

# AHEAD-VETERAN NEWSFEED

A tri-annual newsletter brought to you by the AHEAD—Veteran Special Interest Group

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Leadership Team



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## JAMES WEIER JOINS SIG LEADERSHIP TEAM:



Please join us in welcoming James Weier of the University of Mississippi. As the AHEAD-Veteran SIG continues outreach, particularly to veterans with disabilities, we are committed to making sure all our materials, online and otherwise are fully accessible to the public. James has joined the AHEAD-SIG Leadership team as our Technology Specialist to guide the SIG in this direction.

James Weier is originally from Belleville, Illinois. He currently serves as the Adaptive Technology Specialist in Student Disability Services with the University of Mississippi. He earned a B.S. in Biology at St. Louis University in 1992 and an A.A.S. in Network Technology in 2002. Prior to becoming an Adaptive Tech Specialist, James has worked in the computer/networking field for many years. He refined his computer/networking skills as a part-time home and small business IT consultant, senior helpdesk technician, and as an instructor of Novell Netware client/server software. Eventually, based on his diverse computer/networking knowledge and experience, he was hired as an Adaptive Tech Specialist at St. Louis Community College and was employed there for over 9 years before moving on to Ole Miss.

Currently, his primary duties as an Adaptive Tech Specialist at the University of Mississippi include alternate format conversion, assistive technology training, and accessible web design. In addition to these duties, James has presented to staff, techniques and best practices in alternate format conversion of print and electronic documents accessible to persons with disabilities, as well as testing the University website for accessibility issues, and any other duties that may require his experience in accessibility and Universal Design. Since joining the SIG Leadership team, James immediately became a valuable asset to the work we do.

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## SIG Updates:



- The AHEAD-Veterans SIG is expanding its scope. We've traditionally focused our messaging to AHEAD members and disability service providers. Starting in April, the SIG's updates will change format from a monthly listserv-only email to a tri-annual newsletter. The newsletter will still go out on the SIG listserv, but will also be available on the SIG's AHEAD landing page. With a familiar slogan of the disability rights movement was "nothing about us, without us," we want to progress the movement into the student veteran space by ensuring student veterans with disabilities are included in the work we do. It's a way to provide informed feedback instead of a prescription. Short-term, the inclusion lends credibility to the work we're doing as more consistent information is passed from one veteran to another. Long-term, we leverage the potential of future leaders to be advocates of diversity on a more meaningful level and scale.
- This past winter, we created a Facebook forum in collaboration with professional associations and organizations, and asked current student veterans to be moderators. The forum provides a central place to exchange information, ask questions, get answers, and help one another.
- Another area beginning to trend is with the Disability Services Liaison (DSL) positions. The DSL serves to connect student veterans with disability services. The position can be funded by the VA workstudy program, so there's no cost to the school. The student veteran gains some practical knowledge of academic accommodations and can provide some cultural competency about veterans. A working draft of the DSL toolkit is available by contacting [dan.standage@studentveterans.org](mailto:dan.standage@studentveterans.org).
- The Disability Service Point of Contact (DS POC) database is ongoing. Dan Standage and his team has been working to locate DS reps on each campus with a Student Veterans of America (SVA) Chapter. As of March 1, SVA has 1400 Chapters in the US, its territories, and in four other countries. On average, they add about 15 new Chapters each month. They have identified approximately one-third of the DS POCs for those campuses, and have all schools in WA, CA, OH, NV, and NC. The information gathered is Name, title, department, phone, email, and URL. This information will augment other projects by facilitating communication.
- Also, from the inside: one of the SIG's collaborators - SVA is working with VA Vocational Rehabilitation, VITAL, and VSOC to bring these resources together. These programs support veterans with disabilities in higher education. The collaboration is focused on knowledge-sharing and informed feedback.
- The 2017 Bataan Memorial Death March was held at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico on March 19. It is one of the top 30 marathons in the US. This year marked the 75th anniversary of the infamous WWII event. The memorial march commemorates the survivors with a grueling 26.2-mile marathon through rocky

mountain terrain and loose sand trails. Over 7200 individuals participated. The Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) sponsored an all-veteran team that included five blinded veterans and three sighted guides. Dan Standage, of the AHEAD-Veterans SIG, Tim Hornik, who is pursuing his PhD, and Nate Gotham who is enrolled in law school. Lonnie Bedwell and Steve Baskis were the other members of the team. The small team started and finished together. Total walk time was 8 hours 7 minutes, but due to the large crowd and limited space at aid stations, the total time was more than 11 hours. This year's event was the hottest on record, with 87-degree temperatures and clear, sunny skies. Photo courtesy of Victor Henderson of Blind Endeavors.

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## Knowing Your Rights and Options as a Student with Disabilities:



In January, Dan Standage presented Knowing Your Rights and Options as a Student with Disabilities at SVA's NatCon 2017. The session focused on information to empower student veterans with disabilities and reviewed the implementation of a Disability Services Liaison (DSL).

According to Dan, military and disability cultures often clash. That simple reality may make it difficult for student veterans with disabilities to be competitive with their peers in school and career. Although this demographic has protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, few have had any elementary or secondary school experience with those laws. Even fewer of them may understand how and when to harness the laws' many protections so they can maximize their chance of success in college. The college personnel who are charged with implementing those laws on campus may not understand military culture and are more familiar to working with students who have many years of history working under the anti-discrimination laws in an educational setting.

It is essential that veterans with disabilities know whether, when, and how to disclose; what kind of documentation they should be prepared to provide if they are requesting modifications; what kinds of classroom, residential, and other modifications are available and may be considered; their role in the interactive process; the nondiscrimination protections that are afforded to them; disability vocabulary; how and when to file disability-related grievances; where to go for assistance if their college is being unresponsive; how to develop coalitions and support systems; and other key topics.

The DSL positions offer an opportunity for student veterans to get involved with the process, facilitate collaboration between disability services and student veterans, and provide an entry point for consistent information in this unique population.

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## Student Veteran Spotlight:



My name is Maureen Elias. I am mother to three children on the autism spectrum, wife of a US Army Captain, full time mental health counseling graduate student at Bowie State University (BSU), President of the Student Veterans Association at BSU, Vice President of the BSU Graduate Student Association, 2017 Fort Meade Base Spouse of the Year, veteran advocate, and a disabled veteran. I am slated to graduate in May 2018, after which our family will immediately PCS to a location we do not yet know. I served as a counterintelligence agent for five years and enjoyed my time in the service immensely. Unfortunately, some injuries obtained in Advanced Individual Training degraded to the point where I had to end my time in the service with a medical discharge. I look forward to finishing my degree and working with veterans as a mental health counselor.

I had been out of the service for almost a decade when I began pursuing my master's degree. I did not think the struggles I had heard about for veterans entering the university setting would apply to me. However, I found myself seriously considering dropping out 6 weeks into the program. A majority of my classmates were considerably younger than me with little to no life experience. The veteran population at my school was nearly invisible. It took me almost six months to find out we had a small center for veterans on campus. Once I began spending time at the veteran lounge, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with students going through the same experiences I was going through and meet the student veteran coordinator who began connecting me with resources on campus.

As a disabled student veteran, one of my most difficult struggles is asking for accommodations in class. I do not want to stand out more than I already do. Due to an injury to my wrists, I need to take tests via computer instead of written. Due to a physical injury, I need a seat where I can easily get up and stand and sit as needed. Instead of policies already in place, I have to renegotiate terms with each professor of how my disabilities will be accommodated. Working with the student disability coordinator is not easy. The military mentality in asking for accommodations shows that you are not a team player and I struggle with this mindset when trying to advocate for my needs.

Higher-ed personnel would be better equipped to connect with military-affiliated students through educating themselves on how to interact with veterans and understanding the mentality of asking for accommodations equals weakness to veterans. By offering examples of accommodations we may need, having a list of what accommodations are available, and making an appointment for us to see them a mandatory requirement for orientation, schools may be better able to connect with, understand, and meet the needs of disabled student veterans.

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## BUZZFEED: 10 Things You Should Know About Disability in Education for Veterans



The items below are commonly overlooked pieces of information that may help you better understand student veterans with disabilities.

### **1) Instance of disability is higher in student veterans.**

32% of all Post-9/11 era veterans have a service-connected disability compared to the 17.4% of all other eras combined. Approximately 1 in 2 student veterans are reported as having a disability of some kind. This indicates that education is used as a transition and rehabilitation tool. This claim is supported anecdotally by student veterans.

### **2) Veterans are unaware of self-disclosure requirements of Section 504.**

Veterans are recruited into military service for their health and are likely to have no exposure to Special Education or disability-related supports in education. The Department of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Administration (VA) prioritize treatment, not prevention or education. This means that veterans are coming onto campus unaware of critical support services.

*Solution: Disability service outreach to this student population is important.*

### **3) Veterans may not know if they have a disability.**

A veteran may have filed a disability claim, however the VA may not have made a determination. The claim may also be in the appeals process awaiting adjudication. If you speak of disability-related services, a veteran may not consider themselves eligible and may not reach out for services if they do not have concrete information of a determination. Integrity is a core value of military and veteran culture. The DoD has a set of core values that are shared amongst the various branches of military. Integrity is part of each branch's ethos and reinforced during basic training/boot camp. The Stolen Valor Act is also based heavily on integrity; specifically, not misrepresenting one's military service. Dishonesty is the rough equivalent of being an imposter and a threat to the tribe. That threat can be seen as a tarnish to all veterans by way of a negative stereotype, or something more serious like taking advantage of people or one another. At any point on the spectrum, it becomes a violation of trust—a component of a veteran's core value system. People outside of the military-connected community may not understand how important this one is, especially considering the culture conflict that occurs with self-disclosure and disability identity.

*Solution: Consider offering temporary/interim accommodations/services until a VA determination is made.*

#### **4) The VA determines disability through an actuary model.**

VA disability ratings are designed to determine benefit entitlements, not ability. This means the higher the rating the more loss the VA is compensating the veteran for. A more familiar model to non-veterans is short and long-term disability insurance.

#### **5) VA has three major divisions.**

Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). By design, VHA and VBA do not share information. VBA manages entitlements, such as GI Bill and disability compensation. Physician documentation may be found online through [ebenefits.va.gov](https://ebenefits.va.gov) and eliminating the need to make a medical appointment.

#### **6) The GI Bill is a book of many chapters.**

Chapter 31, VA Vocational Rehabilitation (VAVR), requires veterans to have a 30% disability rating or more for eligibility. The other half-dozen chapters don't have the disability requirement. This means that all VAVR clients have a disability of some kind.

#### **7) The GI Bill has a tutoring allowance.**

Tutoring Assistance is a supplement to the GI Bill. It defrays the cost of tutoring when a veteran is deficient in a subject and is attending school at half-time or more.

#### **8) VA workstudy program.**

An added benefit of the GI Bill is VA workstudy. It's fully-funded by the VA, it gives veterans a tax-free income source, and work experience. Consider creating a position for a veteran so your office can connect with more veterans. Consider the power of a peer and the tribal culture of veterans on this one.

#### **9) Every Purple Heart recipient was injured, but not everyone injured receives a Purple Heart.**

The Purple Heart is awarded only to those wounded in a designated combat zone. Injuries sustained outside of that zone, such as in training accidents, disease, and conditions aggravated by military service may have a service-connected disability rating with the VA, but don't qualify for a Purple Heart.

#### **10) The most underused services by student veterans.**

Disability services, counseling services, academic advising, tutoring, and career services are used infrequently by student veterans. If a veteran sees a peer using these services, they are more likely to use them also.

*Solution: The message here is about helping veterans help each other. Providing information about disability-related services to your student veteran organization on campus is an excellent method of outreach.*

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***We are always looking for articles or information of interest pertaining to supporting student veterans with disabilities in the higher education landscape. If you are interested in submitting information for publication in the AHEAD-Veteran Newsfeed please contact: Jorja Waybrant at [waybrantj@unca.edu](mailto:waybrantj@unca.edu).***

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