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Community, Purpose, and Empowerment: Developing a Support Program with Student Veterans

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COMMUNITY, PURPOSE, AND EMPOWERMENT:

DEVELOPING A SUPPORT PROGRAM WITH STUDENT VETERANS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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Abstract

This set of mixed-method studies evaluated factors impacting student veterans at a Midwestern community college, particularly their sense of community and how their perceptions and experiences relate to academic success. Research on student veterans indicates that many face challenges beyond physical and psychological injury, including difficulties in acclimating to an academic culture and navigating bureaucratic processes. The quantitative and qualitative studies also examined the impact of the academic setting, social climate, supportive services that relate to student veteran perceptions of their sense of community and other academic processes. In the quantitative study, relationships were found between sense of community, membership, connectedness, and academic persistence. Regression analyses indicated that a sense of connectedness was the strongest predictor of academic persistence. In the participatory qualitative study, observations, individual interviews and focus groups included student veterans, administrators, faculty members, family, and other community stakeholders (i.e., employers that regularly hire veterans). The findings suggested that student support services, such as veteran-concentrated classes and mentoring, seem to have a more beneficial impact when they emphasize components that enhance a sense of community and sense of purpose.

Community, Purpose, and Empowerment:

Developing A Support Program with Student Veterans

Over the past decade, colleges have seen a steady rise in student veteran population. Nearly one million veterans have attended or are currently pursuing post-secondary education on the post 9/11 GI Bill (Cate, 2014). Student veterans are typically older than traditional students, must often balance their education with family responsibilities, and take longer to complete their education. These challenges may be a result of veterans having different supportive needs than traditional students. Reports on the completion rates of student veterans have been mixed, with media outlets emphasizing high "failure" rates. Colorado Workforce Development Council reported an 88% dropout rate for veterans within the first year, with only 3% of Colorado student veterans actually graduating (as cited in Briggs, 2012). Studies show dropout rates are much lower than that reported by the media (Student Veterans of America, SVA, 2014). According to the Million Records Project (c.f. Cate, 2014), 52% of student veterans have completed degrees or certificates Data compiled from the American Community survey consistently suggest that over 60% of student veterans complete their degree programs (as cited in Cate, 2013). In comparison, the national completion rate for a bachelor's degree is 59% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). The collection of these findings suggest student veteran completion rates are closer to the national average than the media reports. Yet given that nearly 40% of veterans are not completing their goals for higher education suggests there is great room for improvement in the support these students receive.

The unique challenges student veterans face can impede their transition from the military into student life and eventually their academic success. Some difficulties relate to the physical and psychological injuries sustained during military service, others to readjustment to civilian

communities, and some to challenges navigating the educational system. Community colleges may be integral to smoother transitions for veterans because they allow students to live within their home community while pursuing higher education. More comprehensive student support services programs, dedicated to the unique needs of student veterans, could also enhance their transition into the academic community.

Physical and Psychological Injuries

Many educational institutions have disability services that support students, although, prior to service, few veterans required academic accommodations, and therefore are most often unaware of the resources available and, for reasons of stigma, may be less likely to seek them out (Grossman, 2009). Many student veterans may struggle without realizing that supportive resources are available. For instance, some injuries are not considered a disability by the military, and yet veterans may qualify under the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) (Madaus, Miller & Vance, 2009). Additionally, as a result of military culture, many student veterans are hesitant to self-identify disabilities sustained during service (Shackelford, 2009).

Traumatic Brain Injuries. Between 2000 and 2014, over 300,000 cases of Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) were reported to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (2014). These injuries can result in cognitive impairments in areas such as attention, concentration, planning, organization, judgment, problem–solving, and impulsivity; accommodations have been found to improve student veteran academic performance.

The rigorous demands of a college curriculum can be taxing for any student, but it is particularly demanding for those impacted by TBIs. Surveys of student veterans with TBIs reported high rates of "cognitive fatigue" due to mental demands, and approximately 25% had

previously dropped out of college, citing cognitive fatigue as the cause (Smee, Buenrostro, Garrick, Sreenivasan & Weinberger, 2013). The mode of teacher communication and instruction can reduce cognitive demands, thus decreasing cognitive fatigue. One neuropsychological study, not limited to student veterans, indicates that verbal learning and memory performance was significantly reduced after sustaining a TBI, while visual learning and memory performance remained largely unaffected (Sozda, Muir, Springer, Partovi, & Cole, 2014). Applied in an academic setting, these findings suggest the importance of the visual representation of concepts, such as presenting information in charts and diagrams, as opposed to disseminating course information solely through auditory means such as lecturing. Additionally, information provided by the administrative offices may be best understood through written documentation rather than verbal instruction.

Other Physical Injuries. Although TBIs generally receive more attention in the education world than other physical problems, other physical injuries often present serious challenges for student veterans. Hearing impairment (including tinnitus) is one of the most common injuries sustained during service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). Blast waves from explosives can rupture eardrums, causing irreparable damage to audioreceptors; yet rarely do they lead to veteran referrals for hearing-related services, and when referrals do occur, rarely are they followed through due to stigma associated with hearing impairments (Oleksiak, Smith, St. Andre, Caughlan & Steiner, 2012). Such impairments result in some student veterans missing information presented orally in class, and they can even impede communication with peers, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kersting, 1997).

Other physical injuries limit mobility, such as back or leg injuries, burns and amputations, impeding the academic experience. In one student veteran's account, the time it

takes to navigate campus on crutches adds to the challenge of scheduling classes, and the energy

expended getting to class leaves her with little energy to focus (Branker, 2009). Students with

injuries experience frequent absences due to severe pain or appointments for medical care

(Church, 2009). Pre-registration for student veterans could allow more flexibility for students to

develop course schedules that could allow more time for them to navigate the campus; and more

consideration could be given to student veterans in courses with strict attendance policies.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Psychological injuries such as Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) also make transitioning into an academic environment challenging, and can

seriously impede academic performance. Higher levels of PTSD are negatively associated with

academic adjustment (Ingala, 2012) and are strongly related to suicide risk (Rudd, Goulding &

Bryan, 2011). In a survey of 525 student veterans, Rudd et al. (2011) found nearly half of the

respondents reported symptoms of PTSD, and 46% reported suicidal ideation. Further, 82% of

student veterans reporting a suicide attempt also reported symptoms of PTSD, highlighting the

urgency of support systems within academic institutions.

PTSD symptoms include the re-experiencing of trauma, avoidance, detachment, and

hyperarousal (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). Hyperarousal tends to make people

with PTSD hypervigilant. As a result, students with PTSD are often scanning the environment

for potential danger, resulting in difficulties in focus and concentration and increased anxiety. A

qualitative Participatory Action Research study examined how these symptoms can encumber

academic performance (Ellison, Mueller, Smelson, Corrigan, Stone, Bokhour, Najavits, Vessella,

& Drebing, 2012). Participants reported overwhelming anxiety within the classroom as a result

of triggering stimuli such as loud noises or feeling uncomfortable, surrounded by too many other

people. Student veterans reported coping with anxiety by sitting near the back of the room, using

substances, or leaving school altogether; the students suggested variations such as smaller class sizes, and alternative settings for exams, or online classes, which have the potential to moderate anxiety.

The anxiety experienced by student veterans may be exacerbated by their cognitive challenges, such as difficulty concentrating, or their perceptions of these challenges. Cognitive deficits as a result of PTSD negatively impact test taking ability, and yet exam-related anxiety may be reduced by more effective coping strategies (Rutkowski, Vasterling, Proctor & Anderson, 2010). Student veterans in the PAR study (Ellison et al., 2012) indicated accommodations such as allowing tape recorders and additional time for assignments and exams may also reduce anxiety and compensate for cognitive barriers.

Traditionally, academic institutions rely on students to self-identify and request accommodations. Because many student veterans choose not to self-identify injuries, nor recognize the potential negative impact on academic performance, student support services must take a proactive approach in outreach to raise awareness in the faculty as well as the student veterans themselves.

Navigating the Academic System

Rigid military structure contrasts greatly with the individualistic, sometimes fragmented, organization found in academic institutions. Being long accustomed to strict protocols can result in a cultural challenge for veterans trying to transition from soldier to student, particularly in navigating institutional systems (Ellison, et al., 2012). Military orders are absolute and daily life is prescribed; yet college students are expected to demonstrate initiative, adapt as problems arise, and make independent decisions. The process of registering, selecting courses, and obtaining financial aid can be daunting and confusing. In an interview, one student veteran stated "I mean,

we used to be told to go here, there, and everywhere, but if you don't know really what you're looking for, it's kind of hard to find it. ... (In the military) there was always a commanding officer to tell you what to do and how to do it." (Ellison, et al., 2012, p 214).

Military culture suppresses any natural tendency to ask for assistance. A student veteran who encountered a problem with registration may be much less likely to ask for help. Interviews with student veterans indicated their experiences of difficulties finding staff knowledgeable about veteran-specific financial aid questions, or faculty familiar with the challenges faced by student veterans (Ellison, et al., 2012). The variety of veteran-specific issues highlights the importance of establishing a department, or, at minimum, a specially-trained staff person dedicated to veteran-related administrative services (Vance & Miller, 2009). Illinois State Senator and veteran, Michael Hastings, has proposed Senate Bill 705 which would require colleges to post veterans' guidebooks on their websites as well as require colleges with at least 1000 students to hire a veterans' coordinator providing centralized guidance ("Hastings helps centralize," 2017).

Mentoring

Literature addressing peer-mentoring in higher education indicates successful academic outcomes. An experimental study examining the efficacy of three mentoring styles found significant positive outcomes in higher grades and successful completion rates compared to a control group, regardless of mentoring style (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon & Schabmann, 2014). In another analysis of a mentoring program in a community college, participation predicted social and academic integration and indirectly predicted academic persistence (The Impact of Mentoring, 2010).

In addition to mentee outcomes, students serving as mentors may develop as well. In a study examining the impact of mentoring programs on the mentors themselves, it was found that mentors gained altruistic gratification, enhanced communication, leadership skills, and positive social connections (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012). Similarly, a qualitative study examining the role of mentoring relationships on academic success found that mentoring led to positive outcomes such as increased academic engagement and reduction of anxiety in both mentees and mentors (Snowden & Hardy, 2012).

Research on veteran-specific peer-mentoring is scarce. However, a recent dissertation suggests the benefits of a veteran peer mentoring program could extend beyond an academic context (Buechner, 2014). Using a phenomenological approach to the transition from military to academia, mentoring was found to play a profound role in reintegration into civilian life in addition to transition into a student role. Even without substantial empirical evidence, veteran mentoring programs are becoming more common on university campuses. Through the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) program, developed at University of Michigan, student veterans are partnered with trained mentors (Spinner, 2016). Over 40 universities have collaborated with University of Michigan to receive training and replicate the program; however, few of the partner institutions are community colleges.

Veteran Cohort Models

Participation in a learning community increases academic engagement in the classroom and collaboration with faculty, which in turn impacts academic outcomes (Rocconi, 2011). Self-determination theory suggests that cohort and learning community models create environments where students feel a greater sense of social relatedness, which, in turn, can enhance motivation (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011). The construct "relatedness", defined as "a

feeling of belongingness and connectedness with others" (p. 859), corresponds with

connectedness, and was found, by the researchers, to be the most influential variable predicting

students' sense of contribution to their academic development.

Another study, using a learning community model, and employing a mixed methods

evaluation, found that participants in the program were significantly more likely to re-enroll and

report more active engagement in learning, compared to the comparison group (Tinto & Russo,

1994). Results also suggested that students built stronger social connections with peers and spent

more time studying with peers, suggesting, from the interview data, increased class attendance

and academic persistence. In another study, several students indicated their desire to persist was

directly related to their participation in the learning community (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Consequently, civilian literature supporting the efficacy of learning communities suggests

promise for the student veteran population.

A pilot program at University of Arizona employed a cohort model to deliver curriculum

to veterans transitioning into higher education addressing resiliency, learning-teaching, and

leadership (Markel, Trujillo, Callahan, & Marks, 2010). Results revealed a high retention rate in

the program and indicated that cohort participants had a strong perception of success and the

likelihood to graduate. It was unclear whether the results were a result of the social connections

fostered through the cohort model, the curriculum itself, or a combination of both factors. The

promising results of learning community-based models warrant further exploration.

Veterans Resource Centers

In response to a growing awareness of student veterans' needs, some colleges have

developed Veterans Resources Centers (VRC), physical spaces in which the college can

coordinate administrative services and allow student veterans to congregate. At the University of

Alaska, a recently opened Veterans Center streamlines enrollment, financial aid, and support

services while also providing space "for veterans who rely on one another to regain the

camaraderie lost when they left active duty" (Community College Week, 2014, p. 1).

Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) developed a Veterans Resource Center including

administration staffing, a lounge area where student veterans could relax and decompress, as

well as a small computer lab where veterans could study in a quiet environment (Ahern, Foster,

& Head, 2015). SLCC staff had observed that student veterans with PTSD, often hypervigilant of

their surroundings, were distressed while working in crowded public computer labs. The smaller

lab designated for student veterans offers a safe space in where veterans can work more

comfortably with fewer distractions. Additionally, the Center offers a location where student

veterans can connect with each other, thus providing mutual social support while more

effectively facilitating their transition into higher education.

Though there is currently little research exploring the development and efficacy of

Veterans Resource Centers on student learning, retention, or transition, their growing popularity

indicates their necessity. As Church (2009) suggests, the culture of solidarity and reliance on one

another within the military develops a strong sense of camaraderie that can assist veterans in

their transition into civilian student life; and as such, colleges can utilize this as they create

transition programs for student veterans. Mentoring, veteran cohorts, and VRCs offer

opportunities for student veterans to foster positive relationships critical to enhancing their

success.

Sense of Community

A survey study of 692 institutions of higher learning revealed that 62% of institutions

offer some type of program geared toward student veterans (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead,

2012). Most programs emphasize assistance in financial aid and support for service-related

injuries, but only 37% included services that assist students in transitioning from military duty to

college life. Support programs that address the needs of student veterans with disabilities are

undoubtedly essential; however, the majority of student veterans do not have disabilities.

Programs that solely emphasize response to "wounded warriors" may alienate veterans who

sustained no injuries and yet could still benefit from academic support services (Bonar &

Domenici, 2011).

Although only a minority of veterans sustained disabling injuries, the majority of

returning soldiers do face considerable challenge in reintegrating into daily life (Danish &

Antonides, 2013). Many veterans return home to face questions about their sense of purpose and

identity. Social support systems are key to successful reintegration. Consequently, academic

programs should address social engagement.

In a qualitative case study examining student veteran transition issues, many reported

difficulties transitioning from social supports received in the military to an academic setting

(Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Respondents referred to their military peers as family, starkly

contrasted by their perception of fellow students, who were seen in a much more individualistic,

sometimes competitive nature, within the academic culture. Student veterans felt separated from

their civilian peers by differences in personal characteristics as well as life experiences. They

reported frustration with peers, citing perceived poor work ethic and immaturity, which

contrasted with the expectation of military self-discipline. Global awareness and unique life

experiences set these students apart from what they perceived as naïve, inexperienced peers.

Although some student veterans reported appreciation for the respect they received from peers,

they did not feel their peers understood their lives or the challenges they currently face.

Results in a similar study echo these themes as well as indicate a sense of separation from faculty members (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Some student veterans indicated a desire to blend in with other students and avoid being identified as veterans. One participant suggested civilian students seem unsure of appropriate conversation topics, as evidenced by one student asking him if he had ever killed anyone. Some student veterans perceived a sense of hostility within the classroom environment, particularly when discussions involving politics arise. One professor referred to American soldiers as "terrorists" (p. 89). Another student reported dreading attending a class because the professor often prodded him for insights about military experiences. Several respondents were motivated to connect with fellow student veterans, though no formal organization existed within the institution. These results underscore the need for awareness raising cultural diversity for students and faculty as well as a need for formal student veteran organizations.

A definitive construct of sense of community may seem elusive. Sarason (1974) likens understanding sense of community to hunger: it may be difficult to clearly articulate how hunger feels, but one clearly recognizes the dangers of starvation. Similarly, student veterans may not necessarily articulate experiencing the lack of sense of community; yet, the feelings of isolation as a result of its absence are palpable. Sarason defines sense of community as "the sense that one was part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness…" (p. 1). This clearly expresses the need for student veterans to establish connections within a supportive network of faculty and peers.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four key elements that contribute to a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and emotional

connection. Although all four elements are vital to the development of sense of community, this study focuses on the elements of membership and emotional connection. Membership involves a sense of belonging within a group, and student veterans often report lacking this sense of belonging within educational communities. Further, membership provides a means of emotional safety, a secure social setting in which members feel safe sharing feelings. This is an essential factor in student veterans feeling comfortable in disclosing emotional challenges. Shared emotional connections involve a shared sense of past events. As McMillan and Chavis explain, group members do not need to share the same history, but rather a sense of identification with one another's history. Student veterans may not have served in the military together or even in the same branches of service, yet their shared histories are enough to define their experiences as unique from those of civilian students, providing a range of distinct understandings amongst themselves.

A large survey study of college students, not limited to student veterans, revealed student sense of belonging was closely related to a feeling of being valued as an individual and treated with care and respect (Cheng, 2004). As simple as this sounds, the finding highlights the importance of engaging individually with each student, and addressing the diverse needs of each student veteran, not just approaching the population as a whole. Further, the study found that loneliness had the most impact on a student's negative perception of sense of community. Considering that veterans in many previous studies indicate a sense of loneliness, this is a critical element to address when designing support services programs for this group. Study results suggested that organized social events and student clubs are important vehicles that foster opportunities for feelings of connectedness. Finally, the study stressed the importance of positive

faculty-student interaction, underscoring the necessity for faculty awareness of student veteran

needs.

A separate, related study supported the assertion that out-of-classroom involvement is

related to general student perception of sense of community (Elkins, Forrester & Noel-Elkins,

2011). Students who were involved in student activities felt higher levels of engagement in

learning as well as campus community connectedness. Participation in conferences and

workshops related to a stronger sense of community which researchers attributed to increased

interactions with faculty. Additionally, students participating in recreational sports and fine arts

reported lower feelings of loneliness.

Most of the aforementioned research was conducted within four-year institutions which

typically offer a wider variety of resources and opportunities for social programming as

compared to community colleges. Nevertheless, community colleges and smaller universities

with limited resources can impact the cultures of their own settings in a way that maximizes the

quality of social interactions for student veterans. Contextual factors such as institutional policy,

attitudes of faculty and peers, and the culture of the local community influences the sense of

campus community.

Researchers and veterans themselves, Summerlot, Greene, and Parker (2009), identified

three classifications of campus climate that describe veteran perceptions of social connectedness:

supportive, challenging, and ambivalent. Supportive climates tend to have strong ties to military

services, and to faculty and administration who are veterans, and to opportunities that help them

connect with fellow veterans through student organizations. Challenging climates are campuses

with political upheaval and anti-military sentiments, often leading student veterans to conceal

their veteran statuses to avoid criticism. In ambivalent climate, student veterans tend to succeed

in easily blending in with other students; though connecting with fellow veterans is difficult.

Commuter institutions such as community colleges tend to foster ambivalent climates,

highlighting the importance of developing strong student-veteran organizations to foster a sense

of community.

       Tinto's model (1975), the preeminent model of academic retention, underscores the

necessity of social connections. In addition to personal attributes related to academic integration,

such as prior education and grade performance, social integration is necessary to develop

institutional commitment which in turn leads to academic persistence. Social integration is

achieved primarily through positive interactions with faculty, participation in extracurricular

activities, and most frequently, informal peer interactions. These interactions allow for social as

well as academic support, thus increasing the likelihood of academic success and retention.

Moreover, students who perceive themselves as different from the normative student culture are

less likely to dropout if they are able to make social connections to others they perceive to be

similar to themselves. This suggests subcultures within the institutional social system is

particularly important for non-traditional students to develop a sense of belonging. In a more

recent model, Tinto and Pusser (2006) assert that support is especially important to

underrepresented student groups. They recommend that colleges foster social connections

through clubs, mentoring programs, learning communities, and specialized student centers.

"Such centers provide much needed support for individual students and a safe haven for groups

of students who might otherwise find themselves out of place in a setting where they are a

distinct minority" (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 14). Though the authors do not specifically identify

student veterans as a minority group, their nontraditional student status and specific learning

needs differentiate them from traditional students and frequently lead to a sense of isolation.

Thus, programs designed to foster social connections with similar students could enhance a sense of community within the college yielding greater institutional commitment.

A strong sense of community in the classroom is related to satisfaction of an educational experience as well as measurable academic performance. An experimental study evaluated the impact of six variables of sense of community (connection, participation, safety, support, belonging, and empowerment) on civilian student perceptions of the course as well as their academic outcomes (McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweitzer, 2006). Students in the experimental group received instruction infused with elements incorporating each of the six variables, which included three important constructs for this study, *connection*, *belonging, and empowerment*. Results indicate that students with a stronger sense of community had more positive perceptions of the course as well as higher academic performance. Connection in this study referred to the personal awareness students had of one another, and belonging referred to the instructor's personal acquaintance with each student. The present study considers both constructs together, defining connectedness as a personal or emotional acquaintance with another individual, within the community, regardless of role. The present student considers a sense of belonging to a class, group, or community as membership.

Empowerment in the McKinney et. al. study (2006) referred to the students' active participation in daily classes as well as the planning and execution of some course activities. Empowerment in this present study is defined in terms of Rappaport's (1987) description as the student's sense that he/she is in control of his/her own decisions.

Purpose of the Studies

The purpose of this set of studies was three-fold: 1) to evaluate the relationship between sense of community (with particular emphasis on membership, connectedness, and

empowerment) and intended academic persistence; 2) to gain a broader understanding of student

veteran experiences and their perceptions of support services; and 3) to trace and evaluate the

development of a veteran-led support services program. Study 1 focuses on the evaluation of

relationships between sense of community and academic persistence.

Study 1: Method

It is hypothesized that a stronger sense of community, as well as the sub-constructs of

membership and connectedness, will positively correlate with academic persistence plans.

Additionally, it is hypothesized that empowerment will positively correlate with academic

persistence.

Design

Quantitative measures were collected to evaluate the student veterans' perceived sense of

community with emphasis on membership, connectedness, and empowerment. Measures of

student veterans' long-term plans were also collected to determine whether a relationship existed

between sense of community and student sense of persistence in their current academic program.

Participants

Survey participants were recruited through the campus Veterans' Financial Aid (FA)

Coordinator. An email was sent to all student veterans in the email database (89 students)

explaining the purpose of the study, inviting them to participate in interviews, and requesting

completion of an anonymous online survey with the survey link embedded in the email. Paper

copies were also distributed at a weekly Veterans' Club meeting. Participants received a coupon

for a free drink from the cafeteria as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

Instruments

The questionnaire was developed based on a compilation of demographic information, measures of academic persistence, assessment of student support service needs, modified versions of the Sense of Community Scale 2 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008), the Psychological Sense of School Membership (Goodenow, 1993), the Campus Community Scale (Cheng, 2004), and a modified version of an Empowerment Scale (Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison, & Crean, 1997) (See Appendix A for the full survey). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of academic persistence using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Participants were asked questions such as: "I plan to enroll in courses at this institution next semester," and "I intend to graduate from this institution." The same Likert scale was also used to assess respondents' evaluations of student support needs with questions such as "I would use a Veteran Center if one was available." Scales measuring sense of community utilized a 4-point Likert scale asking questions such as: "I feel valued as a person at this institution," "I have felt lonely on this campus," and "I feel accepted as part of the campus community"

Procedures

Quantitative data using the survey instruments were collected via an online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey as well as a paper version. Participants received a paper version of the questionnaire at a Veterans Club meeting, and a follow-up email was sent to all student veterans on a listserv containing a link to the questionnaire. Surveys were either anonymously completed online and automatically submitted; or returned in a self-addressed envelope with the consent form returned separately to protect anonymity.

SurveyMonkey was used to collect and store quantitative data. Interviews were transcribed with codes instead of names to ensure anonymity. All study-related material was kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office on campus to maintain confidentiality.

Regression analysis was used to determine relationships between sense of community, empowerment, and self-reported academic persistence plans. Descriptive measures of perceived student support needs were intended for use by the college to prioritize attention to fulfilling the most urgently identified needs.

Study 1: Results

Through surveys, the study evaluated student veteran perceptions of their college experiences, academic needs, the interrelation of education and reintegration, as well as the perceived sense of community and student academic persistence plans. The following variables were assessed in relation to sense of community: membership, connectedness, and empowerment. Regression analyses were used to identify predictors of persistence.

Descriptive Results

Thirty surveys (of 89 student veterans) were completed (yielding a 33.7% return rate). The majority of respondents were male (87.5%). The branches of service were represented as follows: Army (78.3%), Navy (8.7%), Air Force (8.7%), and Marines (4.3%). Thirty percent of the respondents listed at least one service-related injury: Twenty percent of the respondents indicated they had been diagnosed with a back injury, 16.7% with PTSD, 13.3% with a hearing impairment, 10% with a mood disorder, 6.7% with an anxiety disorder, and 3.3% had a TBI. The mean age was 29. The mean length of time since service discharge was 9.47 years with a minimum of 4 months and a maximum of 49 years (SD = 14.16).

Findings

The Sense of Community Index scale consisted of 6 items (α=.832). The Membership subscale consisted of 9 items (α=.802), the Connectedness subscale consisted of 7 items (α=.897), and the Empowerment subscale consisted of 5 items (α=.704). Cronbach's alpha for the 4 items measuring Academic Persistence was .751.

Participants reported on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 indicating unfavorable responses and 4 favorable responses, yielding mean scores: sense of community (*M*=3.06), membership (*M*=3.36), connectedness (*M*=3.13), and empowerment (*M*=3.33).

Step-wise regression analysis was used to determine if sense of community, membership, connectedness, or empowerment predicted academic persistence. Results indicated that the model accounted for 24% of the variance (R^2=.244, F(1,28)=9.045) of academic persistence. Of the four predictors, only a sense of connectedness was significant (β=.494, p<.01).

A second regression analysis was run to determine whether aspects of sense of community predicts empowerment. In a separate paper, the researcher theorized that sense of community and empowerment may be interdependent; further, the sense of feeling connected to others may enhance one's sense of control of one's own life (Stevenson, 2015). In this present study, the regression analysis evaluating sense of community, membership, and connectedness as predictors for empowerment also indicated that connectedness predicted empowerment (β=.465, p<.01).

Due to redundancy of related variables, the regression analysis likely failed to show individual relationships. Additional correlational analyses illustrate the relationships between each variable. Academic persistence was significantly correlated with sense of community (r=.427, p<.01), membership (r=.482, p<.01), and connectedness (r=.494, p<01). There was no

significant correlation between empowerment and academic persistence (r=.271, p=.074), but

empowerment was significantly correlated with sense of community (r=.322, p<.05),

membership (r=.435, p<.008), and connectedness (r=.465, p<.005).

Exploratory Analysis

As previous literature (Kersting, 1997) suggested, civilian students with hearing

impairments feel more isolated, therefore, similar results were predicted within this sample. This

led to an independent samples t-test comparing items related to loneliness and feelings of being

different between student veterans with and without hearing impairments. Students veterans with

hearing impairments (*M*=2.25, *SD*=1.50) reported significantly higher levels of loneliness on

campus than student veterans without hearing impairments (*M*=1.32, *SD*=.63). Student veterans

with hearing impairments (*M*=2.25, *SD*=1.50) did not significantly differ from student veterans

without hearing impairments (*M*=1.92, *SD*=1.00) on a measure of feeling different from other

students.

Beyond measurement of individual attributes, additional analyses examined participant

perceptions of setting and supports. Items were included on the questionnaire for future use in

developing a support service program, including questions about a Veteran Center and Disability

Services. A majority of respondents (86.7%) indicated participants would use a Veteran Center

(a space designated solely to student veterans for studying or social gatherings) if one was made

available. When asked if students were aware of the support Disability Services offered, 63.3%

responded there were not aware of these services. Although a minority of participants (30%)

reported a service-related injury, the lack of awareness of Disability Services may suggest that

more information provided during registration could be helpful.

Study 1: Discussion

This study explored the relationship between sense of community, specifically membership and connectedness, empowerment, and academic persistence. The participant sample focused on student veterans within a small Midwestern community college. Previous studies consider student veterans within universities; however, sense of community differs within an institution designed for commuting students, and resources can vary for smaller schools. A great number of veterans attend community colleges, thus it is important to assess their experiences within these settings.

As hypothesized, the quantitative data revealed sense of community, membership, and connectedness positively correlated with academic persistence. No significant correlation was found between empowerment and academic persistence; however, this may be attributed to a small sample size. Empowerment was significantly related to sense of community, membership, and connectedness, suggesting that this construct still warrants consideration when developing supportive academic programs as well as future study using larger sample sizes. Regression analysis revealed connectedness predicts academic persistence. This finding underscores the importance of fostering positive, meaningful relationships among student veterans and with faculty.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size in this study, generalizability is limited. However, it is important to note that the findings in this study were consistent with those of previous studies. Further, due to the small sample size, the present study did not differentiate between branches of service or method of instruction (seated versus online courses) and perceived campus experiences. Additionally, this study specifically evaluated experiences within a small

community college. Experience within larger institutions or four-year universities could vary. Future studies should include a large, more diverse sample within a variety of academic settings.

Study 2

A qualitative approach was used to gain a broader, contextual understanding of student veteran academic experiences, needs, and strengths. Interviews were conducted with student veterans, family members, faculty, administration, and community employers in an effort to understand the experience from an ecological perspective.

Research questions for the qualitative portion include: 1) the enrollment process; 2) the barriers student veterans face; 3) the perception of student veterans of community college sense of community; and the 4) impact of transition from military to civilian life on education.

Study 2 examined stakeholder perceptions of the need for enhanced awareness of both faculty and students, social support, classroom modifications, and specific procedures for student veterans with disabilities.

Study 2: Methods

Design

In Study 2, qualitative interviews were conducted with student veterans, family members, faculty, administration, and community employers to gain broader, contextual understandings of student veteran academic experiences, needs, and strengths. Emphasis was placed on varying perceptions of student veteran experiences and sense of community within and around the community college.

Participants

The Veteran Financial Aid Coordinator and the advisor of the Veterans Club verbally solicited volunteers for student interviews. One transferred student veteran and five current

student veterans, two family members, several faculty and administration, and a community

employer, identified by members of the Veterans' Club, were interviewed.

Instruments

Semi-structured qualitative interview questions were developed, seeking student veteran

responses to their perceptions of campus community and identified needs (See Appendix B for

full list of questions). Sample questions include: *"Can you tell me about your best experience*

since you decided to enter college?" "How connected do you feel to other students? To

faculty?" and *"What would you love to see that would be really different at KCC that would*

completely make you feel better, more empowered, more connected here and beyond?"

The interview for family members (Appendix C) were designed to address how those

interpersonally close to student veterans see the students' educational outlook impacted by the

college, home, and prior military experiences. Questions included: *"How is the student*

balancing coursework and home responsibilities?" and *"What impact has attending school had*

on the veteran's transition?"

Interviews for faculty and administration (Appendix D) addressed awareness and

perceptions of veteran needs, such as *"Considering student veterans you've had in the past, what*

types of support needs do you perceive?" and *"What type of training do you think would be*

helpful to better address these needs?" Employer questions focused on graduating veteran work

performance (Appendix E): *"What are some of the strengths that veterans bring to the*

workplace?" and *"What are some skills/attributes that you think colleges can help develop to*

enhance work performance?"

Procedures

All participants signed consent forms. To ensure comfort for the student veteran participants, interviews were conducted in a private conference room that minimized loud noises and unexpected interruptions. To enhance the comfort level of the remaining student veteran interviewees, a former student veteran assisted the researcher in conducting the student veteran interviews. This was particularly important given some questions addressed psychological injuries such as PTSD and its relation to academic performance. Most questions that could trigger negative emotional responses were avoided. Participants were advised they could stop the interview if they became uncomfortable at any time.

Once the data was collected, the interviews were transcribed, and a grounded theory approach was utilized to determine themes. After examinations of the data two evaluators were used to increase reliability in the identification of themes. After data were coded and themes identified, results were shared with the participants and other members at the college's Veterans Club. This member-checking technique was used so participants could affirm their experiences were accurately interpreted, and to help them in thinking more deeply about their future initiatives to better support student veterans.

Study 2: Results/Discussion

The eventual student qualitative sample included six male veterans and one female veteran. Three participants served in the Army, and one Marine, Navy, and Air Force veteran each. Half of the respondents had been diagnosed with at least one psychological injury, and two with physical injuries. The additional stakeholders beyond the veterans provided much important, supplemental data.

The modified grounded theory approach was used to derive themes rooted in the narratives of the college's student veterans. While keeping an eye out for narratives related to empowerment and sense of community an otherwise open coding method was used with the data. Using an inductive method, repeating themes were identified and organized into coherent categories. The veteran who conducted the interviews additionally and independently coded the interviews to enhance reliability in deriving themes. When the full set of themes were identified and agreed upon, they were brought back to the participants as a form of member-checking, to ensure their voices were properly reflected in the categories.

The interview themes tapped into several areas that were emotionally challenging for student veterans: *the impact of injuries*, difficulty naviga*ting administrative processes*, challenges in *transitioning* from military to education, and themes related to *sense of community*, including cultural differences, and feelings of isolation, as well as positive experiences connecting with other veterans and faculty.

The Impact of Injuries

Students with injuries indicated they had difficulty concentrating in classes, managing time to complete coursework, and developing plans to complete assignments. A spouse of one student veteran stated:

> *Something as little as writing assignments down, he didn't think about. He was so used to routine, now if a schedule changes, he forgets assignments because of all that and all the other internal struggles. He's struggling with PTSD. It's hard to focus on homework when he didn't sleep the night before and he's just thinking about the flashbacks. Sometimes he didn't turn in homework. He showed up drunk for an exam once. I wasn't even focused on the education part. Once he was home, I was more focused on what*

needed to be done at home. I didn't realize what he was going through. Looking back, I

don't feel like I did enough to help him manage and focus. (Spouse A)

Additionally, some respondents indicated that side effects from medications including

dizziness, fatigue, and restlessness added challenges in focusing. "*The only way I can be in some*

classes is by using pain meds, but I can't do some things because of the meds." (Veteran F).

As the quantitative data suggested, student veterans were either not aware of campus

resources that could alleviate some of the challenges or were reluctant to seek assistance. This

was further explained within the interviews:

- *I thought of disability services as helping people with dyslexia and things like*

  that, not for people like me. (Veteran F)

- *No, I don't know the process. I don't know who to ask. I guess I could've found it*

  online, but I didn't. A professor told me about it, but I didn't think it was worth

  the effort. (Veteran A)

- *A lot of vets are used to being told when to go to services. Having services are*

  *amazing when they are utilized, but you cherish the moments you don't **have** to*

  [bolding added to reflect participant's spoken emphasis]. (Veteran C)

Although participants were unaware of services or declined to seek resources, many of

them learned to successfully adapt independently. As one veteran described, "*I'm 40% deaf in*

both ears and have tinnitus. I have to sit at the front of the class to hear. I'm good at reading lips

and I show up early to sit in the front." (Veteran D).

As predicted by previous literature, student veterans were not likely to ask for assistance

when they encountered problems and only one participant indicated using tutoring services.

Interviews with faculty indicated that few student veterans asked for additional help or support.

Administrative Processes

Students reported on their experiences with registration and course scheduling processes and their views were mixed with some indicating it was an easy process and others reporting difficulties and overall confusion:

- *It was like going to the dentist – it was painful. I didn't know what to do, where to start, how to coordinate between KCC and the VA. Payments got messed up because the reporting hadn't been done right. A friend had to help sign me up. In the army, we get step by step directions, we're reacting to an order. School requires you to be proactive. As a soldier, you're reprimanded for saying 'what are we doing next?' as a student, I had to learn to be proactive. For 8 years I was told what to do and reminded, now as a student I had to learn to take responsibility for myself. (Veteran A)*

- *I went through a two-day lecture [in marines] of all the GI bills. The guy told us to use regular GI bills first. Here it was a whole new system. I had to take placement tests and I failed those miserably. Paperwork was foreign. (Veteran F)*

- *There's nothing permanent about military life. When you get out you have all these possibilities. It's hard to find purpose. It's overwhelming to find direction…you're overwhelmed by choices because you get to pick. Advisors are important. We've had some good experiences, sometimes not as good. Not bad, they just don't have answers. And student needs help, but especially for a vet. We really relied on advisors. Maybe a former vet or spouse would make it easier. Sometimes it felt like they just didn't understand the mindset. (Veteran D)*

One respondent stated getting answers to questions was particularly frustrating because it was difficult to find the correct person, the one with full knowledge; this was a stark contrast to the well-informed structure he had been accustomed to in the military, where roles with specific tasks were more clearly defined.

On the other hand, two students who had tried attending other institutions before the present college where they had even more trouble:

- *I was doing this while I was living in Kansas thinking I was going to give [a different college] a try. They kept saying they couldn't help unless I was there. I decided to try KCC and even on the website they said you didn't have to be here. That helps vets because they might not be here. KCC was like come in, we're open for you. (Veteran C)*

- *It wasn't too difficult to make the transition. I'm used to processes, it was quick and easy…there wasn't much support at [the other college]. More support from [the present Financial Aid Coordinator]. Advisors took me right away every time I came in. I never had a bump in the road. (Veteran B)*

Students responded favorably to the financial aid process, stating it was helpful that the college had someone who was trained in veteran services. *"[The Financial Aid Coordinator] is an amazing person. I came knowing nothing left in an hour knowing everything I needed to know."* (Veteran C). *"At one point I had trouble coming to class because of money. [The Financial Aid Coordinator] helped get Pell grants and student loans to help my family."* (Veteran F).

Some of the veterans as well as an administrator suggested it would even be more helpful to have one or two designated contact people who could guide student veterans through the entire administrative process.

Transitioning

Students reported mixed experiences first encountering higher education subsequent to transitioning from military life. One student indicted that he felt like he was still trying to figure out how he fit in at home after an eight-year absence, and the added responsibility of school compounded the stress. *"Last semester was tough, the whole experience. Getting used to being a student again. I'm getting there." (Veteran C)*.

Other students reported that they did not feel like their family members understood the pressures from school, and faculty did not recognize the pressures that the veterans were experiencing in their transition and in their home life.

The results from family interviews were mixed. Some family members were supportive of their loved one's academic pursuits and saw it as a way to establish a new sense of purpose following military services:

"*Going to school gave him a distraction. It's so integral to find something he cared about. He didn't see the purpose in it at first, but once he did, it became his purpose. It prolonged the transition, but it helped." (Spouse A)*.

Others viewed it as an obstacle that impaired their loved one's transition back into family life:

"It was tough in the beginning. He'd slack on one thing or the other. He'd forget he was even in school, but when he got into it, it was all he did. He'd either miss tests or forget to pay bills." (Spouse B).

However, the majority of responses suggested that pursuing higher education positively impacted their reintegration process, and did provide a greater sense of purpose toward the future:

- *School made transition tremendously easier. When you go from a community when given tasks to complete weekly, you do your own tasks. It allowed me to continue on the path where a teacher gives me a task and I do it. I also didn't have to focus on getting a job. (Veteran B)*

- *Being in the military, it's different from being in the civilian world…school helps by giving more of a role in getting back into the civilian world. It's more relaxed. In the military, we're held to higher standards. (Veteran E)*

- *It was really hard to get to class. Hard to prioritize. But I think it helped overall in my transition. Classes in psychology has helped with dealing with PTSD. What I previously saw as character flaws, I found out it was actually because of my illness. It was very freeing. (Veteran A)*

- *Going to school has been one of the best opportunities of my life. (Veteran D)*

Sense of Community

Consistent with the previous literature, student veterans indicated a disconnect between themselves and peers. The veterans stated they felt as though few people understood what their lives were like in service, and some indicated that they felt they had little in common with their younger, civilian counterparts, who had fewer international experiences:

- *A lot of people don't know anything. How do I tell the people behind me that their talking is pissing me off? They might think I'm about to go crazy. It's lack of support from the civilian world. (Veteran B)*

- *They think we can be out of control, that we can't focus, that they can't go to us for help. In some ways we're just like them. They can ask us questions, but not…keep it to school stuff. For them to ask what did you do in Iraq? Did you kill anyone? No one here has asked me that, I tell them I did boring stuff so they don't ask me questions. (Veteran C)*

- *Unless a person has a family member in the service, they don't understand. Veterans understand veterans and people don't know how to react to that. We're not all crazy. We are, but we're not. We're not afraid to answer questions. If they're out of line we'll just say shut up or not answer. (Veteran E)*

- *I want people to know I'm a vet. I feel out of place because of my age. I want people to know that I delayed school because of my service. I feel like people avoid me, like, in group projects. I think people find me intimidating. I think it's unnecessary. Vets are diverse. (Veteran A)*

Though most participants indicated they preferred to be identified as a veteran, others were uncomfortable about disclosing their status.

> *I want people to know that vets aren't right-winged, gun-toting, war mongers. You can tell people that don't like vets. I got spit in the face at [the airport] and called a baby killer. That never happened here at KCC. If it did I would tell a faculty member, but I'd rather people didn't know I was a veteran. (Veteran D)*

Another student reported a negative incident at the college as a result of wearing a shirt with a military-related emblem.

> *I was heading to class wearing with my army unit shirt on and a worker from KCC stopped me and bitched that I couldn't wear that and it was a disgrace. I ended up failing*

two tests that day because I was so upset. I had just been diagnosed with PTSD and I just

couldn't control it then. (Veteran E)

Many of the aforementioned themes related to an overall sense of isolation, the opposite

of possessing a psychological sense of community. Given that the student veterans felt different

from, and did not perceive strong connections to civilian counterparts, they nevertheless reported

feeling connected to and supported by at least one faculty member:

- *Most students don't understand veterans. Having the same instructors over and*

  over has been a saving grace… The instructors in the industrial center really

  understand. There have been some days I couldn't get out of bed because of my

  back and knees, and they get it. (Veteran E)

- *I felt most connected to faculty, particularly two professors who took an interest*

  in me. I wouldn't have had the courage to pursue a degree without them... I didn't

  identify as a student. I was a soldier, not a student…it wasn't until I took [a

  specific class] that I started to feel like I could stick with it. I developed a

  relationship with the professor, the assignments were applied, in class students

  were collaborating with the professor. I realized if this is something I'm doing,

  *then it's something I **can** do [bolding added to reflect participant's spoken*

  emphasis]. (Veteran A)

This sub-theme of feeling connected to a faculty member was further supported by an interview

with a student veteran spouse:

Professors made such a big impact in his life and education. They were totally invested in

him as a person, his history. KCC was a turning point for him. It's what got him inspired.

Teachers inspired him which helped him find his value. If he went to [a large university]

right away, he would've gotten swallowed up. He felt out of place when he transitioned.

He needed positive experiences to draw on. (Spouse A)

Beyond feeling some connection with at least one faculty member, and despite reports of feeling

isolated from civilian counterparts, every student veteran did feel a sense of community through

other veterans, whether through informal encounters or formal connections, such as in the

Veterans Club:

- *Connected to students? Not students really. More student vets. If it wasn't for having a vet in other classes I probably wouldn't talk to anyone. (Veteran E)*

- *If you really needed it, you can go up to any vet and have a conversation…Dave* stopped me in the hallway and asked if I was a vet. We hit it off and became friends. I connected to him. Because of him, I felt connected to vets through him…having someone to relate to, having Dave was a big deal. The familiarity made me more comfortable. My advice would be find one person to be more familiar with. (Veteran B)*

- *I felt connected by getting into the vet club and having like-minded people. Being in a class with 17-18 year olds that don't know…vet club gives me the push to keep coming to school. (Veteran D)*

- *We have vet club. That's been a huge help. We're all like-minded in a way. Yeah, definitely vet club. We get a sense of community, camaraderie. We might not all be going for [the same major] but there's a sense of family in and of ourselves. Even though we served in different branches, it doesn't matter. We're all a family. (Veteran F)*

Suggestions for Improvements

In addition to providing their experiences, participants shared their ideas for improve program support. The coded themes on this question were presented to a larger group of student veterans to create an action plan for further development. As a result of this larger discussion the solutions included: 1) workshops to develop successful skills for the classroom and employment; 2) a dedicated staff person trained in veteran issues that could assist with the administration process and provide academic support; 3) more information regarding available resources provided during registration; 4) a mentoring program; and 5) a Veteran Center. The student veteran group strongly favored beginning the mentoring program immediately and planned to take action. While the Veteran Center was a popular suggestion, development of this plan is contingent upon approval of space and funding from the college. One student summarized the need for this dedicated space:

> *It would be helpful to have a Veteran Center - a lounge. I need a place to unwind. There's no place to do homework here because of PTSD. I need a safe place where I know only vets can be in there. It would mean I could feel safe. Know the culture is the same. (Veteran A)*

Other stakeholders

Two faculty members two staff, and two veteran-friendly employers were interviewed to gain a broader perspective of student veteran strengths and needs, and whether the stakeholder felt adequately prepared to support them. The employer identified leadership skills and maturity as strengths, suggesting student veterans could be better supported by maximizing the skills they already possess.

Faculty interviews suggested that faculty and staff could benefit from being trained to become more aware of veteran needs. Veteran interviews also addressed the need for such training:

There's a big difference between veteran-aware professors and non-aware. The ones who know give seating preference, they give warning before showing graphic content. They understand missing assignments. They should mandate training. (Veteran A)

While one staff interviewee stated training was unnecessary, he characterized veterans as having "*a better idea of what program they want*", which contrasts with veteran experiences of feeling overwhelmed by course selection. As one veteran stated "*It's hard to find purpose. It's overwhelming to find direction…you're overwhelmed by choices because you get to pick.*" This discrepancy suggests awareness training may be beneficial for all staff regardless of recognized need.

Practical Implications: A Support Model

This study, in combination with previous studies, suggests a need for a broad, ecological approach to support services. In addition to services addressing individual needs such as Disability Services and Financial Aid, results from this present study indicate a need to incorporate aspects of community and connectedness within student veteran support models.
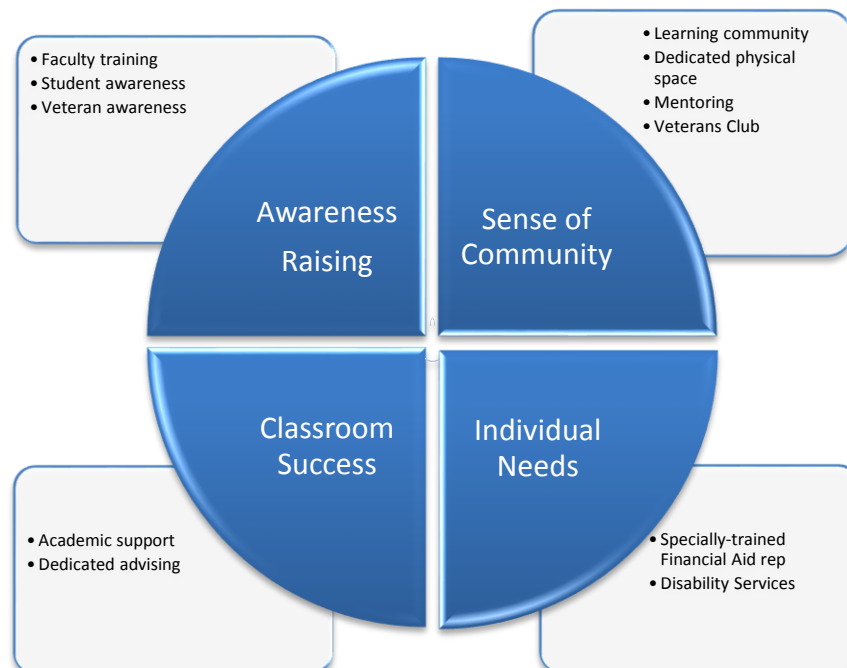
Figure 1: A model of support services for student veterans.

Awareness Raising

First and foremost, awareness raising is essential for faculty, students, and the student veterans themselves. Faculty members should receive training to enhance understanding of needs unique to student veterans as well as education in providing support. In many cases, minor changes such as a seat near the back of the room can significantly decrease anxiety; and, triggers such as laser pointers and loud noises should be avoided. Course materials should be disseminated in a variety of modalities. More specifically, written materials and visual presentations are particularly helpful to student veterans with hearing impairments and TBIs. Additionally, understanding of challenges arising from VA-related appointments may prompt faculty to be more flexible regarding attendance policies and assignment deadlines. Caution should be taken during training, however, to ensure that the diversity of student veterans' needs our addressed and the students are not stereotyped. A faculty training video developed by a university depicted a student vet as angry and dangerous (McMichael, 2009). Although the university's intention was to raise awareness of student veterans' needs, it raised concerns that their depiction perpetuates stereotypes and alienates veterans from other students and faculty.

Several student veterans indicated that they did not feel that their peers understood them. One respondent said he doesn't like to tell people he has PTSD because people assume he is dangerous. Several of the veterans interviewed stated that peer have asked probing and insensitive questions such as whether they had ever killed anyone during their service. Many colleges offer a First-Year College Experience course which helps new students learn to navigate college life by practicing effective academic skills as well as socio-emotional skills such as communicating effectively within a diverse population. Adding a module within Diversity

Training that raises awareness of culture specific to the military could diminish stereotypes about

veterans and help students understand why certain statements would be inappropriate.

Finally, colleges may need to help raise awareness of transition issues for the veterans

themselves. Many student veterans are unaware of Disability Services and the resources it

provides, and as a result, do not recognize how accommodations could facilitate the education

process. As previous research suggests, veterans are often hesitant to self-identify injuries and

ask for assistance (Shackleford, 2009). As a result, colleges must take a proactive approach in

raising awareness of the resources and support that is available.

Individual Needs

Support must be modified to meet individual needs impacted by physical and

psychological injuries and coordination with medical and VA related appointments. Disability

Services can assist each individual in determining the appropriate accommodations. This may

include an accommodation as simple as seating location or extended time for exams. Testing in a

separate, quiet setting could significantly reduce anxiety as a result of hypervigilance that often

accompanies PTSD.

Financial aid under the Post 9/11 GI Bill and veteran grants can be confusing. Many

student veterans reported feeling frustrated when financial aid representatives could not

understand the complexities of GI Bill or answer questions specific to them. Colleges can

improve this process by designating one specially-trained representative that administers all

veteran aid.

Classroom Success

Similar to the trained financial aid representative, an academic advisor dedicated to

veterans could streamline the confusing registration process. Consistent with previous research

studies (Ellison, et al., 2012), student veterans interviewed indicated a need for a designated point-person that could assist in class selection and problem resolution. Military experience often satisfies some course requirements, and specific courses are mandated to meet requirements of their financial aid. These stipulations beyond institutional and state requirements complicates course selection further magnifying the importance of a specially-trained staff person. Additionally, due to medically-related appointments or alertness related to medication schedules, course scheduling is often more challenging for veterans; therefore, priority advance scheduling can be beneficial in selecting courses at optimal times.

Consistent with previous research (Rutkowski, et al., 2012; Sozda et al., 2014), student veterans indicated a need for compensatory testing and memorization strategies. Tutors or extra study sessions could enhance learning and allow veteran students to develop more effective testing strategies. The student veteran who indicated she utilized tutoring services attested to the efficacy of this service. Another student veteran who had already transferred to a four-year university indicated that the veterans on that campus formed an informal tutoring program among themselves. Student veterans wrote their names, contact information, and subjects on a white board in the Veteran Center. Student veterans requiring tutoring in one of those subjects could contact a fellow veteran for assistance.

Sense of Community

Little research has specifically addressed student veterans' sense of community within a community college. Research evaluating sense of community within the general population suggests that SOC impacts student retention and academic persistence (Jacobs & Archie, 2008; McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk & Schweitzer, 2006), and quantitative data in this present study highlighted the importance of connectedness. As student veterans in the present study indicated

barriers to sense of community with civilian peers, it is vital to create opportunities to develop a

sense of connectedness. Student Veteran Clubs and organizations offer a means for veterans to

connect with one another on campus and feel more connected to peers. A lounge, or other

physical space, dedicated to veterans provides a setting in which student veterans can connect

with one another as well as a safe haven to which they can retreat when they are feeling

overwhelmed.

      A desire for a mentor was a common theme expressed by participants. Employers within

the study identified leadership skills as a primary strength of the veterans they employ. A formal

mentoring program in which second year student veterans mentor first-years offers an

opportunity for students to further enhance their leadership skills while simultaneously allowing

them to build meaningful connections with peers.

      The college administration, student veterans, and researchers collaborated to develop the

elements they identified as key to building a sense of community and integral to the success of a

support program. The group agreed to implement a mentoring program and a learning

community the following academic year and assess their efficacy as part of a comprehensive

program supporting student veterans. Research with this institution will continue following the

implementation of the mentoring program and learning community. A Veterans Resource Center

was identified as a primary need by the student veterans, and the administration agreed to include

the development of a Center in the 5-year plans for an Academic Learning Center redesign;

however, plans to address immediate development were not deemed possible. A program

evaluation will assess the efficacy of veteran-centered programs in contributing to academic

outcomes such as retention and course completion as well as yielding a sense of connectedness.

In summary of the two studies, Study 1 explored the relationship between sense of community, specifically membership and connectedness, empowerment, and academic persistence, and Study 2 explored the perceived needs of student veterans, needs that impacts academic outcomes, such as retention and completion, and community college sense of community. Additional stakeholders provided unique perspectives on veteran academic experiences.

There are several ways sense of community may differ in a smaller, Midwestern community designed for commuting students, and resources can vary for smaller schools. A great number of veterans attend community colleges, thus it is important to assess their experiences within this setting. In addition to the student veterans themselves, this study also included other community members to understand a wider scope. Family members were interviewed in an effort to better understand how college attendance impacted the student veterans' reintegration process. Faculty members and administrative personnel were interviewed to determine the perceived needs of student veterans as well as the strengths this population offers. Additionally, a leader from a community area business that regularly employs veterans was interviewed to determine the perceived strengths that graduating veterans bring to the workplace.

As hypothesized, the quantitative data revealed sense of community, membership, and connectedness positively correlated with academic persistence. No significant correlation was found between empowerment and academic persistence; however, this may be attributed to a small sample size. Empowerment was significantly related to sense of community, membership, and connectedness suggesting that this construct still warrants consideration when developing supportive academic programs as well as future study with a larger sample size. Regression

analysis revealed connectedness predicts academic persistence. This finding underscores the importance of fostering positive, meaningful relationships among student veterans and with faculty. This was further illustrated by interviews with student veterans in which one stated *"...vet club gives me the push to keep coming to school."* *(Veteran D)* and another stated, *"I felt most connected to faculty, particularly two professors who took an interest in me. I wouldn't have had the courage to pursue a degree without them."* *(Veteran A)*.

The qualitative results echoed the quantitative findings. Student veterans indicated they often felt as though they didn't "fit" with their peers. Difference in age, life experiences, and goals were cited as reasons they were unable to connect with peers. Many student veterans reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of academic work in conjunction with trying to re-adjust to home life as well as obtaining VA services for military-related injuries. Some reported that they had to miss classes because of VA-related appointments, and they felt faculty members were unhelpful in assisting with missed material and were unaware of existing supportive resources. Some student veterans reported difficulty concentrating in class as well as high levels of anxiety when surrounded by too many people or in open spaces. Further, student veterans expressed frustration about confusing processes in financial aid and registration as well as lack of coordination with government systems.

Family members confirmed that academic workload seemed to increase the overall stress of the student veteran. Faculty members perceived a need for additional support services for student veterans. The community college in the study employs an "early alert" system for athletes who must maintain a minimum grade point average to participate in athletics; grade and attendance reports are sent to an academic coordinator to identify any potential challenges before they escalate. A faculty member suggested a similar practice be put in place for student veterans,

so that they do not "fall through the cracks." Employers identified leadership skills and structure as strengths veterans offered within the workplace.

These findings were consistent with previous research. Many of the participants were struggling with injuries, but were unaware that they could consult Disability Services as a resource to determine appropriate accommodations. Consistent with previous studies, student veterans indicated that they feel disconnected from their peers. Most student veterans did not recognize commonalities with their civilian peers, felt a loss of connectedness from other service members upon leaving the military and found comfort in associating with other veterans on campus.

Study 3

Based on the preliminary two studies as well as the research literature, a comprehensive support program was developed at Kankakee Community College to support student veterans with an emphasis on the concept of sense of community, such as is illustrated in Figure 1 (mentoring, learning community, dedicated physical space, and Veterans Club). While some of the design took physical and psychological challenges into consideration, emphasis was placed on the voices of student veterans, and their perceptions of social climate, service support, and elements related to sense of community, academic success, and overall well-being. Two classes were designated as "veteran-concentrated" to encourage veteran persistence and future enrollment in an effective and supportive learning community. Initial discussions involved the creation of a mentoring program where second-year student veterans could "mentor" incoming first year student veterans. The program design also included a dedicated physical space, for its Veterans Center. Most important, members of the Veterans Club were actively involved in program development. The focus of Study 3 takes a formative approach to evaluate: 1) the

efficacy of the program; specifically addressing how social connectedness (e.g., students

emotionally connected to each other) influences intentions to complete their degrees; and 2)

perceived sense of community and feelings of empowerment as a result of participation.

Given that the desire for connection to and support from fellow veterans was a common

theme in prior studies, the creation of such opportunities going forward was a primary goal. At

every stage, the student veterans played a central role in the decision-making process and

execution of the support program.

Participatory Nature of the Process

Participatory action research (PAR) aims to understand a community through

collaboration and community action, working *with* participants as opposed to evaluating

something done *to* them (Patton, 2002). As the name suggests, PAR is participatory in nature,

requiring active engagement by the population of focus as "individuals in a group try to get a

handle on the ways in which their knowledge shapes their sense of identity and agency and

…reflect critically on how their current knowledge frames and constrains their action" (Kemmis

& McTaggart, 2005, p. 281). Community members are recognized as experts in their own

experience, and the researcher works in conjunction with them to facilitate their action. Kemmis

and McTaggart's model (2005) describes the PAR process as a "spiral of self-reflecting cycles"

involving planning changes, acting on and observing changes, reflection, and repeating the

process (p. 276). Through community involvement, members learn and critique the methods,

sometimes, going forward, carrying out the process without the researcher. Thus, PAR can be an

empowering intervention.

To ensure the process was collaborative, members of the student veteran community

were included in prioritization of needs, decision-making, implementation of programs, data

collection, and analysis. Using grant funds, a student veteran was hired to coordinate the

mentoring program and serve as a research collaborator, and members of the Veterans Club

served as mentors. The participatory process was perhaps as instrumental as the program itself

and, as Kemmis and McTaggart's model suggests, was a fluid progression dependent upon the

participants' needs and goals. As such, program elements were amended as the student veterans

deemed appropriate or necessary. For example, the group had initially planned to host a

community-wide 5K event to raise awareness for veteran-related issues and increase engagement

in the community; however, as planning and participation in supportive programming built

momentum on campus, the student veterans group decided, instead, to direct their focus on

advocating for a Veterans Resource Center to be built years ahead of schedule.

As the primary investigator is a professor at Kankakee Community College, and given

that much of the support program was developed based on the above series of studies, there was

considerable attachment to this project. Additionally, the researcher had been asked early on to

serve as a co-advisor for the college's Veterans Club, so there was an existing familiarity with

some of the veterans in the study. Serving in this capacity created a participant-observer role, as

is consistent within participatory action research.

Beyond PAR, a constructivist view was used, assuming that each member of the

community may have unique experiences and perspectives. Although special consideration was

given to veterans, perspectives from a variety of stakeholders within the program (i.e., faculty,

administration, and support staff) were also collected and analyzed. Interview, observation, and

focus groups were used with the aim of understanding student veterans' experiences and

identifying common themes; however, each individual reality was recognized. Additionally,

participants were seen as active members of the program development and execution. The

elements of the program were designed to provide opportunities for positive social connections

to develop, and indeed, the subsequent connections were central to the intervention as a whole.

The program, it might be said, merely provided a means for the participants themselves to

generate meaningful changes within the community college and its systems.

Research Questions

The qualitative interviews focused on addressing the following research questions:

1) How did participation in the mentoring program and/or Veteran-concentrated classes

influence sense of community and feelings of connectedness?

2) What factors in the program facilitated connectedness? What factors hindered it?

3) How do social connections influence academic persistence?

4) How does planning and executing a large-scale project impact sense of

community and sense of empowerment?

Study 3: Method

Design

Qualitative methods included: 1) observation of Veterans Club meetings, planning

meetings with administration, and veteran-concentrated classes; 2) interviews with student

veterans participating in the mentoring program or veteran-concentrated classes, faculty teaching

the concentrated classes, and staff involved in student support; 3) focus groups with members of

the student veteran community. Emphasis was placed on student veteran experiences and

perceptions of sense of community within the community college as well as the other stakeholder

perceptions of student veteran connectedness within the community. Observations and

interviews were conducted by both the primary researcher and the student veteran research

collaborator.

Table 1.

Description of methodology.

Method	Description	Participants	Frequency	Instrument
Observation	Veterans Club meetings	Student veterans (# varied from 5-17)	Weekly for 16 months	
Observation	Planning meeting	4 student veterans 4 administrators	once	
Observation	Veteran-concentrated classes (2 separate classes)	5 student veterans 2 faculty	twice each class	
Interviews	Mentoring participants	3 student veterans	once	Appendix F
Interviews	Veteran-concentrated class participants	4 student veterans	once	Appendix G
Interviews	Veteran-concentrated class faculty	2 faculty	once	Appendix H
Interviews	Staff involved in veteran support programming	2 staff members	once	Appendix I
Focus Group	Program planning (meet twice)	11 student veterans 2 staff members	twice	Appendix J
Focus Group	Discussion of student veteran experience	8 student veterans	once	Appendix K
Focus Group	Veteran Resource Center planning	11 student veterans	once	Appendix L
Focus Group	Overall evaluation	6 student veterans 1 staff member	once	Appendix M

Participants

Student veterans in the mentoring program and veteran-concentrated classes were self-selected. During registration, the Veterans Financial Aid Coordinator explained the mentoring program, interested students signed up, and were contacted by the student veteran Mentoring Coordinator. The eight students participating in the program were contacted by the coordinator once during the semester to check-in, and again at the end of the year to ask participants for feedback. While all participants engaged in program development, only three of the students agreed to participate in the full, in-depth interview.

During registration, student veterans could elect to participate in a class designated as "veteran-concentrated" if the course met their educational plans. Five student veterans elected to participate; all were observed during classes, and four participated in interviews. The remaining student suspended her education plans mid-semester when she gave birth.

The two faculty members who taught the veteran-concentrated classes were observed and interviewed separately. Two staff members who are actively involved in support programs for student veterans were also interviewed separately.

Five separate focus groups were conducted to plan programming, discuss experiences as a student veteran, develop plans for the Veterans Resource Center, and provide an overall assessment of the program. Participants were recruited through the Veterans Club, and the sessions were conducted during one of their regular meeting times.

Figure 2 illustrates the participants in terms of the program element(s) in which they were involved. Each star represents an individual student veteran who was interviewed or participated in a focus group. Although there were additional student veterans participating in support programs, only those who provided information through interview or focus group are represented in the figure. As illustrated, three student veterans participated only in the mentoring program, two were only in the veteran-concentrated class, and six participated in the development of the Veterans Resource Center; three student veterans participated in both the mentoring and VRC development, but not the veteran-concentrated class, and two participated in all three elements.
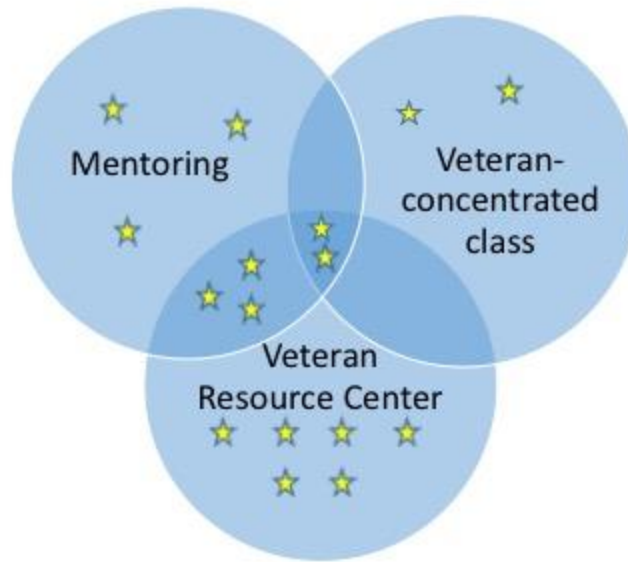
Figure 2: A visual representation of participants' program involvement.

Instruments

A standardized list of open-ended qualitative interview questions was developed to seek

student veteran feedback regarding participation in the mentoring program (Appendix F) and the

veteran-concentrated class (Appendix G). Additionally, questions regarding overall perception of

sense of community and empowerment were asked of both groups of participants. Sample

questions included: "*I'd like to understand your experiences as part of the mentoring (Battle*

Buddy) program. What role did you play? Did it make you feel connected to something? If so, how? If

not, what might have hindered that connection?" and "*I'd like to hear about your experiences in the*

veteran-concentrated class. What was it like? How did it compare with your other courses? Do

you think participating in the veteran-concentrated class helped to support your goals? If so

how? If not, what do you think you need for more support?"

The interviews for faculty who taught veteran-concentrated classes (Appendix H) and

staff who worked closed with support programs (Appendix I) were designed to assess an

additional perspective regarding the progress, strengths, and barriers of the student veterans

engaged in the program. Some questions included: *"I'm interested in hearing more about your*

experiences teaching the veteran-concentrated class. How would you describe the class? What

was the climate/culture like? How was it similar or different from other courses you teach?" and

"What role do you see veteran support services playing in their success as students? Success in

transition into civilian life?"

Focus group questions were developed prior to the meetings to guide the discussions, and

additional questions were asked as the discussion organically progressed. Two focus groups

addressed planning goals and objectives for the student veterans group (Appendix J), one focus

group was held to discuss the experiences of a student veteran (Appendix K), one focus group

was held to discuss a design for a Veterans Resource Center (Appendix L), and the final focus

group addressed an overall evaluation of the veteran-related support programming.

Procedure

Observations of Veterans Club meetings were conducted each week (except when they

were not held due to breaks), first in a classroom where they held meetings prior to the opening

of the Veterans Resource Center, then in the Center after its opening. Observations were

recorded with written notes by the primary researcher and the student veteran research

collaborator with emphasis placed on meeting actions and examples of sense of community.

More specifically, emphasis was placed on recording examples of behavior reflecting the four

key elements that contribute to a sense of community, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986):

membership, *influence*, *integration* and *fulfillment of needs*, and *emotional connection*. Although

sensitizing concepts were used to focus observation on behaviors related to sense of community,

an inductive method of analysis was used to identify patterns of behavior, not limited to sense of community, which emerged from the 16 months of observation.

Similarly, observations of a planning meeting with administration and two sessions of veteran-concentrated classes were also conducted by the primary researcher and student veteran research collaborator. Again, the primary actions of the meeting and classes were recorded through written notes, careful attention was focused on behaviors related to sense of community, and an inductive analysis was used to identify themes.

Participants present during observation periods were advised that data was being collected for the purpose of this research and reminded that participation was voluntary. A coding system was used to preserve anonymity during note-taking, and names of participants were not recorded.

All interview participants were interviewed using a standard list of questions developed for each specific group of participants. Participants signed consent forms prior to the interviews, and filed separately without names to preserve anonymity. To ensure comfort and reduce the anxiety of the student veteran participants, interviews were conducted in a private office that minimized loud noises and unexpected interruptions. In the preliminary studies, interviews were conducted with a fellow student veteran to help participants feel more comfortable. At this point in the research process, participants had been working collaboratively with the primary researcher and did not feel coordinating an interview including the student veteran research collaborator was necessary. Participants were advised they could stop the interview if they became uncomfortable at any time.

Interview questions were developed based on previous literature addressing student veterans needs as well as the collaborative group's need to assess the efficacy of their initiatives.

It is noted that the wording of the questions could influence the direction of responses or interpretation of the qualitative data. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed. Similar to analyzing the observation data, a coding system was developed to identify themes throughout the interview responses with attention paid to elements of sense of community and empowerment. Two evaluators coded each transcript to increase reliability and reduce potential bias. Once again, although sensitizing concepts were used in coding data, the primary researcher and student veteran research collaborator also utilized an inductive process to review data as themes emerged.

Focus groups were conducted with members of the Veterans Club during their regularly scheduled meeting times. Participants were advised that data was being collected for the purposes of this research and advised participation was voluntary. Sessions were audio-recorded, and sessions that included collaborative brainstorming recorded on a whiteboard were photographed. Names were not recorded to preserve anonymity, and people's faces were not included in photographs. Questions were prepared ahead of time to guide the discussion; however, the script was not strictly adhered to allow authentic discussion to emerge among the participants. A grounded theory approach was used in analyzing the focus group data to identify themes that emerged. After data were coded and themes were identified, results were shared with participants and members of the Veterans Club so that they could affirm their experiences were accurately expressed.

Study 3: Results/Discussion

Program Elements

Program elements include a mentoring program (Battle Buddies), veteran-concentrated classes, and the development of a Veterans Resource Center. Figure 3 illustrates the timeline in

which program elements were administered. Additionally, a leadership conference that will be

addressed within this section has been included to clarify timing of events.

ACTIVITY	PLAN START	PLAN DURATION	PERIODS																	
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Vet Club Meetings	1	17																		
Vet-Con. English	1	5																		
Leadership Conference	6	1																		
Vet-Con. Speech	7	5																		
Mentoring	7	11																		
VRC Planning	7	9																		
VRC Open	16	2																		
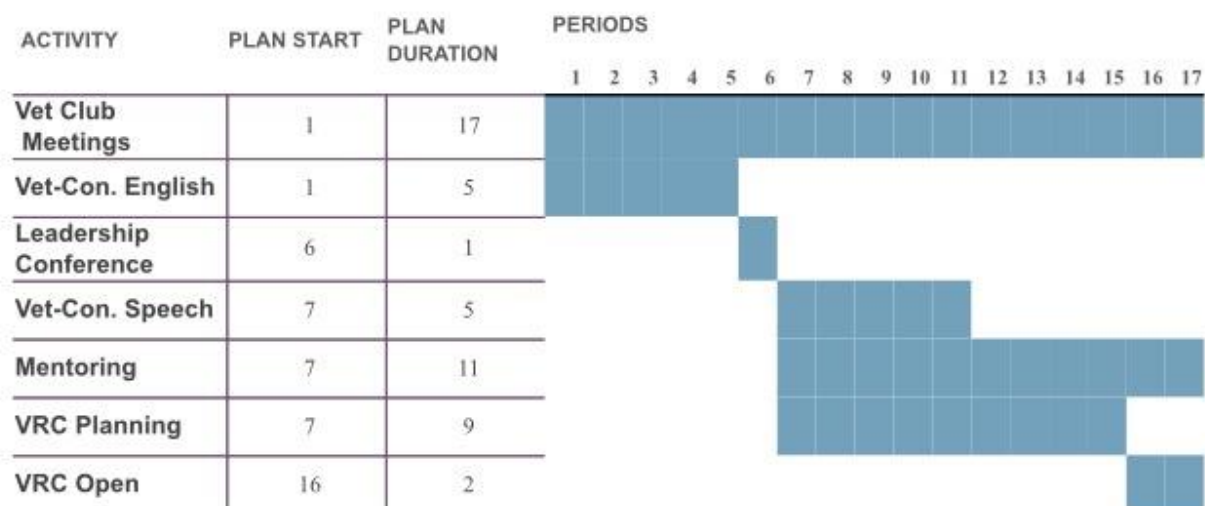
Figure 3: Timeline of support program elements.

Mentoring. The need for a mentoring program was a prominent theme from the

interviews in Study 2. A peer-mentoring program can satisfy the need for emotional

connectedness in addition to serving as a vehicle for information sharing pertinent to student

veterans. For example, Veteran B specified a need for a fellow veteran to orient him to the

college, "*You know, someone that knows that spot in the library where I could sit against the*

wall." During the review of the data from Study 1 and 2, student veterans identified a mentoring

program as one of the highest priorities when developing supportive programs.

Grant funding was used to employ one of the student veterans to serve as a mentoring

coordinator, and members of the Veterans Club volunteered to serve as mentors. The mentoring

coordinator distributed applications (Appendix N) to potential mentors to collect data that would

be helpful in pairing them with mentees. The information collected included items such as

demographics, branch of service, academic major, and hobbies so that compatible connections

could be made.

The coordinator also conducted a training session to provide mentors with clear guidelines and expectations as well as discuss ways to engage the mentee in meaningful ways and provide important resources. The main purpose of the mentoring relationship was to "support veterans transitioning to college after military service to foster academic and personal success" and "to make each new student veteran's transition to Kankakee Community College as smooth and positive as possible and to provide them with the support and resources needed to be successful" (Appendix N). The goals established for the program were 1) easing the transition from military to KCC, 2) improving student veterans' sense of connectedness to the college, and 3) helping to increase student retention/academic performance rates. The expectations and guidelines included:

- The mentor should be the one to take initiative in making contact. But mentees should understand that they can contact their mentor at any time with questions and concerns.

- Both the mentor and mentee should discuss expectations of the mentoring relationship and determine the mentee's goals and needs.

- Mentors should aim to contact their mentee 6-8 times through the year.

- Information shared should be treated as confidential.

- Mentoring meetings should not be conducted in a bar or include alcohol.

- Hazing of any kind is strictly prohibited.

The college's Disability Coordinator was also present at the training to discuss ways she could assist students with physical or psychological injuries, so that mentors were aware of resources should their mentee disclose an injury. Findings from Study 1 suggested most students were unaware of Disability Services and how they could seek assistance, so the mentoring

training provided an opportunity to educate the student veterans serving as mentors as well as a

vehicle for disseminating the information to other student veterans through the mentoring

relationships.

Participants at the training also discussed ways they could reach out to their mentees and

maintain contact (phone, email, texting, scheduling meetings, social media). They were also

given two gift cards for the college's cafeteria, allowing them to invite their mentees to meet for

lunch. Mentor trainees also discussed potential problems that could arise such as having a

mentee who was unwilling to meet. Mentors were encouraged to try to solve any arising

problems by working directly with their mentees and advised that they could also contact the

mentoring coordinator for assistance.

Incoming student veterans could elect to participate by completing a consent form that

allowed the Veterans Financial Aid Coordinator to share their contact information with the

mentoring coordinator who would then assign a mentor based on compatible factors such as

gender, branch of service, and interests. The first group of incoming students did not appear

receptive to participating in the mentoring program. Interestingly, many of them seemed

interested when they thought they would be a mentor to someone else, but lost interest when they

realized they would be a mentee despite lacking familiarity with navigating the college. When

this information was shared with the Veterans Club, the group decided to re-name the program

"Battle Buddies" to reflect an existing program in the military in which a Battle Buddy in a

particular location is paired with an incoming serviceperson to acclimate him/her to the area.

Perhaps even more important than simply utilizing familiar vocabulary, this name change

transformed the perceived dynamic of relationship. The concept of Battle Buddies expressed a

more equal, rather than hierarchical, mentor-mentee relationship. Although the participants then

became known as Battle Buddies, the traditional mentor-mentee titles are used within the

discussion to differentiate the role each Battle Buddy played.

Four incoming student veterans elected to participate in the Battle Buddy program. Based

on the backgrounds of each student, the coordinator identified mentors he thought would be good

matches, then presented the information to the Veterans Club members so they could

collaboratively decide on the best fit for each new student. Once the pairings were established,

the mentor contacted his assigned Battle Buddy by phone and email to establish first contact.

Frequency of meetings varied depending upon the mentees' needs, availability, and participation,

with some pairings meeting more frequently than others. Mentees were also invited to participate

in Veterans Club meetings and veteran-related events.

*Mentoring program results***.** The coordinator formally contacted each Battle Buddy

participant once in the middle of the semester and again at the end to elicit feedback, and

frequently checked in with mentors during Veteran Club meetings. Each of the eight participants

was invited to participate in an interview to discuss their experiences or complete a short email

survey. Three participants agreed to interview, two students did not respond to contact attempts,

and the remaining participants declined an interview, but provided informal feedback to the

mentoring coordinator.

Results regarding the efficacy of the mentoring program were mixed. The student

veterans serving as mentors reported positive feelings about being able to help other students;

however, the mentees were not as enthusiastic about participation which was also disappointing

for the mentors. Two pairings did not meet beyond the first contact as a result of the mentees

declining to respond to the mentors contact attempts. Those mentees also declined to respond to

requests for an interview or survey; and, as a result, the reason for their lack of participation was

not able to be determined. Another mentee did not respond frequently to his mentor's attempts to contact him, but a significant positive outcome was his engagement in mental health services through Veterans Affairs as a result of a discussion with the mentoring coordinator. The final Battle Buddy pairing reported more positive outcomes including the mentee becoming an active and engaged member of the Veterans Club. Initially, the incoming student was apprehensive about joining the Veterans Club as he indicated it seemed overwhelming; however, he was interested in having a Battle Buddy. When he first met with his assigned Buddy, they happened to be at a Club event which allowed the new student to meet several other student veterans. He maintained contact with his Battle Buddy, gradually increased participation in Club meetings, and eventually became an active leader within the group. Thus, the initial connection to one individual served as an entry-point to developing relationships with multiple other student veterans and becoming part of a social network.

Interestingly, informal mentoring relationships also emerged outside the parameters of the formal mentoring program. Interviews with two of the student veterans that developed an informal mentoring relationship after meeting in a veteran-concentrated class suggested positive reciprocal benefits. The mentor reported an enhanced sense of self-efficacy which positively influenced his own commitment to education. Serving as a positive role model to other student veterans elevated his desire to achieve his own personal goals. Faculty who had worked with the two students also noted the mentor's leadership skills emerged as the relationship progressed. Concurrently, the mentee became more engaged in his classes as well as in the Veterans Club. Both faculty noted a significant increase in his academic performance and social engagement at a specific time in the semester. When asked what accounted for his improvement at this time, the mentee confirmed that was when the informal mentoring relationship began and stated, "*That's*

when I got connected to people and just realized I hadn't really been in this thing. I was here,

but I hadn't really been in it."

***Mentoring program revisions*.** Feedback on the formal mentoring program suggested

that some of the incoming students felt it was patronizing and unnecessary. The name of the

program was changed to Battle Buddies in a conscious effort to suggest partners had equal status

and to reflect military vernacular. Nevertheless, some incoming students indicated they did not

feel they would benefit from participating, and one student veteran noted he was not interested

due to an unpleasant experience with a Battle Buddy during his military service. Yet, a

mentoring program was one of the most frequently requested support program elements, and

qualitative data revealed some positive outcomes. Consequently, when the results were shared

with the members of the Veterans Club, they felt strongly that a mentoring program should not

be abandoned despite lack of enthusiastic participation, but it should be modified to continue

promoting positive mentoring experiences.

The members of the Veterans Club identified establishing a positive social connection as

the most important aspect of the mentoring program and recognized that the informal mentoring

relationships were as, if not more, successful than the formal partnering. As a result they decided

to avoid formal "mentoring", and instead host social events at the beginning of the semester as

well as throughout the term to provide opportunities for relationships to develop organically. The

reformed plan is continuing after this study has ended, and the members of the Veterans Club are

hopeful that these changes will allow incoming student veterans to benefit from positive social

connections with more knowledgeable students in a more natural, authentic way that eliminates

the perception of being patronizing.

Veteran-concentrated classes. Cohort models, in which students complete all courses of an academic program together have become increasingly popular in higher education. Such models foster a sense of community and encourage academic engagement. Learning communities, courses built around a specific theme or for a particular group of students, have been gaining momentum. Literature using civilian students suggest that cohort models and learning communities promote retention and enhance academic performance (Beachboard, et al., 2011; Rocconi, 2011; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Not all student veterans pursue the same course of study, plus the college has a relatively small population of student veterans, and therefore it would not yet be feasible to develop a cohort model for student veterans to complete an entire program together. Originally the college planned to develop a learning community where two general education courses would be reserved primarily for student veterans; however, due to the small population of student veterans on campus, they were unable to fill an entire class. The college elected to encourage veterans to take specific course sections that would concentrate their numbers into smaller learning communities.

College administration selected two faculty members with demonstrated success in building positive learning environments for the veteran-concentrated learning community. Both professors received training in partnership with an area Veterans' Affairs hospital. Five veterans registered for an English course, and three registered for a Speech class, and two for both, totaling six participants. Registration also remained open to civilian students who were advised about the veteran-orientation of the courses. Many of the civilian students who elected to take the course had family members in the military, and were, therefore, familiar with the culture.

Veteran-concentrated class results. The content of the courses did not significantly differ from the way the instructors typically taught them. No emphasis was placed on military-related

content; instead, the learning community offered opportunities for a sense of connectedness to naturally emerge with multiple student veterans present. In an interview, one student veteran remarked that he thought the courses would specifically address military-related themes, though he was not sure how that could be accomplished given the diversity of the students in the class. Yet, given the student make-up of the classes, project and assignment topics often centered around military themes when the students were allowed to choose their own topics.

Observations of veteran-civilian interactions. In the speech class observed, students gave speeches on topics of their choice. One student, a civilian, gave a speech on nuclear weapons and another civilian student presented about PTSD. While a third civilian student presented about a famous veterinarian, she noted he was also an army veteran and gestured towards the student veterans in the class. Although her topic was not related to veterans, she seemingly sought a way to connect her topic to her student veteran classmates. These demonstrations were noted by a student veteran in an interview, "*one student who wasn't a vet, but his presentations were military geared so that really grabbed my attention, like 'okay, they're actually thinking of us in here.'*"

Although the classes were initially intended to contain only student veterans, opening them to all students in order to fill the class turned out to be mutually beneficial. Faculty noted that the presence of the veterans had a positive influence on the other students as they sought to emulate the veterans' level of maturity. The student veterans also viewed this positively. One remarked that this design allowed the younger civilian students to be able to learn from the older veterans who had more life experience. He also noted a tendency for veterans to want to help others: "*When I did my Intro to Computer class, there were no vets in the class. But vets are known for one thing and that's always helping. And that's what I did while I was in there. So*

much that the professor got tired of me helping." Another student veteran indicted that while he felt more comfortable around veterans and better understood by them, the mix of civilian and veteran students offered a comfortable bridge to transition into civilian culture. Further, he suggested that being solely surrounded by veterans, while more comfortable, can postpone transition because they don't have to "*sink or swim*." The arrangement with a mix of students offered "*a nice middle ground*" in which they felt understood and supported by peers while also having to be mindful of their language and customs to assimilate in civilian culture.

As to be expected in any class, conflicts did occasionally arise. In the most extreme example, a civilian student became upset as a result of the order they would be giving speeches. His behavior escalated becoming loud, disruptive, and threatening. Due to the threat the student posed, the instructor called security and had him removed from the classroom. He was not allowed to return for the remainder of the semester. Though the student veterans were not directly involved in the situation, the threat of violence triggered one of the students, and he became physically ill. He reported that he was satisfied with the way the instructor handled the situation and offered support. Though this situation was surprising and disruptive, he indicated he felt comfortable in returning to the following class and felt safe throughout the remainder of the semester.

Student veteran peer interactions. Both faculty and student veteran participants reported evidence of positive social interactions amongst the veterans. They frequently collaborated on projects and studied together outside of class. In class, they often socialized with one another and sat near each other even when they had different seating preferences. As one student veteran reported:

> *Kevin*, I got him sitting right next to me now. Like you said he was sitting in the*
>
> *back…as you know, I sit right up front. And actually I made Kevin sit in the front too. I*
>
> *have English with him and he goes, 'why are you sitting up here?' 'Cause I'm old and I*
>
> *can't see, and I can't hear.' So he sat up there with me. So I'm making him do some*
>
> *things that I can't believe he's doing now…he was going to sit in the back in this class*
>
> *and I go 'sit here, sit here!' And he did.*

Despite definite seating preference, as many veterans often have, Kevin was willing to move to support the needs of his friend.

Feeling a strong sense of support was commonly reported by the participants in the veteran-concentrated classes. As one stated:

> *When you with vets, and a lot of vets would probably agree, you feel more a family type*
>
> *of feeling…it's kind of like, no it IS a brotherhood. A sisterhood…so being here, with this*
>
> *environment here at KCC, with the vet to student ratio, I feel very comfortable.*
>
> *Especially in the classes with the vets…I talked more to the vets because we have that*
>
> *connection. We have that bond…like, I trust you with my life. Of course! That's the way it*
>
> *always has been. Brothers in arms. That's what we do.*

In addition to a sense of connectedness, student veterans reported positive academic outcomes. They reported studying together and seeking help from one another when needed. "*We feel more comfortable asking each other for help. There's no judgment.*" One student veteran recognized he had difficulty with a particular topic and sought assistance from a veteran classmate he perceived to be competent in that area. Not only did he continue to study with him, he registered for future classes with him so that he could continue to receive help. This was also beneficial for the student veteran providing the assistance as he indicated excitement in having his classmate

register for the same classes. Additionally, when this student began to lose motivation at one

point, recognizing that another veteran was relying on him motivated him to persevere in his own

academic studies. Another student veteran spoke about the influence a supportive social

connection had on his motivation to continue:

> *I'm human just like anybody else. Sometimes I feel like giving up. Ashley* has talked me*
>
> *out like, 'you can't give up. It's going to get hard. Wasn't Basic Training hard?' Yes, it*
>
> *was! It was a pain! 'You got through that, didn't you?' I sure did. What makes you think*
>
> *you can't get through this. That was mostly physical, and this is mostly mental. Put them*
>
> *together and you're just a whole person…It makes you feel good just to know that you*
>
> *know somebody else who knows what you've been through.*

Thus, the connections developed within the class motivated the student veterans to seek

assistance to improve their performance as well as persist.

Unfortunately, there were two student veterans who did not persist through the semester.

One student reported that the difficulty level of the coursework was too high, and the other

student had a baby during the semester. Nevertheless, the results of the other students suggest

this may be a helpful way to provide opportunities for student veterans to make meaningful

connections to one another.

Veteran-concentrated class challenges. Organizing learning communities for veterans on

a small campus proved challenging. Due to the small number of student veterans divided among

a vast array of academic programs, it was difficult to identify classes that satisfied requirements

for a large number of them. This logistical challenge was made even more difficult when trying

to identify a section that met at a time when the greatest number of student veterans were

available. It was also later determined that only two of approximately ten academic advisors had

been advising student veterans about the availability of the classes which minimized the reach to

the population of focus. Advisors indicated that, despite knowing about the classes, they did not

advise students to take them because they could not differentiate between veteran and civilian

students. There is an item on an intake form in which students disclose whether they have served

in the military, but advisors indicated that they do not have enough time to read the intake forms

before they meet with the students, and unless students verbally disclose the information, they

are unaware of their veteran status. Because student veterans disclose that information on the

intake forms, it is possible that they believe they have already disclosed the information and do

not recognize the need to express it verbally as well.

Ultimately, administration did not offer additional veteran-concentrated classes beyond

the scope of this research. Nevertheless, student veterans' responses reflect their perceived value

of this program. Upon learning that another veteran-concentrated class would not be formally

offered the following semester, the students involved in the current class decided to create a

concentration on their own. Collectively, they identified a class that many of them needed or

expressed interest in, and encouraged other veterans to register as well. While this meets the

need of the current students, new incoming students or student veterans not already engaged in

mentoring, veteran-concentrated classes, or Veterans Club are not likely to be aware of this

opportunity to connect with other student veterans. This problem was also recognized by a

student veteran who advocated for more veteran-concentrated classes. When asked how he

would enhance connectedness between student veterans he said:

> *Getting more student veteran classes, I'd say. Because some of the student veteran*
>
> *classes like the speech classes and English classes, a lot of the vets have already taken*

them and the newer students haven't. So that's why they have to go through those. By the

time the new students get to where the vets are, we're gone.

Thus, the student-organized veteran concentration might meet needs of current students, but it

may not reach new or non-connected student veterans who are the primary audience for such

programming.

      Veterans resource center. Community involvement is a mainstay of the Veterans Club.

The Club initially consisted of a small group of student veterans who socialized at regularly

scheduled meetings; however, as membership grew, they collectively began to rally around

community-oriented service projects. Members partnered with other college clubs to host

fundraisers and increase awareness about cancer, PTSD, and veteran needs, and they frequently

volunteered at a local veterans' home and a civilian retirement home. A highlight many

participants noted was volunteering on Veterans' Day with an organization that trains service

dogs for veterans with injuries. When one of the organization's leaders commended them for

giving their time, especially on a day designated to honor them, a student veteran replied "*as*

long as my legs still work, I'm going to use them to help a veteran whose don't." And,

throughout the period of observation, a commonly repeated phrase was "*we raised our right*

hand to serve, and we still serve." The collective commitment to civic engagement strengthened

the sense of community among the members and the combined result of connectedness and

purpose attracted new members. One staff member, also a veteran, observed:

      When they first started, it was just a couple of vets that would just show up and kinda

      hang out and whatnot, but…they actually showed, hey it's not just a bunch of guys

      hanging out, but that we can actually do something in the community so that we can have

      strength in numbers and show our force.

The Club frequently participated in several singular engagements, but as they recognized they had developed greater strength as membership grew, they decided to undertake a significant large-scale project that would have a positive impact on the community.

Initially, Club members had intended to host a 5K event that would raise veteran awareness as well as encourage engagement with members of the local community; however, after the Veterans Club leaders attended a national leadership conference for student veterans, they shifted their focus to advocating for a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) to open as soon as possible rather than waiting for the plans that were not scheduled for another five years. Student veteran leaders returned from the conference unified in a mission with a renewed sense of focus. The President proposed changing the name from Veterans Club to Veterans Association to reflect the influence they had on campus and within the greater veteran community. As she reasoned, this was not just a social club where they hang out, but rather, this was an organized network of support that contributes to the community. The members unanimously passed her proposal, and the group will be referred to as the Veterans Association from this point forward.

In Study 1, a majority of survey respondents (86.7%) indicated that they would utilize a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) if one was made available to them, and the qualitative results in Study 2 reflected a desire for a space in which they could feel safe while studying and connect with other student veterans. The student veterans had recognized the impact such a space could have on their own educational experiences, and through the leadership conference, they saw the role that VRCs could play in recruiting and retention. Upon returning from the conference, they felt a sense of urgency to develop a VRC as soon as possible, not only for themselves, but for the countless student veterans to follow.

Proposing the center. Association leaders collaborated with the primary researcher and

student veteran research collaborator to develop a proposal using data from Studies 1 and 2 as

well as information learned from the leadership conference, and requested a meeting with the

college's upper administration. They advocated for the VRC by illustrating the necessity in

helping new veterans reintegrate into civilian life as well as an "operations center" in which they

could plan and execute "missions." As one student veteran stated, "*We aren't accustomed to ask*

for help, but we respond when someone needs help." They reasoned that having a physical

location would offer more effective means of impacting the veteran community beyond just

having a collective meeting group.

They presented a need for having a private location with walls explaining that the

openness of college computer spaces made it uncomfortable for many of the veterans to use

them, particularly those who experience PTSD. Further, the culture that student veterans share

allowed them to feel comfortable and accepted among peers, and a private location would foster

a sense that they could "*just be themselves for awhile*." However, they felt it was important that

the location was not too remote, as they did not want to exacerbate feelings of isolation. While

they desired a space in which they could feel comfortable, they also recognized a need to

integrate within the civilian world, so a private location amongst the regular activity would offer

refuge while still feeling connected the college. The VRC was envisioned in being a space for 1)

studying in a comfortable environment, 2) socializing with other student veterans, 3) conducting

Veterans Association meetings as well as meetings with veteran organizations from the

community, and 4) sharing veteran-related resources.

Developing the center. Administration was impressed by the group's presentation and

agreed to move forward with plans to open a VRC immediately rather than waiting for the

original design which was not scheduled for another five years. Additionally, administration was receptive to including members of the Veterans Association throughout the planning phase though this may have prolonged the process. Typically, the college would proceed with input from staff, and though a student veteran had been hired, it was agreed that additional input from a wider range of student veterans was necessary to ensure a diversity of needs were met. The college identified a few different locations in which the VRC could be housed, and with the Veterans Association's input, a large room near the Registration area was selected. This location is fairly secluded to allow for a sense of refuge for the student veterans, but it also offers easy access to the Veterans Financial Aid Coordinator as well as other college resources which maintains a feeling of integration. Additionally, the location is near an elevator to allow easy access for veterans with physical injuries.

A focus group was conducted to discuss the experiences of student veterans including strengths, challenges, and barriers. Meetings were held to determine objectives in planning the space and activities conducted within it, and a final focus group was conducted to finalize plans and meet with physical plant personnel to determine furniture placement. Considering the VRC was a space to fulfill multiple purposes, furniture placement presented a challenge. Throughout the interviews, discussions, and focus groups, student veterans frequently reported feeling uncomfortable using college computers because they were set up in a way that required users to face the wall with their backs exposed, so computer placement was one of the most crucial decisions. Unfortunately, physical plant determined that due to the configuration of the wiring, it would not be possible to set up desks away from the wall so that veterans could face the computers looking outward. Ultimately, the student veterans decided to place the computers against the wall with the door so that their sides were facing the door rather than their backs, and

the student veteran worker's desk was placed perpendicularly to act as a barrier between the

students at computers and anyone entering the VRC (See Figure 6). A lounging area was also

created using couches that were donated by the college and a TV that was donated by a

community member (Figure 7). A conference table and chairs, also provided by the college, was

placed in a corner to provide meeting space (Figure 8). The students also brought in a small

refrigerator, microwave, and coffee maker to create an area for refreshments, and hung a bulletin

board to post information about veteran related resources in the area. A bookshelf under the

bulletin board houses additional pamphlets and brochures for resources such as counseling,

financial assistance, and veteran benefits assistance (Figure 9). Future plans include devoting a

bookshelf to a library loan where student veterans can donate their used textbooks for future

student veterans' use.

Figure 4: The view of the VRC from the entrance.

Figure 5: Computer desks and donated books.

Figure 6: Student veteran worker's desk creating a barrier between the door and computers.

Figure 7: Lounging area.

Figure 8: Conference table and refreshment area.

Figure 9: Area for sharing veteran-related community resource information.

Opening the center. Planning the VRC took approximately 9 months from proposal to

opening. The Center was opened about 6 weeks after the beginning of the semester, and the

college incorporated a grand opening dedication as part of their Veterans' Day celebration. In the

short time the VRC has been opened, the Veterans Association has seen a steady increase in the

number of student veterans engaging in veteran support services that had not been previously

connected. Having a central location has been critical in the redesign of the mentoring program

to allow relationships to develop in a more authentic way, and it may also be helpful in allowing

them to plan for future classes as they designate their own "veteran-concentrated" class by

providing a location where they can post communications to the group. Although plans for a

VRC were initiated a few years ago by two staff members, the collective initiative of the student

veteran leaders dramatically accelerated its development. Thus, the VRC is as much a source of future success as it is a culmination of it. As a staff person present at the administration proposal meeting stated:

> *I was incredibly impressed by the way the veterans engaged the KCC Foundation,*
>
> *President, and members of the Board to advocate for their Veterans Resource Center.*
>
> *They were able to effectively communicate their needs in a very professional setting and*
>
> *made it clear that a space for them was more than a safe space; it was also a place to*
>
> *stage their operations as they work to change KCC and Kankakee for the better.*

Addressing the Research Questions

As the Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) model of Participatory Action Research suggests, flexibility it crucial as a group plans and executes change, evaluates and reflects upon the changes, then modifies as necessary. The participants' flexibility and instrumental role in the process can be viewed through evaluation of the research questions. Moreover, the resounding themes that emerged through the qualitative data analysis were the student veterans' commitment to one another and their commitment to serve.

1) How did participation in the mentoring program and/or veteran-concentrated classes influence sense of community and feelings of connectedness?

Participants who were actively involved in a mentoring relationship reported feeling connected to another individual and an enhanced sense of community. In many cases, connectedness extended beyond the Battle Buddy as developing one relationship led to an introduction to other student veterans and engagement in the Veterans Association. Similarly, student veterans who established connections to others in the veteran-concentrated classes, extended their social network as a result with both members of the Veterans Association and

civilian classmates. Participants from Study 2 indicated they felt civilian students feared them

due to misconceptions about veterans. This was echoed by some of the participants in Study 3

who suggested the civilians in the veteran-concentrated class had greater understanding of

military and veteran culture, and thus they felt more at ease in connecting with them.

Considering the overwhelming support in the preliminary studies for a mentoring

program, the group had expected more enthusiasm from incoming students. Nevertheless,

recognizing the value of connectedness, they decided it was important to modify the program

rather than abandon it. Similarly, though the college decided not to offer another learning

community due to scheduling challenges, participants of the program as well as Veterans

Association members decided to create a veteran-concentrated class of their own by collectively

registering for the same class. This reflects the value of the programs elements as perceived by

the student veterans who participated in them.

2) What factors in the program facilitated connectedness? What factors hindered it?

The programs did not necessarily create connectedness, rather it was the student veterans

themselves who developed the connections. However, the programs facilitated connectedness by

creating opportunities for it to develop. One student veteran had attended the college for several

semesters; however, it was not until involvement in the veterans-concentrated class that he

established a meaningful connection to another student. And after befriending one veteran

classmate, he began to attend Veterans Association meetings, expanding his network of social

support. As Sarason suggested, sense of community is difficult to define, and like, hunger, is not

always recognized until one is starving. Although student veterans often report feeling isolated,

they are also part of a culture that diminishes seeking help; and as a result, they may not actively

seek out social support even when they recognize it is lacking. And yet, veterans, sharing a

common culture and mutual understanding, easily befriend one another. The effectiveness of the programs then lies in simply creating the opportunities for student veterans to establish connections, and connectedness develops naturally.

In the same regard, the unwillingness to ask for help may have been one of the factors that hindered new incoming students from participating in the Battle Buddy program. Some potential participants expressed interest when they thought that they would be helping someone else, but declined when they realized the purpose was to help *them* acclimate. A potential allure for connecting veterans may involve harnessing their propensity to help others, and then involving them in collective engagement. As the Veterans Association became more engaged on campus and in the surrounding community, more new members joined the group.

Lack of communication between the college and student veterans was another factor that may have hindered connectedness. A number of student veterans were not made aware of the veteran-concentrated classes, and many potential participants missed the opportunity to participate, and as a result, may have missed an opportunity to develop a sense of connectedness.

3) How do social connections influence academic persistence?

Establishing a meaningful connection to another student veteran seemed to evoke a similar sense of loyalty established through military service. Connected student veterans were able to share resources such as tutoring one another and providing rides to students without regular transportation. During a focus group, students reported that working together as a group helps them to "*get [their] homework done.*" One stated they "*feel more comfortable asking each other for help*" and the others agreed studying together has become a collective process. The group mentality also fostered a sense of accountability. As one student said, "*everyone keeps*

everyone accountable for what they do." Many reported looking forward to registering for classes the following semester with their fellow student veterans.

In addition, connectedness led to sharing mutually beneficial social support and inspiration. As one student veteran stated:

> *I believe we are empowered by the examples of other student veterans. In this way, we're no different than any other group. We know that children whose parents graduate college are more likely to graduate college. Likewise, children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds are more likely to achieve success when someone is modeling it for them. Attending conferences and meeting other veterans who have graduated keeps graduation attainable for us.*

Besides receiving inspiration from others, connected student veterans reported feeling a sense of responsibility to provide a positive example for others. As one participant said of his Battle Buddy, "*Sometimes I feel like I want to quit…but I've got to make a good example for [him].*" Another veteran stated:

> *It empowers to be individuals in a place where we were. It's that group mentality, that hive mentality. But it has taught them that, hey yeah, it's okay to have that mentality but it's also okay to succeed on their own…it gives them an opportunity to be themselves which is not normally accepted in society. It also gives the ability not only to be competing, but also have that support channel. Feeling like class, what do you need? It's like that 22 mile ruck march…you're not allowed to quit on the other person…you see someone on the ground and you pick them up and that gives you that sense of purpose to say, you know what, I'll help you, we're not going to finish this unless we finish it together.*

In addition to enhanced academic assistance due to receiving support, academic persistence was enhanced as student veterans felt a need to *provide* support to fellow student veterans.

     4) How does planning and executing a large-scale project impact sense of

       community and sense of empowerment?

During interviews and focus groups, developing the Veterans Resource Center was one of the most frequently mentioned highlights of the previous year. The members of the Veterans Association had been actively engaging in campus activities as well as the wider community, but advocating and planning the VRC was a longer-term, more complex endeavor that required the focused, sustained collective effort of more members of the group. The members who had attended the leadership conference were inspired by the positive impact they believed the VRC would bring to their veteran community, and their own sense of community was strengthened as they rallied around a common mission. The immensity of the project focused their efforts and allowed members to utilize their leadership skills. As one leader stated:

> *Leadership opportunities empower veterans…we know how to lead…More than anything,*
> *we associate leadership with purpose and a sense of purpose can change a life. When*
> *soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and veterans have a clear objective, they execute.*
> *Leadership positions offer that objective.*

This sentiment was also reflected in the meeting with administration when another student veteran leader said, *"[At a community college], we are more likely to be a student from the community which means we are likely to be leaders in the community."* This led to a powerful exchange between two student veteran leaders as they expressed the importance of undertaking this project:

> *"A sense of community is where we find our sense of purpose."*

"A sense of purpose keeps you alive."

"Our mission gives us a purpose and we rally our community around our mission."

Thus, a sense of community served as the impetus in awakening a sense of purpose, and this

purpose empowered them to strengthen their sense of community to support their collective

purpose.

Sense of Community, Sense of Purpose, and Empowerment: A Theoretical Model

A theoretical model was developed as a result of what was learned from the set of

studies. Initially the focus of this study was exploring the relationship between sense of

community and empowerment as guided by Studies 1 and 2. However, inductive analysis of the

aggregate data revealed a third crucial construct: sense of purpose. As the exchange between the

two veteran leaders alludes, these three constructs may be interrelated. The model in Figure 10

illustrates the interdependence between sense of community (SOC), sense of purpose (SOP), and

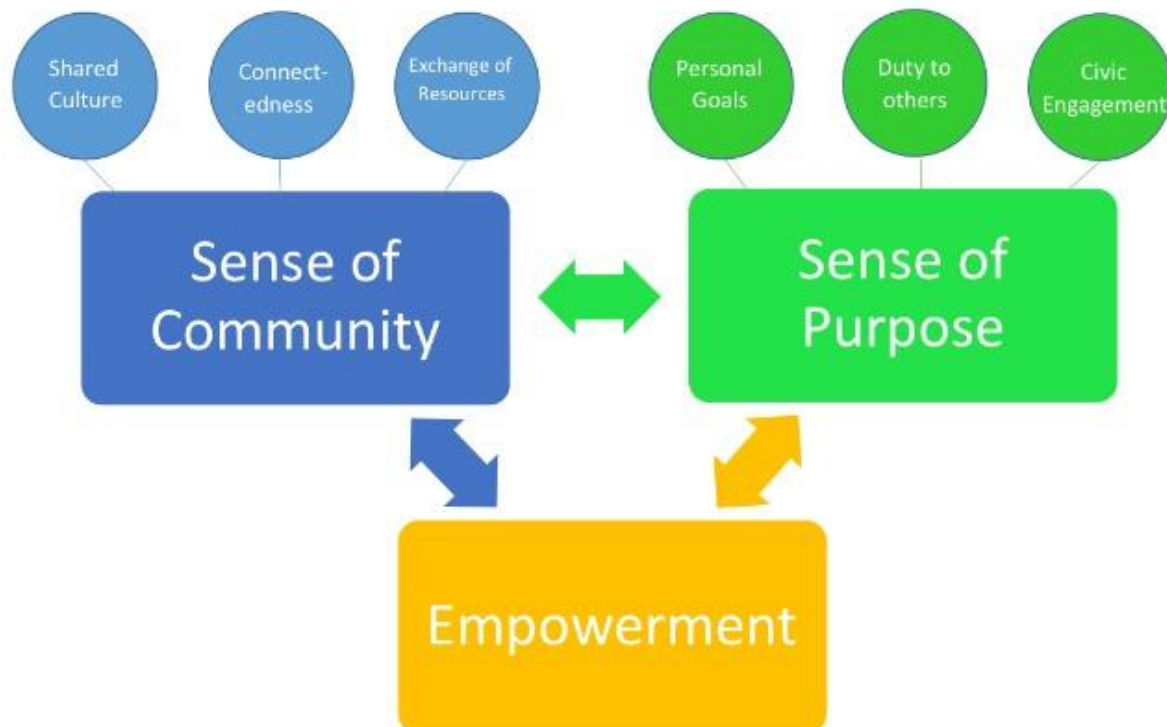empowerment as well as the factors that were involved in SOC and SOP.

Figure 10: A theoretical model of the interdependence of sense of community, sense of

purpose and empowerment.

Sense of community and empowerment. Empowerment, as described by Rappaport

(1984), is a process by which people gain mastery over their own lives. Although Rappaport

does not specifically use the term "disempowerment," he alludes to contextual factors such as

poverty and social injustice that may impede a sense of personal mastery. Like sense of

community, a definitive definition of empowerment can be elusive as it "takes on a different

form in different people and contexts" (p. 3). Within the context of veterans, loss of camaraderie

and loss of purpose are frequently referenced as barriers to transitioning from military to civilian

life, and within the context of this study, both sense of community and sense of purpose appeared

related to a sense of empowerment.

Sarason (1974) defined sense of community as "the sense that one was part of a readily

available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a

result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness" (p. 1). Qualitative data

suggested participants in this study felt a sense of community through the supportive network

developed amongst the student veterans involved in programming. Inductive analysis suggested

three main factors were involved in the participants' SOC: shared culture, connectedness, and an

exchange of resources. Participants frequently reported that they felt at ease in the presence of

other veterans as it fostered a sense of being understood and accepted. Perhaps in part due to this

comfort, members within the veteran-connected programs reported developing emotionally

satisfying friendships. Additionally, members reported benefitting from exchanging resources

such as tutoring, car rides, babysitting, and even information about mental health support and

veteran benefits. Results from Study 1 also suggest a relationship between these constructs as a

multiple regression analysis indicated connectedness predicted academic persistence, and significant correlations were found between empowerment and sense of community as well as empowerment and connectedness specifically.

Defining the paradox. Rappaport (1981) introduced the notion of the paradoxical nature within social problems. For example, freedom and equality, while both positive ideals in social justice, are, in reality, diametrically opposed. As Rappaport wrote:

> Allowing total freedom will lead the strong (in whatever form strength is found-social, power, money, physical powers) to dominate the weak and equality will be obliterated. Equality will require constraints on freedom, which will necessarily impose limits on certain people (p. 3).

Riger (1993) critiqued what she viewed as two underlying assumptions of empowerment: emphasis of individualism which leads to competition and conflict among those who are empowered, and "preference for traditionally masculine concepts of mastery, power, and control over traditionally feminine concerns of communion and cooperation" (p. 279). Given the cooperative nature involved in sense of community, this dialectic assumption suggests a paradoxical relationship between SOC and empowerment. Accordingly, as individuals gain mastery over their own lives, the emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency usurps the supportive nature involved in sense of community. Similarly, but on the other hand, emphasizing communion and cooperation requires constraints on power and control. However, study of these student veterans suggests that, at least in some contexts, SOC and empowerment may be interdependent phenomena.

Resolving the paradox. A sense of loneliness can be disempowering to anyone, particularly to those who are accustomed to a culture, such as military, that emphasizes unity. In

addition to adjusting to a civilian culture, student veterans may feel further isolated by the intense competitive nature common within higher education. Further, entering college at an older age exacerbates perceived differences from the traditional college student. These factors combined can intensify feelings that one does not belong and potentially influence one's decision to stay in college and complete academic goals. Within this study, participants reflected a sense of "not fitting in" when they first enrolled, and gained a sense of community, as well as renewed confidence, through developing a network of relationships with other student veterans. *("I believe we are empowered by the examples of other student veterans... meeting other veterans who have graduated keeps graduation attainable for us.")*. In this regard, it was a communion with others that led to a sense of mastery over their own academic plans.

This is not to say that conflict or competition never transpired among the participants. As to be expected in any group, there were occasions when conflicts arose; however, conflicts were ultimately resolved without impact to academic progress. Although, connecting veterans did foster competition at times, this is not necessarily a negative dynamic for this population. For veterans, competition enhances individual performance for all involved parties, but communion is maintained due to the commitment to one another and the military resolution that no one is ever left behind. Being surrounding by fellow student veterans motivated them to work harder and persist in their education as they used one another as social comparison; and, it strengthened their sense of community as the competitive nature mirrored their shared military culture. Competition with one another was not necessarily to be the best individual, but to bring out the best of the collective group.

Several members of the Veterans Association participated in a 22 mile Ruck

March to raise awareness of PTSD and veteran suicide. Interestingly, completion of the march

became a metaphor for academics ("*Feeling like class, what do you need? It's like that 22 mile*

ruck march…you're not allowed to quit on the other person… we're not going to finish this

unless we finish it together.") Ryan*, one of the participants in several veteran-connected

programs, recounted his Ruck March experience when asked to describe a time he felt a sense of

community:

> *Well, the ruck march was pretty good, 'cause you know what, that was the first*
>
> *test on my legs. And I was really worried about not completing the march. So completing*
>
> *that made me feel real good… I made it through the whole thing, so I felt pretty good*
>
> *after that. Well, with the other guys too, I got really close to them…I probably would*
>
> *have quit [without them]. 'Cause I see Mia*, she's in front of me, I go damn! … I go I*
>
> *gotta keep up with her. I told her that too. Yeah, I told her, I'm glad you're with me*
>
> *'cause you just pushed me to do the whole thing.*

Empowerment from within. Not only was Ryan's account of a sense of community about

feeling close to fellow veterans, it illustrates that competition within the group generated power

within him to complete a rigorous task that he did not feel he could have completed alone.

Empowerment may not always involve an exchange of external power, but rather it may come

about by generating a *power within*.

Riger (1993) referenced Hollander and Offermann's (1990) delineation of different types

of power: *power to* (suggesting the power to act more freely), *power over* (suggesting the power

over resources), and *power from* (suggesting the power to thwart oppressive forces), and asserted

that while the concept of empowerment may suggest a sense of self-efficacy is a *power to* lead to

decision-making over resources (*power over*), interventions that fail to address a concrete change

in power are not actually empowering. However, this interpretation of power may fall short of addressing a fourth power: a power within. Although oppressive forces did not change for Ryan - he still had the same physical conditions that challenged his goal - the power that was generated within him empowered him to complete an arduous undertaking. And the power within him was generated, at least in part, through feeling a sense of community.

Sense of community, empowerment, and sense of purpose. Ryan had a goal in mind: to complete the Ruck March. This goal provided a sense of purpose which may have also contributed to his empowerment. A theme of sense of purpose continually percolated the data, and three related concepts emerged: personal goals, duty to others, and civic engagement. Just as Ryan had a personal goal to complete the Ruck March, he also spoke about the driving force that led him to college, "*I personally plan to get my degree. I didn't come back just because I wanted to, I have to get a job. My body won't let me do what I did anymore and I needed something different.*" He later stated "*[the] best thing I did was going back to school. I was kinda depressed because of my body and now I have a goal and something to work towards.*" Like many other participants, his personal goal was the impetus in positive changes he made in his life.

Although Ryan was a good student and performing well in his classes, there were occasions when factors in his life, such as health and living conditions, nearly led him to drop out. However, meaningful connections and perceived obligations to others generated that power within to persist. ("*Sometimes I feel like I want to quit…but I've got to make a good example for [him]*"). This duty to others was another common theme that emerged. While this involves connection to other people, the construct differed from connectedness in that it transcends a need for emotional connection and illuminates the need to protect and serve others. The military instills a sense of solidarity and obligation to defend one another; a camaraderie that is so

powerful and unique, participants often had difficulty finding that same connection outside the military. As a result, veterans frequently found a sense of purpose in helping others. ("*We aren't accustomed to ask for help but we respond when someone needs help.*") Though veteran-connected programs were not necessary to allow veterans to help others, they provided a vehicle to do so. ("*[V]ets are known for one thing and that's always helping. And that's what I did while I was in [that class].*") During one focus group, when asked to describe a time when they felt empowered, one responded "*when I bring other students into the VRC to help them*" and another said "*Having different connections to different partners [in the community who provide resources]. When you have an experience, you can help others through that experience. I feel more comfortable telling other veterans what to do with their benefits. Now I know how to help them.*" In other words, because she had successfully navigated through veteran services, she now felt empowered to lead others though the process. The relationships developed through the veteran-connected programs offered opportunities to fulfill a sense of duty and gain synergistic strength from one another to continue to make positive changes in their own lives as well as engagement in the community.

As the group strengthened in numbers as well as resolve, they looked for more ways to build connections within the community and serve a greater number of people. During a Veterans Association meeting, one veteran stated, "*We served in the military and now we need to serve in the community.*" Fulfilling this service also seemed to fulfill a sense of purpose. The student veterans participated in numerous civic engagement activities including volunteering time for an organization that trains service dogs for veterans as well as retirement and veterans' homes, raising awareness about PTSD and men's health, and raising funds for veteran-related organizations as well as breast cancer research. As one student veteran had remarked that

"*leadership opportunities empower veterans*," through engagement with other veterans and

service within the community, Ryan emerged as a respected leader among the group members

and an officer of the Veterans Association. Just as the President of the Association had indicated

when proposing the name change, this was no longer just a social group, together they had

leveraged their collective strength to fulfill a greater purpose and make meaningful changes in

the community. Although the logic model of the Veterans Association's mission, goals and

strategies, (Figure 11) is beyond the scope of this research, it has been included to illustrate the

collective power of the group harnessed around the common purpose of helping the veteran

community.

KCC Veterans Association Initiatives

Mission: to provide our community's veterans and their families with access to resources, professional networks, role models, and purpose and direction as we work together to achieve our greater goals of academic success, community engagement, mental health and wellness.

Goals: to enhance academic and transition experiences by addressing individual personal development, meaningful social connections, and civic engagement.

Guiding Principles and values: Social connectedness to strengthen and empower individuals; honor, service, camaraderie, integrity, and learning

Population/Context	Goals/Strategies	Outcomes and Indicators
Population of focus • Student veterans at KCC • Some elements open to the veteran population living in the area KCC serves **Context** • Higher rates of unemployment and poverty compared to state averages • Veterans face multiple psychological injuries including PTSD, anxiety, and depression; also feelings of isolation. • Suicide rates in Kankakee County exceed state average • Distance from VA hospital **Strengths** • Strong veteran culture of mutual respect, resilience, and commitment to action • Supportive and engaged staff • Established community support • Active Veterans Association members • Increasing support from civilian students • Veterans Resource Center • Chapter of Student Veterans of America **Needs** • Increase participation in student veteran activities, etc. • Enhancement of employable skills • Awareness of available resources for student veterans and veterans in the community • Increased membership in Veterans Association • Enhancement of social connectedness, sense of identity, and sense of purpose among student veterans	**Enrich personal development through a veterans' education program** • Financial literacy • Resume-writing, mock interviewing, professional communication • Leadership development • Connections to mental health resources • Stress management through massage therapy, meditation, and effective coping strategies ↓ **Enhance social connections and reduce isolation** • Open houses in Veterans Resource Center • Group events • Peer to peer support ↓ **Increase civic engagement through participation in the community** • Serve as mentors for veterans participating in Veteran Court • Host Military Open House and social events from community	**Personal Development** • Enhanced knowledge of financial literacy and stress-reduction strategies • Enhanced preparation for job searches and increased employment • Increased access and engagement of resources supporting well-being and mental health • Improved leadership skills in student veterans **Social Connections** • Reduced isolation and increased social connectedness among student veterans • Increase membership in Veterans Association **Civic Engagement** • Enhanced sense of purpose • Increased engagement in the community • Increased knowledge of community resources for student veterans and veterans within the community

Figure 11: Logic model illustrating the Veterans Association's mission, goals and strategies. Members of the Veterans Association collaborated with their advisors to develop a mission statement, establish goals, and generate strategies to achieve and measure their goals. Their emphasis on sense of community and purpose is evident in their mission statement: "to provide our community's veterans and their families with access to resources, professional networks, role models, and purpose and direction as we work together to achieve our greater goals of academic success, community engagement, mental health and wellness." And their overarching goal "to enhance academic and transition experiences by addressing individual personal development, meaningful social connections, and civic engagement" alludes to the connections between sense of community, sense of purpose and empowerment.

Riger (1993) challenged community psychologists to consider both "agency and communion; empowerment and also community" (p. 290). This community of student veterans demonstrated that communion can bring forth agency, and that agency and communion can enhance empowerment as well as strengthen a community. Like Ryan, student veterans enter college with a personal goal, an element that gives them purpose, and by fostering a sense of community, students harness a collective power which generates the power within - to persist in their own goals and fulfill greater potential. This sense of empowerment and collective energy further reinforces the desire to help others and engage in the community, and doing so strengthens a sense of community among the collective members, and a sense of personal mastery within the individuals.

Lessons Learned

Although generalizability is limited due to the small sample size, recognition of a few emerging themes may be useful for other institutions developing supportive programs for student veterans.

1. *Collaboration*: There are no better experts of a community than members of the community themselves; thus, it is paramount to include student veterans in the planning and decision making process. Student veterans are a diverse population with a variety of individual needs, and though empirical evidence may suggest a course of action, the student veterans of the institution may be the greatest authority of what course of action is most appropriate to meet their needs.

2. *Adaptability*: Given the diversity of needs and number of stakeholders involved, adaptability throughout planning and implementation is key. For example, the mentoring program evolved through response to feedback, and its current form is quite different than its original structure. However, the outcome of connecting student veterans to one another was more important than maintaining a specific structure of a program, and therefore, evolved accordingly. Programs must be adaptive to the various needs of the student veterans participating in them.

3. *Connections*: Connections to both individuals as well as a greater community are critical. Given the results of Study 1 indicating emotional connectedness predicted academic persistence, program elements were initially designed in ways to foster individual connections between student veterans. As relationships developed, connections became integrated within a larger network of student veterans reinforcing support at a macro-level. Analysis of the data suggests student veterans benefited from connectedness at both levels. Thus, programs should emphasize connectedness at both levels.

4. *Community and Purpose*: Empowerment is maximized when people are engaged with and supported by others and fulfilling a sense of purpose. The student veterans in this study felt empowered by connections with other student veterans and by fulfilling a sense of duty to serve others. The communion with fellow veterans committed to serving others further fueled a resolve as well as a confidence to serve the community in a greater capacity. And the satisfaction of serving the community enhanced a sense of mastery over their own lives.

5. *Competition and Communion*: Though critics of sense of community and empowerment suggest they are paradoxical, the dynamics in this population suggest that, at least for some, they may be interdependent. Student veterans in this study reported the competition between one another motivated them to fulfill their potentials while also strengthening their commitment to one another. This experience paralleled the military culture in which competition is a component of camaraderie. Communion with other veterans allows an opportunity to "compete" with one another, and this competition may facilitate growth in the individuals while simultaneously strengthening a sense of community.

Limitations and Future Studies

The study's small sample size prohibited statistical analysis and limits the generalizability of the results. It is important for future studies to include more participants so that correlational designs can explore relationships between SOC, SOP, and empowerment. Further experimental designs would be useful in continuing evaluation of veteran-supportive programs (i.e., mentoring, veteran learning communities, Veteran Resource Centers, etc.) and their effect on student veterans' academic success and transition.

The nature of Participatory Action Research emphasizes communal action; therefore, it is possible that the behavior observed and feelings reported in terms of sense of community, sense

of purpose, and empowerment could have been influenced by the methodology employed. Future

studies, especially those evaluating causal relationships, should consider methodology to control

for the possibility of such influence. Nevertheless, the altruistic nature and value of camaraderie

among veterans makes PAR an optimal methodological approach for this population.

Additionally, future studies in different populations would be beneficial in exploring how the

perceived paradoxical nature of sense of community and empowerment may be resolved in other

communities.

Veterans represent a significant population of college students. Continued research is

needed to identify ways to meet their unique needs, enhance opportunities for social connections

and personal growth, and support transitioning from military to civilian life. Although many

student veterans face challenges unique to their experiences, they also possess numerous

strengths to personally succeed as well as lead and inspire fellow students. Asset-based research

emphasizing these strengths is also needed.

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Appendix A
Student Veterans Survey

How well does each of the following statements represent how you feel?

	Not at all	Somewhat	Mostly	Completely
1. I get important needs of mine met because I am part of KCC.	1	2	3	4
2. KCC has been successful in getting the needs of its student veterans met.	1	2	3	4
3. When I have a problem, I can talk about it with someone at KCC.	1	2	3	4
4. I can trust people here.	1	2	3	4
5. Fitting into KCC is important to me.	1	2	3	4
6. It is very important to me to be a part of KCC.	1	2	3	4
7. Students care about each other.	1	2	3	4
8. It's hard for people like me to be accepted here.	1	2	3	4
9. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.	1	2	3	4
10. Most professors at KCC are interested in me.	1	2	3	4
11. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here.	1	2	3	4
12. There's at least one faculty or staff member I can talk to if I have a problem.	1	2	3	4
13. People at this school are friendly to me.	1	2	3	4
14. Professors here are not interested in people like me.	1	2	3	4
15. I am treated with as much respect as other students.	1	2	3	4

	Not at all	Somewhat	Mostly	Completely
16. I feel very different from most other students here.	1	2	3	4
17. I feel valued as a person at this institution.	1	2	3	4
18. I feel accepted as part of the KCC community.	1	2	3	4
19. I have felt lonely on campus.	1	2	3	4
20. I am satisfied with the range of extracurricular activities and programs.	1	2	3	4
21. Faculty are available when I seek their help.	1	2	3	4
22. Friends at KCC share my interests and beliefs.	1	2	3	4
23. I am satisfied with the overall quality of social interactions.	1	2	3	4
24. It is important for me to graduate from college.	1	2	3	4
25. I am confident that I made the right decision in choosing to attend this college.	1	2	3	4
26. It is likely that I will register at KCC next semester.	1	2	3	4
27. I plan to graduate/complete a program from KCC.	1	2	3	4
28. I would use a space specifically designated for student veterans (i.e., a Veterans Center for studying, meetings, hanging out, etc.)	1	2	3	4
29. I generally accomplish what I set out to do.	1	2	3	4
30. When I make plans, I am almost certain to make them work.	1	2	3	4
31. I am usually confident about the decisions I make.	1	2	3	4
32. People are limited only by what they think possible.	1	2	3	4
33. I can pretty much determine what will happen in my life.	1	2	3	4

How many semesters have you attended KCC (including this one)? _____

Are you attending full-time or part-time?   ☐ Full-time   ☐ Part-time

Do you intend to graduate/complete an academic or trade program?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Do you intend to register at KCC next semester?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If not, why not? Check all that apply:

☐ Graduating/completing program   ☐ Accepted work
☐ Transferring   ☐ Re-enlisting
☐ Dissatisfied with KCC   ☐ Other_____
☐ Family obligation

Please indicate if you have been diagnosed with one or more of the following service-related injuries:

☐ Hearing impairment   ☐ PTSD
☐ Back injury   ☐ Depression or mood disorder
☐ Injury impacting mobility   ☐ Anxiety disorder
☐ Traumatic Brain Injury

If you have a service-related injury, have you contacted KCC Disability Services?

☐ Yes, I am currently using resources provided by Disability Services
☐ Yes, but I do not use services
☐ No, I did not know about Disability Services, but would like to see how they might assist me.
☐ No, I am not interested.

Branch of Service/Component
☐ Army   ☐ Navy   ☐ Air Force   ☐ Marines   ☐ Coast Guard

☐ Active Duty ☐ Reserves ☐ National Guard

Approximately how long has it been since you were in the service? _____

Please feel free to provide any comments regarding services for student veterans at KCC:

Demographic Information

Age   _____

Gender   ☐ Male   ☐ Female

Ethnicity (check all that apply)

☐   Asian/Pacific Islander
☐   Black/African American
☐   Hispanic/Latino
☐   Native American
☐   White/Caucasian
☐   Other _____

Marital Status
☐   Single, never married
☐   Married or domestic partnership
☐   Separated
☐   Divorced
☐   Widowed

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your responses provide valuable information to better serve KCC's student veterans. If you would like more information regarding the results of this study or have questions, contact Cari Stevenson at (815) 802 – 8724 or cstevenson@kcc.edu.

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Student Veterans

Beginning: I am interested in your story of your life and the experiences you have experienced,

particularly from the time of becoming a veteran, deciding to attend college, and becoming a

member of the KCC community. But I want to hear further back and I want to hear about your

visions of the future as well. So take the role of a storyteller, telling about the events you have

experienced.

1. The first thing I would like to get is an overview of your life in brief chapters. So if your life

was a book, and there were somewhere around seven chapters, tell me what the chapter titles

would be and a bit about those chapters.

2. Next I would like to hear about a single episode in your life. Tell me what happened from the

time you decided to enter college, whether that was when you were in service and before, and

your thinking about it since, important conversations, all the way up until you decided to apply

and entered KCC.

> a. While we are talking about these things, what was the whole application,
>
> admission, and registration process like?
>
> b. What helped you, regardless of who or what that was, what didn't, what would
>
> you advise to others beginning to think about this now and trying to begin the
>
> process soon? From the school's end, what changes would you suggest?

3. I am interested in sense of community and empowerment. Some people describe sense of

community as a sense of belonging or a feeling that you matter to a group and empowerment as a

process that allows people to take control over improving their own lives. Can you tell me about

your best experience since you decided to enter college? And it doesn't have to be related to anything that KCC did, but just think of a life episode since starting here that was reflected a sense of community and empowerment. When did it happen, where, who was present and just tell me how the whole episode proceeded. Basically, I am looking for an example of one of the best experiences you've had here as a student or somehow connected to your education process.

4. Now answer the same question, but I want to hear about the worst experience and episode that has happened in this time period of your life. I know this could be difficult, but I promise this is completely anonymous and confidential and you do not have to respond to it, but what was your low point, what was the worst thing that happened? Who was there, when did it happen, what precipitated it, and how does it affect how you feel today and your perception of your future? What about this event would help others? What would you advise to others who might encounter a similar situation? How would you tell others to help? Particularly early on when the trouble seems to start?

5. Next I would like to hear about a big transition in your life? What would be a transition that you have experienced around education since you entered school?

    a. What has seemed to be the most empowering to you?

    b. How has going to school impacted your transition? What challenges have you

       encountered?

6. Now I want to hear something about your sense of community at KCC. How connected do you feel to other students? To faculty?

    a. Where has the real source of connection from others come from? Who has it come from

and how has that happened?

   b. You have already touched on this but what innovative could be done to make this happen

     more smoothly for others?

   c. How do perceptions about Veterans play a role? What would you like people to know

     about student veterans?

7. I know we have talked about some of this, but generally, how well supported do you feel as a

student? And again, this is anonymous and don't hold back on your honest feelings. Tell me

about a time when you have felt you needed support at KCC and you either got it or didn't.

8. Could you have used, have you used, would you ever consider any sort of support service at

KCC? For you or others, are you aware of any support services at KCC (e.g., tutoring, disability

services, Veteran Financial Aid coordinator)?

   a. Tell me more about any experiences you have had with the services? If not you, anyone

     else? If you have, which have you used?

   b. Whether it is you or others who might benefit, what might make using services easier in

     the future? What would be your sense or guess about how support be improved?

   c. Really thinking outside of the box, what would you love to see that would be really

     different at KCC that would completely make you feel better, more empowered, more

     connected here and beyond?

9. Thinking about beyond. What is it you want to do and where do you want to go in the future?

This question is about your ideal future. Tell me a story about your idealized future. Think about

yourself in 10 years. What are you doing, what is happening, what has gone right and where are

you?

    a. Tell me more about what it really is that you need to get there?

    b. If anyone, any office or anything at KCC could help, what might that look like?

    c. If you were advising others to follow this path, what is the best piece of advice you

       would give them?

11. Thank you so much for doing this interview. It was so helpful to hear about all of your

experiences and what you have been doing and how you have been navigating this stage of your

life.

Is there anything about any of our topics that is something I need to know that I haven't asked? If

so, please tell me more about it.

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Family Members

1. How do you perceive (student veteran)'s experience has been at KCC?

2. How has being a student impacted his/her transition from the military?

3. Can you describe how you perceive his/her experience in balancing responsibilities at home and school?

4. What role do you perceive education has had in his/her transition?

5. What challenges has he/she faced as a student at KCC?

6. In what ways do you think KCC provides support for student veterans?

7. In what ways do you think KCC can offer more support?

8. What type of support does (student veteran) receive outside of KCC?

Appendix D

Interview Questions for Faculty and Administration

1. Describe some experiences you've had working with student veterans.

2. What are some of the strengths you perceive student veterans demonstrate?

3. Describe some of the challenges you perceive student veterans face.

4. How well do you feel prepared to support student veterans' needs?

5. What type of training would be helpful?

6. In what ways do you think KCC provides support for student veterans?

7. Have you referred student veterans for support services? Which services?

8. How do you think KCC could better support student veterans?

9. What challenges do you foresee KCC facing in providing support services for veterans?

Appendix E

Interview Questions for Employers

1. Why do you hire veterans?

2. What strengths to veterans demonstrate in the workplace?

3. What challenges do veterans face in the workplace?

4. What areas do you think KCC should address in preparing student veterans for the workplace?

5. As an employer, do you feel you or your management team could benefit from training to better understand veterans?

6. If so, in what areas do you feel training would be beneficial.

Appendix F

Interview Questions for Mentoring Participants

1. I'd like to understand your experiences as part of the mentoring (Battle Buddy) program. What role did you play? Did it make you feel connected to something? If so, how? If not, what might have hindered that connection?

2. How often did you and your Battle Buddy meet and what types of activities did you do?

3. How connected do you feel to others at KCC? And in what ways do you feel connected? How does this influence you as a student? And how would you encourage other student veterans to connect with others on campus?

4. I am interested in sense of community. Some people describe sense of community as a sense of belonging or a feeling that you matter to a group. Can you tell me about your best experience since you decided to enter college? Specifically I'm looking for an example of a time you felt a sense of community.

5. Now answer the same question, but I want to hear about the worst experience that you've had as a student. I know this could be difficult, but I promise this is completely anonymous and confidential and you do not have to respond to it, but what was your low point, what was the worst thing that happened? Who was there, when did it happen, what precipitated it, and how does it affect how you feel today and your perception of your future?

6. I'm also interested in empowerment. People might describe this as a process that allows people to take control over improving their own lives. Thinking about your time as a student, describe something that helped you feel empowered.

7. Now thinking of the same idea of empowerment, but opposite….has there been any events or experiences that made you feel helpless or powerless? If so, what happened? And how do you think something like that could be changed to avoid other students feeling that way?

8. I know we have talked about some of this, but generally, how well supported do you feel as a student? And again, this is anonymous and don't hold back on your honest feelings. Tell me about a time when you have felt you needed support at KCC and you either got it or didn't.

Thank you so much for doing this interview. It was so helpful to hear about all of your experiences and what you have been doing and how you have been navigating this stage of your life.

Is there anything about any of our topics that is something I need to know that I haven't asked? If so, please tell me more about it.

Appendix G

Interview Questions for Veteran-Concentrated Class Participants

1. I'd like to hear about your experiences in the veteran-concentrated class. What was it like? How did it compare with your other courses?

2. Have you made any social connections to other people on campus, whether students or faculty? How did you go about building those relationships?

3. Can you tell me about any experiences that stick out when you felt really engaged in your education? What lead up to that experience? What factors made you feel engaged?

4. I am interested in sense of community. Some people describe sense of community as a sense of belonging or a feeling that you matter to a group. Can you tell me about your best experience since you decided to enter college? Specifically I'm looking for an example of a time you felt a sense of community.

5. Now answer the same question, but I want to hear about the worst experience that you've had as a student. I know this could be difficult, but I promise this is completely anonymous and confidential and you do not have to respond to it, but what was your low point, what was the worst thing that happened? Who was there, when did it happen, what precipitated it, and how does it affect how you feel today and your perception of your future?

6. I'm also interested in empowerment. People might describe this as a process that allows people to take control over improving their own lives. Thinking about your time as a student, describe something that helped you feel empowered.

7. Now thinking of the same idea of empowerment, but opposite….has there been any events or experiences that made you feel helpless or powerless? If so, what happened? And how do you think something like that could be changed to avoid other students feeling that way?

8. I'm interested to see if there's anything that makes you feel isolated on campus? If so, what contributes to that? What do you think could change that?

9. What suggestions to you have to enhance social connections on campus?

10. What are your future educational plans? How do you plan to achieve them?

11. Do you think participating in the veteran-concentrated class helped to support your goals? If so how? If not, what do you think you need for more support?

Thank you so much for doing this interview. It was so helpful to hear about all of your experiences and what you have been doing and how you have been navigating this stage of your life.

Is there anything about any of our topics that is something I need to know that I haven't asked? If so, please tell me more about it.

Appendix H

Interview Questions for Faculty

1. I'm interested in hearing more about your experiences teaching the veteran-concentrated class. How would you describe the class? What was the climate/culture like? How was it similar or different from other courses you teach?

2. I understand you received training related to teaching student veterans…did you feel this helped to prepare you? What else did you do to prepare for the course? Was there anything you felt you needed to be better prepared?

3. How would you describe the interactions amongst students in the class? Did you perceive a sense of community within the class? If so, what do you think lead to that forming?

4. As you know we initially intended for the class to be veterans-only; however, there were not enough veterans to fill a section, so civilians were included. How did that mix of students impact the interactions? Did veterans and civilians seem to form connections as well?

5. In thinking about your student veterans, I'd like to hear about some events, highlights, or interactions that really stick out. What happened and what factors surrounded those events?

6. Did you identify any certain barriers or difficulties your student veterans seemed to encounter?

7. Do you have any suggestions for other things we can do to support student veterans at the college?

Thank you so much for doing this interview. It was so helpful to hear about all of your experiences. Is there anything about any of our topics that is something I need to know that I haven't asked? If so, please tell me more about it.

Appendix I

Interview Questions for Staff

1. You've been involved with the Vet Association for a couple of years...describe the progress that you have seen.

2. What are some of the highlights that stand out? What about it makes it stand out?

3. What do you think has attributed to this progress?

4. What barriers or challenges do you see?

5. What are some of the strengths of the group?

6. What role do you see veteran support services playing in their success as students? Success in transition into civilian life?

7. What do you think empowers the students veterans? What can we do to assist in that process?

Thank you so much for doing this interview. It was so helpful to hear about all of your experiences. Is there anything about any of our topics that is something I need to know that I haven't asked? If so, please tell me more about it.

Appendix J

Focus Group Guiding Questions – Planning Meetings

1. What are the values that guide our work? What is the mission of the Veterans Club? And what are the main goals?

2. What are some of the strengths of the group? What barriers do you face as student veterans? As members within this community?

3. What do you perceive as the main needs to address?

4. What are your goals and strategies to address those needs?

5. How do you anticipate you can measure the outcomes?

Appendix K

Focus Group Guiding Questions – Student Veteran Experience

1. If you were to take photographs that illustrated your experience as student veteran at this college, what that look like? How could you tell your story to someone through pictures?

    a. How did you feel when you first got here? What would that look like?

    b. What are some of the challenges you face as a student?

    c. What are some of the positive outcomes of being a student?

2. How would you illustrate your experience as a member of the Veterans Club?

    a. What benefits do you receive as a member?

    b. Why would someone want to become a part of the club?

Appendix L

Focus Group Guiding Questions – Veterans Resource Center

1. What does this space mean to you? What should it accomplish? What activities do you plan to conduct in the Center?

2. How should it be designed to meet your needs? What type of furniture do you need? How should it be placed?

3. What other items do you need? For what purpose?

4. Where will the furniture/items come from?

5. How will consumable items (i.e., coffee, food) be replenished?

Appendix M

Focus Group Guiding Questions – Overall Evaluation

1. What are some of your highlights of the past year? What are some things that stick out to you?

2. Is there something you experienced in the past year that has made you feel connected to someone?

3. What role, if any, do you think connections to others has had on your role as a student? How have connections to each other influenced you as a student?

4. How have your experiences here influenced your transition into civilian life?

5. You've made a lot of progress over the past year…what do you think has contributed to that progress?

6. What do you think are some of the strengths of the group?

7. What are some of the challenges or barriers that you perceive to your success?

8. I'm also interested in empowerment. That can be described as feeling as though you have control over your own life. I'm interested to hear how you might have felt empowered through this process or examples of times that you have felt empowered as a student veteran.

9. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't already covered?

Appendix N

Mentoring Application and Training Material

Kankakee Community College
MENTORING APPLICATION

Personal Information:

Name_____ Gender ☐ Male
           First   Middle   Last   ☐ Female

Address _____
           Street   City   State   ZIP

Home phone _____ Mobile phone _____

Branch of Service _____

Work phone _____ Occupation _____

E-mail address _____

Volunteer Information:

1. What do you feel are the strengths (bilingual, math skills, previous relevant volunteer experience, etc.) you can bring to this program?
_____
_____
_____

2. Write a brief statement on why you have chosen to participate in the mentor program.
_____
_____
_____

3. Initial the two statements below:

_____ I understand that the mentor program involves spending a minimum of one hour every week for the academic year at a school with an assigned student.

_____ I understand that I will be required to complete the mentor program orientation and at least two training sessions during the year.

4. College Major (mark one):

       ☐ Criminal Justice   ☐ Education

☐ Nursing   ☐ Vocational
☐ Business   ☐ Humanities and Social Science
☐ Other (please specify) _____

5. GPA _____
6. Why do you want to become a mentor? _____
_____

Optional Information:

1. Do you prefer working with someone from a particular military branch?

         ☐   Army

         ☐   Navy

         ☐   Air Force

         ☐   Marines

         ☐   Coast Guard

2. Do you prefer working with a ☐ male ☐ female ☐ No Preference

3. Do you prefer working with a student from a specific racial/ethnic group? ☐ Yes ☐ No
                                                                   ☐ No Preference

  If yes, please specify: _____

4. Please list any hobbies or interests you may have:_____
_____

5. What would you like to do with a mentee? _____

6. What clubs or groups, if any, do you belong to? _____
_____

7. My favorite subject in school was _____

8. My least favorite subject in school was _____

9. What qualities would you like in a mentee? _____

10. What individual has served as a role model for you? Why? _____
_____

11. If you could recommend one book for your mentee to read, what would it be?
_____

12. Please put an X by the activities you enjoy the most:

___   Playing sports such as _____
___   Watching sports such as _____
___   Writing
___   Reading
___   Listening to music such as _____
___   Photography
___   Attending plays
___   Going to the movies
___   Arts and crafts
___   Visiting zoos and parks
___   Visiting museums
___   Using computers
___   Playing games
___   Cooking

12. What days of the week are you available to volunteer? (check all that apply):
     ☐ Monday   ☐ Tuesday   ☐ Wednesday   ☐ Thursday   ☐ Friday   ☐ Saturday   ☐ Sunday

13. What is the best time for you to volunteer? (check all that apply):
     ☐ Mornings   ☐ Afternoons   ☐ Evenings   ☐ Weekends

I certify to the best of my ability that the information provided on this application is true and accurate

_____   _____
      Signature   Date

Mentoring/Sponsor Program for KCC

Mentoring Program outline

- Mission
- Philosophy
- Goals/Purpose
- Objective
- Program Guidelines
- Contact Information
- Marketing
- Recruiting
- Interview Process
- Training

Mission: To support veterans transitioning to college after military service to foster academic and personal success.

Philosophy: to make each new student veteran's transition to Kankakee Community College as smooth and positive as possible and to provide them with the support and resources needed to be successful.

Goals/Purpose

- Ease the transition from military to KCC
- Improve student veterans sense of connectedness to the college
- Help increase student retention/academic performance rates.

Objectives

- Retention and engagement between student veterans
- Development and professional relationships
- Create culture of continuous learning

Program Guidelines

- Mentor and Mentee should meet once a week for the first X weeks. Then X number of weeks on a by request basis
- Mentor and Mentee will keep a one on one mentoring program for one full semester
- Meeting will take place in a setting that is most comfortable with both mentor and mentee
- Mentors will be sophomore or higher, must be in good academic standing and current student
- Mentors should try to be in the same program

Contact information

- In Person, word of mouth
- Email
- Facebook

Marketing

- KCC Veteran Club Facebook page
- Word of mouth
- Brochures
- Email
- Orientation

Recruiting

- Referrals
- Web based
- Volunteers

Interview Process

Training

- Literature
- Slide show
- Resources to call

KCC Veteran Mentoring Guidelines

What does a mentor do in the mentoring relationship?

The mentor should be the one to take the initiative to make the initial contact with the mentee (as soon as the match is made) and elicit the mentees goals and expectations. A mentor listens carefully to his or her mentee's goals, strengths, and struggles. Based on those goals, the mentor supports the mentee in meeting his or her goals through questioning, providing guidance and feedback, sharing his or her own experiences, and possibly connecting the mentor with other individuals or groups who could help. Every mentoring relationship will unfold differently based on the individuals involved, but the purpose of mentoring is not to tell the mentee what to do, but to help the mentee make his or her own informed decisions. The mentor should be supportive, not critical or negative, and should remember that everyone's experiences and priorities are different.

What does a mentee do in the mentoring relationship?

A mentee communicates his or her goals and professional situation clearly to the mentor. He or she listens critically and objectively to the feedback and guidance received, keeping in mind that the mentor is speaking from his or her specific experience and priorities. It's up to the mentee to ensure that the relationship is beneficial by keeping in contact, clearly communicating expectations, actively addressing problems, and asking for help when needed.

Setting goals and expectations

Both the mentor and the mentee should start by discussing their expectations for the mentoring relationship. This should be clarified as soon as possible, because not understanding each other's expectations for the relationship could lead to disappointment. A mentor should ask his or her mentee about what the mentee's goals are and what he or she is looking for from the relationship. Mentees should be clear about what they hope to get out of the mentoring relationship, particularly with respect to goals, which will form the foundation of their work with the mentor. Issues like frequency of meetings, availability, and modes of contact should be agreed upon from the start.

Mentors and mentees are expected to be in contact at least 6-8 times during the academic year that they are working together. However, contact can be more frequent or last longer than a year if this is mutually agreed upon.

Ways to keep in contact

The mentor and mentee should establish together which mode(s) they prefer to use to keep in contact:

- In-person
- Phone
- Email
- Skype

Confidentiality

Given that the mentoring relationship requires trust, communications between the mentee and mentor should be kept confidential.

If things are not going well

Occasionally, the mentoring relationship doesn't work out. This can be a result of bad fit, a mentor or mentee who doesn't actively participate in the relationship, or communication issues. If this happens, the best way to approach it is to first address the issue with the mentor/mentee. If this does not rectify the problem, contact the Mentoring Coordinator [EMAIL] so he can try and help fix the problem.

Other Guidelines/Rules

- Mentoring will be done in a professional manner
- Mentoring will not be done at bar or while drinking alcoholic beverages
- Both Parties will be respectful of each other's differences and backgrounds
- Mentor and mentee will meet 6-8 times during the academic semester (Spring/Fall)
- Mentor and mentee will keep a professional relationship
- There will be no misuse of influence or hazing of any kind

At the end of the year (or nine-month period)

At the end of the year or nine-month mentoring period, the mentor and mentee will be asked to complete a survey evaluating their experience with the mentoring program. After this point, the mentoring relationship can continue informally, so long as both parties agree. However, after this point, the mentoring relationship is no longer under the formal Mentoring Program and its guidelines.