Women Veterans: ‘Invisible Warriors’ on Your Campus

Do you have a hidden group of women at your school whose needs aren’t being addressed? You do if your student body includes women veterans.

Following reintegration, military women don’t think of themselves as “veterans.” Whether through denial or pride, they believe that they don’t need special assistance. Often their service is misunderstood or discounted.

“"My experience was that for many years, I didn’t identify with being a vet," said Michelle Cyrus, diversity office at the Center for Diversity and Social Justice at Central Washington University (CWU), who left the Army after five years to raise a family.

At the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) conference held in Phoenix in March 2012, three student affairs professionals with ties to the military spoke about the issues surrounding women veterans. They also suggested ways to help schools to become more veteran friendly.

Other panelists were Katrina Whitney, senior director of the Empowerment Center at CWU and Rafael Lozano, veterans’ benefits enhancement program manager at The Evergreen State College WA.

Speaking from their experiences, the trio also shared the results of a study they conducted. Cyrus, whose husband was and whose son is now in the military, wishes she had been able to stay in the service long enough to retire from it. Lozano served in the Air Force. Whitney was a military dependent whose father served in the Navy.

Statistics tell the story

More than 230,000 women now serve on active duty; they are 14% of all active duty soldiers and 18% of National Guard/Reserve members. Women are 20% of new recruits. Of 23 million living veterans, 1.8 million are women.

Military culture prides itself on being “hyper-masculine,” said Whitney. “It’s very male-oriented and driven.” The close-knit, sexist culture erects barriers for women who want to be respected for doing their job. It also contributes to women’s invisibility.

To better serve the veterans they currently work with, the trio conducted a study of some 40 women, all veterans from World War II forward, to assess their military experiences. It included women from different branches and ranks, as well as enlisted personnel and officers.

Most interviews were in person. Not all of the veterans were originally from Washington State; for many it was their last station so they stayed there after discharge or retirement.

Their experiences differed significantly depending upon a woman’s role. “The military makes a distinguishing difference between an officer and enlisted, and between ROTC and active duty,” said Cyrus.

Women officers reported very positive experiences about their time in the military, although they noted their having to do more and be better than the men to earn respect.

Many of the enlisted women reported more negative experiences, including sexual trauma. “When you come in as enlisted, you’re nothing,” she said. When you’re told what to do, you do it even if it means scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush. There were also significant differences between the experiences of women and their male peers.

Motherhood and children played a big role in determining whether the military experience was positive or negative. Currently 11% of women in the military are single parents, compared with only 4% of their male peers.

Women who were officers chose to have children later in life, while the enlisted women chose to have them during their service. “We see the same kinds of things happening to women that appear in the corporate world,” said Cyrus. Many postpone childbearing until they’ve reached a certain level.

Women face unique challenges

Improvements in battlefield medicine mean today’s veterans receive very different injuries from those who were in Vietnam and earlier. Many return with “invisible” injuries such as traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rather than visible physical effects.

There’s been a change in women’s roles, too. In the past, women who served in war zones were nurses who operated away from the front lines. Now women are being sent into villages to build relationships with the locals in high combat zones, putting them at risk for the same injuries as their male counterparts. Women with less education have a greater risk of experiencing PTSD.

But female soldiers are also returning from combat with
something more—military sexual trauma (MST)—which they tend to keep to themselves, leaving them more vulnerable to mental illness. The Department of Defense defines MST as rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment.

The military is still very much a man’s world. Females in the military are perceived as either lesbian or promiscuous. The presence of women, especially in more male-oriented roles, is seen as threatening tradition. Some male soldiers and superiors react negatively to women’s successes by inflicting physical or emotional abuse on them.

Women who’ve experienced MST rarely report it for fear of being transferred to another unit or having the perpetrator attack again. They are well aware that reporting an incident could end a career.

Reproductive issues also affect women more directly. Although there’s a “no-sex” policy while in the theater of operations, pregnancy does occur. Abortion is not allowed at military hospitals.

Women soldiers also face other unique issues. Many units have few women serving in them, leading to isolation. They’re less likely to benefit from the camaraderie and social support of the unit, due to power and control issues that men don’t face.

Visibility equals credibility

A lot of veterans say they want to blend in to campus culture when they enroll. But many also want the specific privileges that come with having been in the military.

Perhaps it’s just the nature of being a woman, but women vets take on an invisible role when coming back to school, said Cyrus. They want to disconnect from their military experiences and are less likely to acknowledge their being a vet, more likely to be homeless and more likely not to file for benefits or to drop their applications when faced with barriers.

Because women are more likely to access counseling and therapy to deal with mental trauma than male vets, the problems they face are more “functional” rather than “clinical.” Things such as housing, financial and legal problems, work stress, unemployment and educational/training needs all have practical solutions.

Despite programming specifically targeted at this group, Whitney and Cyrus find it difficult to get women veterans to volunteer and be part of informational panels. One woman and her husband started the veteran’s association at CWU; only two have taken a visible role and spoken out on their experiences at the school.

Visibility leads to credibility. “ Civilians have a warped sense of all vets,” said Cyrus. “They think that they all have PTSD and are dangerous,” especially those veterans returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Women vets face even more challenges to their credibility. People don’t understand the concept of a female vet. They don’t know what the women did overseas and they’re not seen as “warriors.”

Some respondents said that the hardest thing for them was the transition from the military to civilian life, especially the loss of community: “Veterans get out and then don’t have the support they did while serving and all too often isolate ourselves from other veterans and services.”

Creating ‘vet-friendly’ campuses

To make women veterans’ transition to higher education successful, start by recognizing and respecting them. Engage them through programs specifically for women vets.

• Create an on-campus event that celebrates and acknowledges women’s service. CWU hosted a summit for some 600 former service members, mostly women. This event helped Cyrus feel pride in her service.

“It was a magnificent phenomenon to see all these women veterans and to realize that I’m part of this elite group,” she said. “I AM a military veteran. I served my country. I protected my country just like the men standing next to me.”

• Give women a voice to tell their stories. Offer them opportunities for social interaction and engagement.

• Partner with local organizations, churches, vets centers and workforce development centers. Help them to find suitable housing, childcare options and employment to solve their functional problems.

• Encourage the veterans to seek out allies in other students, faculty and staff. Create a safe space for women vets and explore developing a center specifically for them.

Understanding women’s experiences in the military can help you develop programs that will effectively serve their unique needs. With the military drawn down in the Middle East and the expanded G.I. bill offering these veterans greater access to higher education, now is the time to do it.

—MLS

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