school, and helping her older son with his homework. The stress of managing everything is negatively impacting her mental health and triggered two severe panic attacks within the past month. With no clear academic direction or support network on campus, she is beginning to wonder if college is worth it.

### **College Perspective**

Administrators at the community college Mary attends believe the college is doing a good job supporting student veterans. The college has had a veteran's resource center for many years that is staffed by a certifying official and two work-study students funded by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. In addition, the college recently transformed one of the school's general academic advising positions into a specialist role dedicated to advising veterans and invested in extensive renovations to convert an unused classroom into a separate lounge for veterans. The lounge was decorated by student veterans on campus and includes computers with free printing, loaner laptops, comfy chairs and couches, and a regular supply of snacks and beverages. To promote awareness of these services, veteran's services are prominently displayed on the college website and fliers across campus. Finally, to foster a welcoming and inclusive culture for student veterans, the college holds a series of events annually on Veterans Day.



## Discussion Questions

1. What missed opportunities or areas of disconnect did you observe in the vignettes?
2. Thinking about your own college, why do many students struggle to navigate and/or not use various student support services?

## Activity 5b: Turning Individual Engagement into Universal Support

**Instructions:** Please read the “Alternative Experience” vignette to imagine how the principles of Ask-Connect could have been used to better support the student. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns. The vignette draws from research on college practices to support student veterans.<sup>2</sup>

### Alternative Experience

Recognizing that the availability of services does not necessarily mean they will be utilized, the community college engages in intentional efforts to understand who their veterans and other military-connected students are in order to provide targeted outreach. The college not only reviews data on the use of VA education benefits to identify military-connected students but also added a question to the college application for students to self-identify in case they do not plan on utilizing tuition benefits. A student support specialist housed within the veteran's resource center emails each military-connected student and encourages them to visit the center.

To best meet the needs of military-connected students, the center is set up as a one-stop resource that includes academic advising, tutoring, assistance with VA benefits, and mental health counseling as well as a student lounge. All students identified as military-connected are informed that the academic advisor in the veteran's resource center is their assigned advisor. Aware that student veterans are not a monolithic population and that female veterans in particular are likely to have had different experiences and have different needs, the college hired a female veteran to serve as the student support specialist for the center and prominently features female student veterans in a promotional video about the center. To further enhance a sense of community for military-connected students, especially among commuter students unable to stay on campus outside of classes, the college developed a section of the first-year student success course specifically for military-connected students.

---

<sup>2</sup> Karp, M. M., & Klempin, S. (2016). *Supporting military veteran students: Early lessons from Kohlberg Prize recipients*. Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

In addition to designing services and supports specifically for veterans, the college deliberately incorporates the needs of veterans and other military-connected students in college-wide student success initiatives. When the college implemented a new degree audit and education planning tool, the academic advisor for the veteran's resource center was invited to participate on the planning committee to ensure that education plans aligned with requirements for VA tuition benefits. Finally, as part of a college-wide effort to elevate the student voice, the college regularly conducts student surveys and focus groups. In doing so, the college learned that many working students, including many student veterans, would benefit from later service hours and the flexibility of virtual appointments. As a result, a number of services, including those offered through the veteran's resource center, now offer later hours and online appointments.

In this alternative scenario, Mary received two encouraging emails shortly after enrolling: one from the veterans' specialist with information about support services for veterans, and one from the academic advisor for veterans with information about resources for educational planning and career exploration. Because the advisor offered virtual appointments, she was able to schedule an appointment that worked for her to talk about her experience in the Navy and to identify a program that built off her experience. The advisor also helped Mary receive credit for prior learning from her military experience and referred her to the certifying official for assistance navigating her tuition benefits.

### Discussion Questions

- How could Ask-Connect practices be used to create a different experience for the student? What questions would you ask the student?
- Thinking about your college, in what ways might you be able to integrate Ask and Connect practices to provide a coordinated support network, rather than sending students to a variety of isolated/stand-alone services?
- How would you know students are accessing the new Ask and Connect practices and that they're having a positive impact on new students?