

Beyond Service: New Outreach Strategies to Reach Student Veterans

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Over two million U.S. service members have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001. As the war in Iraq has ended and combat operations have ended in Afghanistan, the military is reducing its size, and thousands of military service members are leaving the service and returning to college to prepare for civilian careers.¹ Many of these veterans are eligible for college and vocational training through U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits programs, and colleges and universities have had a resulting influx of veterans in recent years.²

Student veterans, like many other post-traditional students, face a number of challenges as they transition from the military to colleges and universities. In order to help student veterans succeed on their campuses, many colleges and universities have instituted programs intended to help veterans through the difficult transition period and to help them achieve academic success. However, libraries have remained on the sidelines with regards to outreach to student veterans. Very few academic libraries have created formal outreach efforts targeting student veterans, despite the fact that research shows that there is a positive correlation between library usage and student success.³ By devising outreach campaigns specifically aimed at student veterans, libraries can serve as important campus partners who can help student veterans achieve their academic goals.

Scope of the Issue

The number of veterans enrolled in higher education has exploded in recent years. According to VA data, the number of individuals using veterans education benefits has nearly doubled since 2007, reaching over 1 million in 2013.⁴ While this number alone is dramatic, it is not complete—the true number of veterans and service members enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities is likely significantly higher, since the VA only tracks individuals using VA education benefits (commonly known as the GI Bill). The trend of veterans flocking to colleges and universities is likely to continue, as troop drawdowns and reductions in force size will send many people out of the military, many of whom will be likely to take advantage of the generous benefits afforded them by the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Literature Review

How Veterans are Different

Veterans differ from the general student population in several ways. According to an American Council on Education (ACE) report, student veterans are likely to be older than their civilian counterparts, and they are also more likely to be male, students of color, and first-generation college students.⁵ Further, student veterans are more likely to report spending time on activities such as working off-campus and caring for dependents. They are also likely to report lower levels

of traditional measures of engagement, such as work on-campus, participating in extracurricular activities, and forming relationships with fellow students.⁶ Despite these differences, which are similar to those of many post-traditional students, it is unclear how well veterans fare in higher education. There is limited data available on veteran success in higher education; even the VA historically has not tracked the academic outcomes of veterans using the GI Bill, which is only a segment of the veteran population in higher education. A recent study by the Student Veterans of America in partnership with the National Student Clearinghouse and the VA found that student veterans are likely to have better outcomes than many post-traditional students, but that they may have lower completion rates than the national average, and they take longer to complete their degrees.⁷

How Universities are Reaching out to Veterans

Pressure to serve student veterans effectively has come straight from the top, as President Obama issued an Executive Order establishing principles of excellence for institutions receiving GI Bill dollars.⁸ But colleges and universities are also receiving pressure from student veterans themselves as they seek out institutions interested in serving student veterans. For example, the VA allows veterans to search for schools based on veteran-friendliness factors such as participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program and commitment to the 8 Keys of Veterans Success.⁹ Other sites, such as G.I. Jobs, help student veterans find “military friendly” schools, based on such elements of veteran support as free tutoring for student veterans and the availability of a student veteran club or association on campus.¹⁰ Responding to these pressures, and in response to the call of researchers such as DiRamio et al. (2008),¹¹ many colleges and universities have been working actively to help this student population succeed on their campuses. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that a number of universities provide services such as customizing financial aid information, providing special admissions information,

and awarding academic credit for military training.¹² And many universities are moving beyond efforts to provide veteran-tailored information and credits in order to increase levels of social support for veterans on campus. ACE reports that common efforts include coordinating VA support services, creating a veteran lounge or designated gathering place, developing an orientation for veterans and other adult learners, sponsoring veteran/military student organizations on campus, providing support groups and mentoring for military and veteran students, providing tuition waivers or reduced tuition for veterans, and making scholarships available for military and veteran students.¹³

How Academic Libraries are Reaching out to Veterans

Although colleges and universities have been very active at reaching out to veterans, academic libraries have been slow to develop efforts to engage this special population. A few libraries have begun to develop programming and outreach aimed at veterans, and they have provided suggestions for how other libraries could begin to target this unique population. Helton, for example, offers a number of suggestions for tailoring existing library programs to meet veterans’ needs, including information literacy boot camps, veteran-oriented exhibits, and open houses for veterans.¹⁴ Similarly, Sojdehei offers a set of suggestions for reaching student veterans, including librarian office hours in a veterans lounge, outreach to veteran-specific courses, library open houses for veterans, and displays to coincide with veteran holidays.¹⁵ Fawley and Krysak further suggest librarian involvement with “Military to College” courses designed to help student veterans transition to college life.¹⁶ And Marquez suggests a number of veteran-oriented programming options, including sessions on financial security and career services fairs.¹⁷ Some libraries also are developing services aimed at veterans or service members who are not necessarily enrolled students. For example, Hoppenfeld et al. describe successful business librarian involvement in the Entrepreneurship

Bootcamp for Veterans, a national program aimed at helping disabled veterans become entrepreneurs.¹⁸

Veterans Outreach at the University of Utah

The University of Utah, located in Salt Lake City, Utah, is the state's flagship public university. It is classed as a Very High Research Activity university according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.¹⁹ The Fall 2013 enrollment totaled 32,077 students, and 86% of undergraduates and 68% of grad students were Utah residents.²⁰ The University of Utah is located near downtown Salt Lake City, and many students live off-campus. A number of military and veteran-related organizations are located near or at the University, including the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System, Fort Douglas, and the National Center for Veterans Studies.

The University of Utah, like many colleges and universities around the country, has a substantial population of student veterans, with nearly 1,000 student veterans enrolled.²¹ The University of Utah boasts a newly-renovated on-campus Veterans Support Center, which offers a wide variety of services to student veterans, military students, and military dependents. These services include facilitating access to veteran and military educational benefits, coordinating veteran-related events on campus, spearheading efforts to improve veterans' educational experiences, advocating for student veterans, and serving as a gathering place for student veterans to study and socialize.

The Marriott Library is the University of Utah's main academic library, and is one of three major libraries on the University of Utah campus. It serves most of the academic units on the University's central campus, as well as some units on the health sciences campus. The library has 43 librarians and over 125 staff members.²² In 2012, the Marriott Library hired the author, a librarian who was also a former Army sergeant and Iraq War veteran, and her supervisor gave her permission to begin identifying ways to improve library outreach to and engagement with the University's student veteran community. What

evolved was an outreach strategy based upon both her experience as a veteran and former student veteran and her understanding of the military and veteran communities. This strategy involved developing partnerships with existing veterans' organizations on campus and in the local community as well as grassroots efforts to reach student veterans directly, and it was founded upon five elements that many veterans understand about themselves and their former comrades. These five elements can help explain the successes and failures of the library's different veterans outreach strategies and also provide ideas for future outreach directions to help librarians not just serve, but engage, student veterans.

Five Things to Understand About Veterans

1. *Veterans share a sense of camaraderie.*

The first factor that all librarians working with student veterans should understand is that veterans share a sense of camaraderie. Veterans connect well with one another based upon their shared military experiences, and they frequently will seize upon an opportunity to "talk shop" when they come across another veteran. Since a veteran has an easy entrée into what can be a tightly-knit, exclusive veteran community, it can be very helpful to assign a student veteran liaison who is also a veteran. A veteran liaison may have an easier time understanding the norms and customs that exist among veterans as well as decoding some of the military jargon that is common among veterans. However, if a veteran liaison is not possible, then the library may want to designate a liaison with military connections (e.g. family or friends who have served) or a genuine interest in and appreciation for the military.

Although assigning a liaison with military connections can be a helpful first step toward student veteran outreach, it is essential to ensure that veterans are made aware of the liaison's military connection. As a woman veteran, the author does not fit the stereotypical image of the wartime veteran, nor is she immediately identifiable as a former service member.

Therefore, in order to raise awareness on campus that there was a librarian veteran available, the library took a two-pronged, proactive approach. The first step was making connections with other veteran-oriented organizations on campus and in the local community, including the campus Veterans Support Center, the Veterans Day Commemoration Committee, and the Salt Lake City VA. Connecting with these organizations and making it known that the library shared their interest in veterans' issues was a necessary first step toward identifying the library as a partner in serving student veterans. The next step was to build grassroots awareness. One strategy that the librarian veteran chose was to self-identify as a veteran in all of her classes. This simple mechanism of raising awareness was surprisingly effective, as students would often wait for the librarian after class either to identify themselves as a veteran or to discuss their interest in joining the military in the future.

2. *Veterans are accustomed to contributing.*

Veterans come from a work environment where it is essential to function as a team. Military service instills the need to look out for one another; for example, the Army's Warrior Ethos reminds soldiers that they are to "never leave a fallen comrade."²³ After leaving the military, many veterans still feel a responsibility to look out for their fellow veterans. Librarians can tap into this propensity by developing outreach efforts that are designed to help veterans support one another. For example, librarians can help facilitate and provide space for veteran peer tutoring sessions, empowering student veterans to help ensure that their comrades are not left behind academically. Librarians can also involve veterans in charitable efforts, especially those intended to help veterans or service members. For example, the Marriott Library worked with the Salt Lake City VA on a drive to collect winter coats and boots for homeless veterans. By partnering with veterans' organizations, especially student veterans' organizations, on efforts to serve the veteran community, the library can demonstrate that it is an active and willing partner in veterans' issues and librarians can develop valuable new relationships.

3. *Student veterans are busy people.*

Student veterans, like many post-traditional students, have a lot of demands on their time. Research has shown that student veterans are very likely to be married and to have children,²⁴ and they are more likely to spend a significant amount of time caring for dependents than their non-veteran counterparts.²⁵ Student veterans are also more likely than non-veteran students to spend ten hours or more per week working at jobs off-campus, which is another substantial demand on their time.²⁶ Because student veterans tend to be busy with these types of commitments, it can be difficult for librarians to attract veterans to events or activities. Since student veterans are also more likely to live off-campus,²⁷ events that require students to make a special trip back to campus are a particularly tough sell and should be used sparingly.

In order for veteran-oriented outreach efforts to be successful, it is important to emphasize flexibility. For example, the library opted to film the *Lionesses: Voices of Military Women* panel discussion cosponsored by the library and the Veterans Support Center. By making the panel discussion available after the event, we were able to reach not only the thirty-five people who attended the event in person, but over a hundred others who watched the video footage later.²⁸ Another example of the difficulty of reaching student veterans at a fixed time is the common strategy of holding librarian office hours in the campus veterans' center. The Marriott Library attempted this strategy for two semesters, but found it to be a low-impact method of reaching student veterans. Instead, it was more effective to leverage the library's partnership with the Veterans Support Center by providing its staff with librarian business cards and relying on referrals for individual appointments which students could schedule around their other time commitments. While it took time for this strategy to pay off, eventually students became more comfortable following up on those referrals.

4. *Veterans often have unique needs.*

Another important factor to keep in mind is that student veterans may have some needs that are dis-

tinctly different from the general student population. For example, some student veterans, especially those who have returned recently from a war zone, may feel a bit uncomfortable amid the crowds and chaos of a university campus. Some veterans may have disabilities, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as a result of their service.²⁹ In terms of the library, student veterans may have some unique needs. For example, some student veterans may desire a different type of study space, as some students indicate that they feel more comfortable with their backs to a wall.³⁰ In order to accommodate this need, the Marriott Library developed a building floor map overlay that highlighted spaces that were “recommended for veterans.” These spaces were selected initially by the librarian veteran as spaces with lower traffic levels and where students could sit with their backs to a wall, and they were then approved by the director of the campus Veterans Support Center. A printable version of the “recommended for veterans” map was sent to the Veterans Support Center provide to veterans who needed recommendations for veteran-friendly study spaces on campus.

5. *Veterans don't want to be seen as needier than other students.*

Although some student veterans do have specific needs, it is important to recognize that veterans are coming from an environment where they learned to function and even thrive in the face of adversity. They are accustomed to toughing out difficult circumstances, particularly so they don't let down the other members of their team. In the higher education environment, student veterans can translate this toughness into an unwillingness to be perceived as somehow weaker or needier than traditional students.³¹ Although student veterans, like many post-traditional students, have some specific differences and challenges, outreach efforts toward student veterans need to be carefully marketed to let them know that they are being targeted not because they are needier, but because the library and the university are invested in student veterans' success. Librarians can craft marketing and

outreach efforts that acknowledge student veterans' service, especially those who served in a time of war, and frame special activities and events within the context of supporting a group of students who have sacrificed to serve their country.

At the Marriott Library, a number of outreach efforts were developed with the aim of giving student veterans a platform to share their stories with the campus, including the *Lionesses: Voices of Military Women* panel discussion; a series of displays featuring student veteran photos from their service; and stories written by students in the University's Writing About War course compiled into a book and printed on the library's Espresso Book Machine. These outreach efforts, which highlight veterans' service as an asset to campus diversity, helped the library build connections with the student veteran community and also helped inform the larger campus community about the experiences of the veterans among them.

Conclusion

Although the number of student veterans on U.S. college and university campuses is skyrocketing, and although many colleges and universities have demonstrated their investment in helping student veterans achieve academic success, libraries are still in the early stages of developing outreach strategies to reach student veterans effectively. Librarians can play an important role in campus efforts to ensure that student veterans are able to successfully transition to a college environment and succeed academically. Librarians can target their outreach efforts to student veterans more successfully if they bear in mind that veterans, although a widely varied group of individuals, do tend to share some similar characteristics and attitudes due to their military experiences and training. By tailoring outreach strategies to appeal to common veteran traits, librarians can achieve more impact for their effort, and academic libraries can begin to become known as an organization truly committed to student veteran success.

Notes

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