

Disability Compliance

for Higher Education

Successful Strategies for Accommodating Students and Staff with Disabilities

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Memory aids: Equal access or success and fundamental alteration?

By Michael R. Masinter, Esq.

Some schools have added memory aids to their list of standard test accommodations for closed-book testing, but memory aids, sometimes called memory cues or cheat sheets, are a far cry from conventional test accommodations. Extended time, reduced-distraction rooms, and other common testing accommodations alter testing conditions but do not alter the test itself. By contrast, memory aids alter the test itself by supplying the student tailored information directly relevant to successful test performance.

Schools that offer memory aids for closed-book tests do so for students with traumatic brain injuries and concussions, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, and some psychiatric disabilities on the

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STUDENT-VETERANS

Work effectively with BIT to assist student-veterans

By Joan Hope, Ph.D., Editor

When you work with student-veterans as a disability services provider, you probably collaborate with other offices and groups on and off campus. The Veterans Affairs Administration and your institution's veteran support office are a few good resources. Your college or university's behavioral intervention team can also assist in helping student-veterans adjust to campus life and meet the goals they set when they enrolled.

Brian Van Brunt, executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, said the two most important things to know about behavioral intervention teams working with student-veterans are:

1. The BIT should not be synonymous with punishment. A good BIT identifies behaviors early, while there's still time for the student to get help. "BIT,

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when done well, is a connection to services,” Van Brunt said.

The BIT’s goals are to prevent problems for the student or the institution and to help students stay on campus, he said. If others see BIT and threat assessment efforts as punitive or adversarial, that creates a problem with rapport. “The idea of being preventative, collaborative, helpful, and caring is at the heart of BIT work,” Van Brunt added.

2. The BIT will focus on assessment rather than making assumptions about what it means to be a student-veteran. College officials shouldn’t assume that all student-veterans will express the same behavioral issues and do so for the same reasons.

However, some student-veterans might be struggling with events that occurred when they were on active duty, Van Brunt said. If they are asked to write an essay about current affairs, they might have difficulty taking the assignment seriously, he added. Behaviors such as hypervigilance, a startle reflex, sensitivity to loud noises, and irritability might occur in the classroom.

But other student-veterans are ideal students, Van Brunt said. We always should be careful to avoid making assumptions about groups of students based on our bias, he added.

Understand BIT process

Some campuses had informal BITs before the mass shooting at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2007, Van Brunt said. But after the incident, colleges and universities began to formalize the BIT process, increasing the volume of people identified as at-risk and considering how an institution prevents getting sued.

Van Brunt said the three phases of the BIT’s work are:

1. Gathering data, marketing, advertising, and soliciting information from anyone who might have concerns.

2. Applying a risk rubric. Using evidence, team members discuss issues that pose a danger.

3. Building interventions. The BIT connects individuals to care, based on their risk rating. There are five levels of risk: mild, moderate, elevated, severe, and extreme.

Most teams meet every week or every other week, Van Brunt said. They generally have eight to 10 members, and one is often from disability services. An institution with a high student-veteran population might also include a representative from veterans services.

BIT teams are much stronger when there are members that have working knowledge of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act regulations, Kolpin said.

“At NaBITA, we describe the BIT as a central place for sharing of information in order to keep students safe. With the exception of licensed medical and mental health providers, certain clergy, and human resources, all others on BIT fall under FERPA when it comes to information sharing,” Van Brunt said. “This allows disability staff, veterans affairs, academic affairs, student conduct, law enforcement, nonclinical case management, and Title IX to share limited information with the BIT under FERPA’s legitimate educational interest clause,” he added.

“In scenarios where there is a potential emergency or risk of violence, FERPA allows for sharing under its emergency exemption clause. This information should always be shared as needed and with the least information that still allows the BIT to have what it needs to make better-informed decisions. There never should be a point where entire psychological records, diagnostic, testing, or other private information should be shared,” Van Brunt said. Summary information is appropriate, he added.

Disability services providers who serve on a BIT can help the process go well for student-veterans, said Thierry Kolpin, associate professor of school counseling in the School of Education at Brandman University. He recommended that DSS providers focus on the following issues:

➤ Make sure the student does not feel alone. The student needs an advocate. Students need assurance that their voice is being heard and they are not being singled out, Kolpin said.

➤ Address issues using a holistic approach. When students are referred to the BIT, there is often more going on than the particular behavior that resulted in their referral, Kolpin said. The BIT should call on resources both within the institution and in the community beyond it, with the goal of supporting the student on a long-term basis.

But the BIT is not a substitute for the conduct process, Van Brunt said. For example, if a student has a pattern of difficult conversations with professors, that might be a student-conduct issue. “There is no reasonable accommodation for shouting or threatening others,” Van Brunt said. However, how campus officials handle a situation would be different for a student with extenuating circumstances compared to how they would handle it for a student having a bad day, he added.

Focus on preventing behavioral issues with student-veterans

Some student-veterans encounter challenges adjusting to the culture of a college or university. Kolpin and Pedro Olvera, former curriculum team lead and associate professor for school psychology at Brandman, shared strategies for preventing problems from occurring with these students:

- Educate advisors and faculty members. Help them communicate in ways that help veterans know they are being heard, Kolpin said.
- Don't make assumptions about technical knowledge. "Don't assume that because you have technology, people will be able to access it," Kolpin said. If you tell students to log in for access to resources, they might not know how to do that. Listen carefully and clarify instructions as often as you need to, Kolpin added.
- Be aware student-veterans might be facing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. The data are pretty clear that the number of veterans with these disorders has been underestimated, Kolpin said. You don't have to provide treatment, but you do need to direct students to resources that can help them, he added.
- Ensure the institution's functions are easy to access. A one-stop shop where students have contact with all services makes adjusting to college life much easier for veterans, Kolpin said. If support systems are available but students don't know about them, that doesn't help, he added.

➤ Encourage student-veterans to ask for help. Many veterans and military personnel are hesitant to share their life experience, Olvera said. If they ask for help or accommodations, many of them feel like they are cheating, he added. Administrators and disability services staff members should be prepared to spend time convincing them that it's OK to ask for help, he said.

➤ Support students into fieldwork. Problems sometimes arise when student-veterans start fieldwork, Olvera said. Olvera serves as a liaison between the university and K-12 schools where education students complete their field experience. That's usually in the third year of classes. Sometimes student-veterans, having spent years in the hierarchical culture of the military, are frustrated when kindergarten children do not respond the first time they are asked to do something, Olvera said. They also are not used to the politics of a civilian work environment.

At Brandman, the students engaged in fieldwork meet weekly with their professors and other students. Sharing their experiences and problem solving together helps student-veterans make the transition, Olvera said. As a last resort, Brandman officials might look for a different supervisor who will enable the student to be more successful.

Email Brian Van Brunt at brian@ncherm.org and Thierry Kolpin at tkolpin@brandman.edu. For more tips on working with student-veterans with disabilities, see Loren O'Connor's article on page 6. ■

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