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Project Title: Supporting Student–Veterans Transitioning to College Life

During my time as a member of URI's Student Veteran Organization (SVO), it came to my attention that the student veterans often felt ostracized, stereotyped, and lost because they did not attend college in the "traditional" fashion (i.e. right after high school). As a result of these feelings, they mostly did not attend URI orientation, and thus were starting school at a disadvantage due to lacking basic knowledge in navigating URI and its online resources that one learns at Summer Orientation. I was moved by their honesty and started thinking about how unfair it was that these veterans, who were going back to school to make meaning of their lives for a variety of personal reason(s), were missing out on an essential and informative part of the "college experience."

This inexperience and lack of information is particularly detrimental for student-veterans because transitioning back into civilian life for military personnel can be very overwhelming, unfamiliar, and challenging. For a majority of these individuals, there is a sense of loss of rigid structure, fierce companionship, and purpose. Most have experienced a traumatic event during combat deployments. Thus, these individuals may already have a hard time transitioning back into civilian life.

As a result of hearing these concerns, I immediately knew I wanted to focus my Honors Project on creating an orientation program specifically for student-veterans, as well as learn more about the thanatological concepts of loss and meaning making within this population. Thus, I worked with Rachael Garcia, Assistance Director of Veteran Affairs and Military Programs at URI, and Jeff Johnson, an academic advisor, to construct and implement an orientation program specifically programmed for both incoming and current student-veterans. The orientation was hosted as a breakfast event at URI's Higgins Welcome Center in early September 2019. The program included informative sessions on navigating URI's campus, using online resources, and seeking advice on course enrollment. In addition, the program introduced them to various other helpful resources, such as Vocational Rehab, Providence VA Medical Center, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Labor and Training, Army/ Air National Guard, URI Career Services, and others. With all these resources, the orientation program was able to guide new and current student-veterans at URI through their educational and financial experiences and circumstances.

In order to further my understanding of the military-to-civilian transition, I interviewed a group of current student-veterans at URI about their transition experience and how it specifically pertained to college. One student-veteran I interviewed told me that because of his PTSD, he did not have the luxury of taking URI's RIPTA shuttle on campus because it was often times too crowded and too loud and so he always has to walk. Another student-veteran disclosed to me that despite the support from professors, transitioning as a student was very difficult for him, for he felt isolated and depressed. However, the SVO has definitely helped him break his isolation and has pushed him to become more involved and find a new passion for education again. Other, younger student-veterans expressed that they found other student-run clubs and organizations that helped them feel more like a student and less of a veteran, which helped immensely with their transition. Despite this, these student-veterans also wish that the SVO had more social events sponsored in addition to the networking events, which are more beneficial to the older student-veterans. Additionally, every student-veteran I interviewed asserted that a Student-Veteran Orientation program was exactly what URI needed for this population, and would be even better if URI could provide a Student-Veteran Center in the future. Through these interviews, I gained a

more personal awareness of the obstacles, advantages, losses, and gains that student-veterans face during this transition period. Stories such as these helped me learn more about their specific needs during this transition and how URI can adjust to meet these needs.

My passion for thanatology, education, and the veteran population in itself compelled me to advocate for this group's desire to make meaning of their personal losses and life through enrollment in a higher education system that does not necessary cater to their specific needs or circumstances. As a result of my project, I helped create a program for a minority population at URI that will ultimately help them feel like they belong and positively reinforce their decision to enroll at URI. This orientation program will provide a supportive foundation for future student-veterans who are ready to redirect their lives and make meaning of losses they experienced during their time in the service. Hopefully, it will raise awareness of and appreciation for their presence on campus.