

Purdue University
Purdue e-Pubs

Charleston Library Conference

Is the Library Ready for an Emerging Field? The Case of Veterans Studies

Marc D. Brodsky
Virginia Tech, marc9@vt.edu

Bruce E. Pencek
Virginia Tech, bpencek@vt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/charleston>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

An indexed, print copy of the Proceedings is also available for purchase at:

<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston>.

You may also be interested in the new series, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences. Find out more at: <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston-insights-library-archival-and-information-sciences>.

Marc D. Brodsky and Bruce E. Pencek, "Is the Library Ready for an Emerging Field? The Case of Veterans Studies" (2013). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315249>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Is the Library Ready for an Emerging Field? The Case of Veterans Studies

Marc D. Brodsky, Public Services and Reference Archivist, Virginia Tech

Bruce E. Pencek, College Librarian for Social Sciences and History, Virginia Tech

Abstract

How can libraries and archives prepare for emerging scholarly fields that have not yet emerged? How do we know when such a “discipline” is emerging, and how might we support it?

An archivist at Special Collections and the history/social science librarian at the Virginia Tech Libraries saw signs of research interest about veterans on their campus and elsewhere. With an interest in supporting what might be considered an emerging field, both were aware of the risks of investing in materials that do not attract users. This presentation will examine their process of evaluating those risks while assessing evidence of a growing need. After a review of existing holdings, they began to survey the research landscape for indications of the subjects, disciplines, methods, and constituencies that might consolidate as a discrete field of veterans studies. Further, given the absence of indicators that mark established fields—regular conferences, journals, academic programs—they turned towards a strategy of actively “seeding the need” by engaging in interdisciplinary conversations on the matter of veterans studies and gauging reaction and participation. As a consequence of this work, both librarian and archivist have become active in projects that are creating the very indicators that suggest veterans studies may emerge as a field of academic inquiry requiring library support. At this session, this process and its results to date will be discussed, along with the project's implications for special and circulating collections and, more broadly, the library's scholarly communications initiatives.

Introduction

Are libraries ready should the field of Veterans Studies emerge as a viable field of study that will require a response of resources on the part of librarians and archivists alike? Is veterans studies poised to emerge in this way? What signs indicate the formation of this area of study? How best might we pay attention to these signs?

It is important to note that we are not saying definitively that this field is going to emerge and that everybody should think about getting ready. Rather, we have been exploring the question, in some ways quite actively, and are here to discuss that exploration, with the idea and suggestion that others may be interested in pursuing a similar or parallel course.

It Is in the Air (and Has Been for a Very Long Time)

Talk about veterans is in the air. One need not listen either very long or hard to the contemporary American dialogue to hear veterans' stories, concerns for returning veterans,

or sincere offers of thanks for their service. In fact, the cultural trace left by veterans—across the continents and centuries—has been in the air for a very long time. More precisely, it seems to have been rarely, if ever, absent. If veterans studies is to emerge as an area of academic study, it will be from out of this context.

On U.S. college and university campuses, after more than a decade of war, we are seeing the largest influx of veterans into higher education since World War II. Student veterans are forming or have formed communities based on their shared experience and have demonstrated both a desire to further understand their own experience and to investigate, in a scholarly way, the social, historical, political, and civil aspects of their service. These interests are forming a new focal point for areas of study already established, such as war literature and military sociology, while also providing the basis for a growing number of writing classes and related programs. Furthermore, support for veterans as they move into the classroom has, itself, become a matter of interest for university administrators.

In the broader community, with respect to veterans, public librarians may even be more keenly aware of the needs of veterans returning to civilian status than are their academic colleagues, given the range of support their institutions offer. At libraries across the country, this often includes providing information regarding federal and local social services; offering meeting space for veterans groups; assisting with the navigation of often complex information systems, governmental and otherwise; and locating books and other printed resources related to veteran's issues. Many public libraries have become partners in the Veterans History Project or simply link to this effort of the Library of Congress to collect oral histories from those who have served. Formed in October 2000, the Project has so far accumulated over 85,000 collections, nearly 14,000 of which have been digitized and are freely available on the web.

Contemporary artistic and creative communities also reflect veterans experience with musical, theatrical, and literary efforts, among others. Examples include Holding It Down: The Veterans' Dream Project, a recording that focuses on veterans of color from the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; also Outside the Wire, a performance group and self-described "social impact company" that addresses social and political issues, often involving the experiences of veterans. Writing workshops and seminars for veterans have arisen across the US, of which the Veterans Writing Project is perhaps the best known. Founded by retired Army Lt. Col. Ron Capps, this program conducts writing workshops for veterans and their families with the threefold goal of advancing literature by veterans, reminding civilian society of veterans' experiences, and healing. As similar programs do, the Project has a university affiliation, George Washington University, without restricting participation to students in the host institution, and it produces a literary journal, O-Dark-Thirty, devoted entirely to veterans' fiction and non-fiction.

Of course, the cultural thread of veterans' experience is all around us. Representations of veterans have populated the landscape of

television and movies for decades; whether one thinks of Matthew Crawley and William Mason from *Downton Abbey* or James Bellamy and Edward Barnes from *Upstairs, Downstairs* or prefers Nick Adams's Johnny Yuma in *The Rebel*, Clint Eastwood's Josey Wales, or Cullen Bohannon in *Hell on Wheels*. Pick a war, and there are movies about veterans of that war returning home. *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Coming Home*, and *Brothers* are just a few examples. In literature, stories of the return home and reflections on experiences endured cut across cultures and time. Again, select the conflict and the country, regardless of time period, and you will find a literary record to match. The subject of the returning veteran is as timeless as storytelling itself. It is Shakespeare's Coriolanus returning to Rome. As archetype, it is Odysseus returning to Ithaca.¹

It is not difficult to see just how common the experience of veterans is as an element of culture, not to mention the impact that experience is having now on the lives of veterans and on the political and social life of this nation. But will this become something for which we as librarians and archivists will need, specifically, to prepare?

Recognize and Assess the Need; Evaluate Resources: Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech has a long military tradition dating to its founding in 1872. It is a senior military college with approximately 1,000 cadets among its nearly 25,000 undergraduates. Its Veterans and Military Support Initiative provides services to student veterans and dependents along with training opportunities for university faculty and staff who work with veterans. Approximately 1,000 students self-identify for federal benefits as veterans or dependents. The local chapter of the National Student Veterans of America includes activists seeking to cut through bureaucracy, but also graduate students seeking to do veteran-related research.

In our library, attention to veterans studies began in late 2010 when Bruce Pencek attended a "Veterans@VT" teaching workshop where one of the graduate-student presenters, recognizing

Pencek as his liaison librarian, asked for help developing a dissertation proposal about veterans' civic engagement. On the principle that one articulated reference question is a proxy for many that are not asked, Pencek solicited colleagues for their insights about veteran-related research and resources on campus. If even a fraction of the growing population of veterans on campus were doing research related to their military and or veteran experiences, the library ought to be ready to serve them.

A review of our print collection confirmed that our military-related holdings were already strong. Virginia Tech is a net interlibrary lender of military history titles. Special Collections also has a large body of materials that could be of interest to students and scholars engaged in military and/or veteran research. Moreover, library science provides a rich intellectual infrastructure that draws on work beyond explicitly military or historical domains. Nearly 700 separate subject headings in our catalog (out of nearly 2,500 listed in the LC Subject Authority Headings) begin with "Veterans"—to say nothing of related main subjects like "Women veterans," "Homeless veterans," and "veterans" as a subdivision.

We quickly realized that veterans' experiences are transdisciplinary, and we should expect the literatures attempting to describe and understand them to cross many boundaries within the library. All subject specialists, for example, could have a role in supporting veterans research, inasmuch as the library was already providing access to a wide range of material, notably about veterans' medical, psychological, and social-services needs. We could also draw upon the insights and recommendations of coworkers who are veterans or friends and family of veterans. Awareness of potential research needs beyond our professional siloes, appeared to be a larger problem than identifying relevant resources.

We realized, too, a responsibility to provide resources to meet needs that might not be associated with academic work. Some of these would complement Virginia Tech's land-grant mission and the work of the Veteran Support Initiative to provide useful information, for example, handbooks to veterans' benefits and

advice to job seekers. Perhaps more important, we wished to anticipate unstated needs. It is a longstanding truism that veterans may feel a stronger bond with other veterans, even former adversaries, than they may with their civilian contemporaries. We also knew, anecdotally, that many veterans who wish to find meaning in their own experience often seek works—literary as well as nonfiction—that will help them situate their experiences within those of others.

Although we were reasonably confident about the existing strength of our physical and online collections to support many lines of veteran-related research at minimal additional cost, we were uncertain about future directions and needs.

In surveying the academic landscape, we noted that for a decade the dominant work about veterans has focused on American military personnel who have served in the recent wars in Iraq and or Afghanistan. University service centers such as Veterans@VT are widespread. University writing programs for veterans proliferate in universities, in part to ease the transition to civilian life. Research centers, notably the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University and, later, the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah were emerging to support academically sound, interdisciplinary inquiry into veterans *qua* veterans, mixed with a mission to serve American veterans. They certainly could set the tone for future approaches to veterans research and probably reflect priorities in the flow of "soft" research funding.

Nonetheless, it appeared to us that the strong attention to instrumental needs and applied research left many questions unaddressed—questions that were suggested in the historically rich and culturally varied literatures about veterans we saw in our own collection, in the veterans we worked with, and in tools the liberal arts could bring to bear. To focus research on one country's veterans of recent wars (implicitly emphasizing combat over other forms of military service) seemed impoverished and exclusive as an academic matter. As guidance for serving even recent veterans, it seemed to cut them off from

the diverse experiences and wisdom of veterans who had gone before.

Thus we saw tensions between the more narrowly exclusive and more broadly inclusive views of veteran research agendas, as well as a tension between instrumental research into objective needs and the needs of users whose scholarly or creative work might offer subjective, if not therapeutic, meaning for themselves or for others. We also noted a tension between academic work that reinforces a distinct veteran identity and the more skeptical, ostensibly disinterested tradition of inquiry. As a library matter, this raised the question of what resources scholars and instructors would treat as authoritative or legitimate.

Lacking “big picture” guidance to resolve these and other tensions, we wondered what such a picture—veterans studies as an academic field—might look like. The elements appeared to be lining up along the lines of black studies, women’s studies, and Appalachian studies (among others): there is a self-conscious identity movement, which is partially animated by a critique of the dominant, marginalizing culture, and which can bring together existing, heretofore discrete, literatures. But so far, the movement lacked the markers of an academic field: no organization of interested scholars, no conferences, no research journal. We, therefore, decided to embark on a more active approach and to create opportunities for veterans studies to coalesce.

“Seed the Need”

Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC)

We would support conversations about veterans across disciplinary and identity boundaries, at first by providing sites at which they might occur. These sites would be different from the focused conferences that already existed but that pertained primarily to medical research, therapy, and the provision of services to veteran communities. Rather than trying to simply “Read the Need,” we would “Seed the Need.”

As an archivist, Marc Brodsky knew that Special Collections had materials—primary source materials—that pertain to the experience of veterans, as did many of my colleagues at their repositories. In spring 2012, he proposed a panel for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC) that would create an opportunity among this specific community of archivists to discuss how we might become involved in these questions about veterans studies. We sought to explore the ways in which our collections might be valuable to veterans or to other students interested in issues related to veterans. Were there new collecting areas we should consider to support this range of inquiry? What might we do to attract a new group of student veterans to our materials? Are there needs among this new group of potential patrons that we have not anticipated? Brodsky designed the panel to bring together archivists who already worked in military/veterans collections and academics whose research and teaching appeared to place them at the leading edge of veterans studies.

Mike Miller, veteran and Head of Archives and Special Collections at the Library of the Marine Corps and founder of the newly created Military Roundtable for the Society of American Archivists (SAA), chaired. Beth Ann Koelsch described her ongoing work at the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at University of North Carolina, Greensboro, a repository of nearly 600 collections, including over 400 oral histories. Alexis Hart, also a veteran and a professor of writing and rhetoric, discussed her work with student veterans in writing classrooms at Virginia Military Institute. (Hart has since coedited an issue of *Composition Forum* on the subject of Veterans and Writing.) In Travis Martin, from Eastern Kentucky University, we heard from someone who created the country’s first academic veterans studies program. He described the elements of the program, which explore the relational, institutional/environmental, and cultural dimensions of veterans’ experience, and which has been designed to either provide an undergraduate minor or lead to an interdepartmental certificate. As a result of his preparation for MARAC, Martin has added to the program a new course, “Preserving Veterans

History,” which examines the archival side of the process—the actual collecting and processing of materials—as well as the more theoretical issues involved in doing this work specifically with veterans. If the creation of this course was indicative of the kind of intersection of influences that took place as a result of the panel, then it was a clear success. The fourth presenter on the panel, graduate student Eric Hodges, would also play a key pivotal role in the next effort to “seed the need.”

The First Veterans Studies Conference

The MARAC panel was intended to search for interest in veterans studies among archivists. It would take a more ambitious project, the Virginia Tech Veterans in Society conference, to identify at least some of the interests and trends of scholars working on veterans’ topics.

Working within the Veterans Support Initiative, three members of the organizing committee were already working together: graduate student veteran Eric Hodges was starting his dissertation on civic engagement; English Professor James Dubinsky (a retired Army officer); and Bruce Pencek were members of Hodges’s dissertation committee. These three drafted the call for papers and conducted blind reviews of proposals. The fourth member, Karen Sanders, was a university vice president whose portfolio included the veterans-support programs. Planning began in late spring 2012, and the conference was held on campus in April 2013. Units across campus provided funding. Nearly 100 people attended.

Although the call for papers was framed in a way that drew attention to reintegration of American veterans of post-2001 conflicts, its specifics were explicitly interdisciplinary. The conference theme, “changing the discourse,” challenged narrow conceptions of veterans studies as well as the stereotypes of veterans in popular culture. Accepted proposals addressed topics as varied as writing workshops, the rhetoric of women veterans, higher education pedagogy, broadband access, and the constitutional status of “stolen valor” legislation. Presenters came from around the United States and included faculty and graduate students; an undergraduate proposal

dealing with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington had been accepted but the author was unable to participate.

The organizers judged this first conference successful enough to warrant pursuing another; one that more explicitly contrasted itself with the mainstream, instrumental scholarship—not to supplant it but rather to complement it, contextualize it, and thereby bring veterans studies to the attention of wider swathes of the academy.

Veterans and Veterans Studies: Learning More, Doing More

The inclusive view of the possibilities of veterans studies has been central to the organizers of the 2014 conference, “Veterans in Society: Humanizing the Discourse.” To that end, administratively—and culturally—the conference moved from a student-services unit to an academic one, the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society in the English department. In keeping with building connections across lines of scholarship and categories of veterans, the conference design brackets research presentations with a theatrical performance, a conversation with a filmmaker about “military brats,” and a panel with a controversial essayist about what it means to “support our troops” and veterans.

Without deprecating instrumental research, the 2014 call for papers invites scholars to address fundamental questions:

- Who “counts” as a veteran? Have some kinds of service, experiences, needs, or potentials been arbitrarily privileged (or devalued) over others?
- What do historical, comparative, and literary perspectives bring to our understanding of military service and the postmilitary experiences of veterans vis-à-vis their civilian societies? Conversely, in what respects might such “lessons” be spurious?
- How have veterans themselves made meaning of their military and civilian

experiences (for example, through literature, music, and other creative media), whether as creators expressing themselves or as audiences for whom those creations may have special value?

- How do the experiences of civilians in war zones (e.g., diplomats, journalists,

contractors) parallel and intersect with those of wartime military veterans?

How those questions are answered—whether the call for research-based answers is even heeded—will determine how veterans studies advances or fades away.

¹ “Odysseus in America” has, in fact, become the theme and the title of both a book (*Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, by Jonathan Shay, 2002); and a documentary film (*Odysseus in America*, directed by Charles Berkowitz, 2005) that examine the lives of returning American veterans.