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Engaging Student Veterans as Researchers: Libraries Initiating Campus Collaborations

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My name is Mark Lenker, and I’m a Teaching and Learning Librarian at University of Nevada Las Vegas. My collaborator Melissa Bowles-Terry could not be here today, but she sends her regards.

Over the past ten years or so, you can see more and more in the literature on academic libraries doing outreach to student veterans on campus and to veterans generally in the community. There are helpful studies out there that talk about ways to honor student veterans for their service through displays and events, developing spaces in the library with veterans in mind, and considerations for working with student veterans in reference and classroom contexts.

The approach that we are sharing today is a little different. We decided to team up with partners from across campus to give student veterans a platform for sharing their excellent research and creative work. I will get into our reasons for pursuing this route after I share some background information about student veterans.

An important note: On my campus, and frequently in the literature, you see “student veteran” as the label applied to students with a range of military connections -- veterans, reservists, and active-duty military members. So when I say “student veterans,” I mean more than just veterans.
If you are just getting started with outreach to student veterans, an excellent starting point is Sarah Lemire and Kristin Mulvihill’s (2017) *Serving Those Who Served*. In addition to providing a wealth of information about veterans and libraries working with veterans, they have an entire chapter devoted to student veterans on campus and how academic libraries can serve them. They draw upon a 2013 study by the American Council on Education that was actually a big part of my pitch to library administration and to potential collaborators for pursuing a symposium program. Most notably, this study found that compared to other students, student veterans exhibit higher rates of:

- Studying 11 or more hours per week.
- Enjoying positive relationships with faculty.
- Pursuing independent study and capstone experiences.

These findings suggested to us that mentored research was an excellent fit for student veterans inclinations, and that taking a research-oriented angle to our outreach might be a good way to go.
Student veterans are typically older than traditional college students, which has important implications for their work as researchers.

1. They bring life experience to their studies, and giving student veterans the spotlight in a research context is a way to recognize and honor the potential they bring to their work as researchers.

2. They usually have significant responsibilities outside of school, which means that they are really busy. They may have work obligations, family obligations, mortgages to pay -- real-life stuff. One of our award-winners for our symposium is a really brilliant student, and at another event he was being recognized for a $7000 dollar award he had won. There was a giant check and everything. But he called in to the organizers and said that he couldn't make it because he couldn't take the time away from work, not even for a giant check for $7,000. So, student veterans tend to be busy, and part of the appeal of the Symposium was that it is a single-afternoon event that participants could schedule for months in advance.
When I started my job at UNLV, outreach to student veterans was one of my responsibilities, but it was a completely new area for me. It was also a new initiative for UNLV Libraries. But I could tell that it had the potential to be a really big deal. There are over 1800 student veterans at UNLV (our overall enrollment is 30,000, so that’s a significant chunk). I also learned that UNLV had received some recognition for being an excellent university for student veterans. So part of my challenge was to learn what the Library could do to add to student veterans’ already considerable success at UNLV.

To figure this out, I met with some representatives of the Student Veteran Association and with the Director for our Military and Veteran Services Center. They were all interested in the possibility of working more closely with the Libraries, but both the students and the Director gave me a very important piece of advice: “Veterans are not broken.”

This echoes an insight from Sarah Lemire’s 2015 presentation at ACRL: outreach messaging to student veterans need to be crafted with care, as veterans can be easily turned off if they sense that they are being looked upon as needier than other students.
We kept this idea of avoiding need-oriented messaging in mind as we looked for ways to develop our outreach to student veterans. The idea of a research symposium was appealing because, rather than an offer for help, it’s essentially a challenge to student veterans to share their excellent academic work in a public forum. Instead of saying that student veterans need us, we are sending the message that we want to see them deepen their level of professionalism as researchers, because we believe in their potential to excel.
Here are our participants and a few members of our planning team.

To round up participants, we sent out a call for proposals to all student veterans (both undergraduate and graduate students). Students were invited to submit either a 10-minute podium talk or a poster presentation. We received 12 proposals, and our reviewers decided to accept 11, so we had just enough participants for a full schedule for the afternoon.

Why just 12 proposals?
1. It was our first time running the event. We may need to do it a few times before it really catches on.
2. Our plan for advertising the call for proposals rested pretty heavily on a single collaborator’s access to the email for all student veterans at UNLV. They had a pretty drastic change of circumstances in their life, and as a result, the call for proposals went out to students much later than we had planned. In the future, we hope to diversify our channels of communication further.

Even though we did not get very many proposals, the quality of those we received was quite good. And the students did an outstanding job with their presentations on the day of the event. If I had to use a single word to describe our presenters, that
word would be “poised.” They were so professional and so ready to go. A couple of students told me afterward that the Symposium was their first time presenting in a setting like that. I really would not have guessed that.
If you decide to plan a veteran’s symposium at your institution, you will have several big decisions you need to make as you design your event. Here are a few questions to consider:

*Should the Library run the Symposium on its own, or should it collaborate with other units on campus?*

At UNLV, we decided to collaborate extensively. I feel like this approach resulted in a better event overall. Colleagues in some of our partner units have extensive experience running events to showcase student work, and they saved us from having to “reinvent the wheel” in many respects:

- They already had Qualtrics forms set up to accept proposals.
- They had scoring rubrics both for reviewers looking at proposals and for judges evaluating student work on the day of the event.
- They shared their contacts with us when we were recruiting judges.

All of these things really helped to expedite our planning and allowed us to use tested strategies that others had developed.

Other collaborators included units like the Writing Center, who support students in ways that complement the research-oriented support that we provide for students.
And we were all pretty much in the same boat insofar as we weren’t really doing any targeted outreach to student veterans, so working together seemed like a good way to start.

At a minimum, we would recommend that libraries collaborate closely with the campus veteran center if there is one at your institution. Veteran services administrators have an informed perspective on the types of programming that “works” for student veterans. They also should have established channels of communication with student veterans and can help ensure that the call for proposals and announcements about the event reach the veteran community.

Furthermore, The Military and Veteran Services Center performs a vital role at UNLV, but is mostly engaged in transactional work on behalf of veterans: helping them secure their G.I. bill funding, facilitating registration for classes, helping students who are deployed drop classes without getting penalized -- it’s a lot. They did not have the bandwidth on their own to manage a symposium to highlight student research, and were exceedingly grateful that the Libraries and other campus partners were able to run the event.
Should research projects focus on veteran issues, or should it be left open to other research areas as well? After consulting with the Director of the Military and Veteran Services Center, we decided that the symposium should be open to student research in any discipline on any topic. We had previously considered narrowing the focus to veteran issues, but the Director encouraged us to keep the scope broad, as some students may want to take their civilian careers in directions that do not involve the military. Among our 11 presentations, only two were directly about veterans or military service. I'm glad that we made the choice we did.
Do students need to be on campus to present? Or should we be open to presenters sharing from off-campus?

Student veterans may need to be away from campus for any number of reasons. Some may still have military obligations that involve a transfer to a remote location. Others may have family or career circumstances that make it necessary for them to be away on the day of the symposium. Because our library has the technological resources and expertise to facilitate remote presentations relatively seamlessly, we made it a priority to open up the symposium to students who could not be in the area on the day of the event. We ended up having one of our eleven presenters deliver a podium talk via Adobe Connect. One of our committee members worked with her to give her a practice run the week before the event and to facilitate her presentation on the day of the symposium. Our remote presenter was able to share her work and field questions with no problems.
We collected feedback from presenters in order to improve the event next time. Students reported that they found value in gaining exposure for their research, experience in presenting, and enjoyed hearing their peers present. When asked what they found most helpful about the symposium itself and the support we provided as they prepared, they noted that they were grateful to have a platform from which to share their research, they found it helpful to receive written and video instructions on how to prepare a poster or podium talk, and they were excited to learn about academic presenting as students.

Here are a couple of comments from their feedback forms:

“Thank you so much for the opportunity. The symposium was an amazing experience that I believe shines a light on the intellectual side of our nation’s military, highlighting that we can be intellectuals as well as warriors.”

I gained: “General knowledge on the organization of academic symposiums in general, as well as the wonderful knowledge and research of my peers.”

On another note, once word spread about our symposium, we heard from our Congresswoman, who asked whether she could attend and say a few words. To accommodate her request, we adjusted the program a week before the event. The
day of the event, we learned that she was unable to attend (she was off to DC to try to fix the government shutdown), but she did send a staff member in her place. Although the last-minute change in plans was a bit disconcerting, our Congresswoman's interest demonstrates the importance of veterans for many stakeholders in the community, and the potential for an event like this to draw VIPs to the university.

We recommend using multiple channels to promote the event. The Director of the Military and Veteran Services Center emailed the call for proposals to all student veterans enrolled at UNLV, and UNLV Libraries promoted the event on the website and via social media, but we still heard from students who said that they would have participated in the Symposium if they had known about it. We plan to involve our Student Veteran Organization in promoting the Symposium in the future, in hopes that hearing about the event from other students might make it more appealing for potential participants.

We held workshops to give students additional support as they wrote their proposals and planned their presentations. These were too sparsely attended to justify continuing them in the future. Student feedback indicates that students value the tips and examples we sent via email, so we will continue to provide asynchronous support. We will also emphasize contact information for the Libraries and the Writing Center, so that potential presenters can schedule individual appointments as they see fit.

Consider the optimal size for your planning team. On the one hand, a large team means that each individual needs to do less and helps to cultivate broader buy-in for the event. But having too many people can make scheduling and planning unwieldy. We plan to have a smaller planning team next year but still encourage buy-in by asking a larger group to volunteer to review proposals, serve as judges, and help staff the event.
We plan to make this an annual event, and in the next iteration will rely more on student veterans themselves to plan and run the event. We asked participants in 2019 if they would be interested in helping to plan the event in 2020 and had enough interest that we will likely have two or more students play an active role in recruiting peers to present their research, recruit judges, spread the word about the event, and manage the event itself.

As the Symposium program grows in the future, we would like to see student veterans take over the bulk of planning and implementation with guidance from a faculty or staff advisor. Giving students behind-the-scenes experience in conference planning is an important professional development opportunity for many of our students, especially those who plan to continue in academia. We look forward to seeing how the student veterans build on the symposium program as they make it more completely their own.

Activity:

*Which other units should the library collaborate with? Take two minutes to do some brainstorming on this. Here’s an example: we decided to invite the Graduate College to collaborate with us for this event...*
Librarians who intend to plan this type of event should take stock of campus partners and consider who should be engaged. Important things to consider are 1) what do the partners bring to the collaborative enterprise? and 2) what incentive or motivation is there for this stakeholder to participate? It’s important to strategically consider potential collaborators in order to distribute the workload, capitalize on other units’ knowledge and connections, and secure buy-in from the most relevant campus units.

Engaging student veterans as researchers is also an appealing proposition for potential collaborators, so long as the library plans in a manner that supports collaborators’ interests. In our case, the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Graduate College already offer showcase opportunities for students to share their research. By scheduling our event early in the spring, we are giving these partners an opportunity to recruit successful students for their events later in the semester. For the Writing Center and the Academic Success Center, collaborating on the symposium gives them a chance to build rapport with a student community that is frequently hard to reach. In return, the Libraries benefits from the expertise of these units in planning the symposium and supporting students along the way.
Questions? Comments?

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thanks!