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Serving Those Who Serve: Outreach and Instruction for Student Cadets and Veterans

Nancy Fawley and Nikki Krysak

Student cadets and veterans new to college have unique academic needs, and the abrupt switch from civilian to Corps life for new students at a military university can be challenging. Likewise, transitioning from military life to civilian life as a veteran student can be overwhelming. The libraries at Norwich University and The University of Alabama are supporting programs to assist new students in the transition from civilian to Corps life and from military to civilian life, respectively. While these students are at different stages of their military careers, cadets and veterans have common attributes that inform library support and instruction, with expectations to succeed in the twenty-first century global workforce. This paper focuses on the unique academic needs of these students and details case studies where instruction and outreach have been tailored to address both user groups.

Introduction

The transition to university can be difficult for anyone, particularly for student cadets and veterans. The abrupt switch from civilian to Corps life for new students at a military university is life-changing. Likewise, veterans transitioning from military life to civilian life as students face another set of challenges. Both cadets and veterans new to college have unique academic needs and libraries are in a position to support these students directly and by outreach to campus partners.

Military colleges have taken a more outcomes-based educational approach to ensure that cadets meet the competencies for learning and development. With integrated leadership training and self-discipline, cadets are developing lifelong methods for success in a global workforce. The emotional demand to meet the lifestyle, academic, and leadership standards at a

military college is nothing short of a balancing act. Furthermore, the generous education benefits of the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program (or Post-9/11 GI Bill) have encouraged many veterans to seek a college education. In turn, colleges and universities are preparing for an increase in the enrollment of veteran students and are working to establish programs that meet the unique needs of these students and support their academic experience.

As a result of their military education and service, both cadets and veterans are self-directed and goal oriented. These characteristics create opportunities for libraries and their campus partners to support them academically. The development of military principles, whether on the field or in an academic setting, enable vets and cadets to excel in the classroom and graduate better prepared to commission or to enter the civilian workforce. As such, these students must

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show the same level of initiative toward information evaluation and critical thinking both inside and outside of the classroom in order to successfully compete in the twenty-first century workplace.

Veteran Students

The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides veterans of the Global War on Terror with educational benefits to attend college or university. Academic institutions are just now starting to see an influx of student veterans as military operations downsize and many retire from active duty. Veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan make up ten percent of the veteran population and unemployment rates for this group are higher than other veteran groups and non-veterans.¹

Instead, many young veterans, up to twenty-five percent of the 18 to 24 age group, enroll in college after leaving the Armed Forces.² In 2011, over a half million veterans were receiving education benefits through the Post 9-11 GI Bill, an increase of thirty-four percent from the previous year.³ Ninety percent of these veterans are former enlisted members rather than officers; their decision to attend college is more likely to be intentional unlike some of their non-veteran colleagues.⁴

This sudden increase in the number of veterans attending college has caught some institutions unprepared to support the unique needs of these students. A 2012 survey by the American Council of Education found that sixty-two percent of the 690 colleges and universities questioned provided programs and services specifically for military service members and veterans.⁵ This number should increase as veterans continue to take advantage of the educational benefits and the unique services provided to them. In these early stages there are no national statistics on the retention and graduation rates of student veterans, but as more money is distributed there will be an expectation to show accountability for the funds being spent. Both the Student Veterans of America and the Department of Veteran Affairs are beginning to collect this data.⁶

Academic institutions, however, are cautioned in how they brand their services to student veterans. "Most veterans have experienced environments that are truly hostile, so pursuing labels of 'veteran friendliness' may not be important to veterans. It is more important to identify potential obstacles to student success and focus policy and service energy there."⁷

The literature on veterans' transition from military to college points to key areas where academic institutions can provide services and support to increase chances for student success. "Contemporary student veterans come from a professional, all-volunteer standing military, seasoned by the highest-quality training, equipment, standards and expectations, and by modern combat and deployments around the world."⁸ Veterans are transitioning from the military's highly structured and interdependent environment to an academic experience where individuality and inquisitiveness are encouraged and expected. In the military, the hierarchical structure is established and inflexible. By contrast, the organizational structure of a traditional university can be more difficult to interpret and navigate. Veterans accustomed to a clear chain of command can find the bureaucracy of academia to be frustrating.⁹

DiRamio, Ackerman and Mitchell¹⁰ and Wheeler¹¹ both used Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition as a framework to perceive how veterans manage the transition to college, including their academic experiences and personal relations. The first study found that the main challenges were learning study skills, making connections with peers, and dealing with financial issues.¹² The latter studied veterans transitioning to community college and found similar themes of transition in their academic experiences, personal relationships and the navigation of their GI benefits.¹³

It is especially important to consider female veterans. Many are less likely to be involved with campus programs and services for veterans, even though engaging with other female veterans can be the key to a successful transition to college.¹⁴ DiRamio, Ackerman and Mitchell found two themes in their interviews with female veterans that affect their transition to higher education: financial strain and sexual violence.¹⁵ Furthermore, female veterans are more likely than their civilian colleagues to be single parents.¹⁶

Cadets

Core values at senior United States military institutions have common attributes, which include teamwork, respect for authority, and discipline. Literature on the topic of library services and instruction at military colleges is scarce, but articles on the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) serve as a useful model for consideration. Although it is not classified as a senior military institution, the United States Air Force

Academy (USAFA) explicitly states quantitative and information literacy as a skills outcome.¹⁷ Furthermore, the USAFA will “commission leaders of character who embody the Air Force core values committed to societal, professional, and individual responsibilities” who are “empowered by integrated intellectual and warrior skills” and “grounded in the essential knowledge of the profession of arms and the human and physical worlds”.¹⁸ The USAFA defines integrated intellectual and warrior skills as those that “embody quantitative and information literacy, oral and written communication, critical thinking, decision making, stamina, courage, discipline, and teamwork.”¹⁹

Learning-focused classrooms at the United States Air Force Academy begin with instructors presenting goals and expectations.²⁰ This “demonstrates and rewards the importance of foundational knowledge and allows for students’ self-assessment of their base knowledge.”²¹ New questions are then explored in a hands-on capacity. Finally, a wrap-up allows for students to finalize their classroom session and determine if their learning goals have been met. This outcomes-based learning model parallels twenty-first century library instruction by focusing on how students can use the knowledge they acquire in both the academic setting and the real world. Sagendorf, Noyd and Morris report that “there has been a collective effort to use a learning-focused approach with teaching, with the goal of inspiring and supporting deep student learning” that will transition from the classroom to the workforce.²² As professors take a more interdisciplinary approach toward majors, instruction librarians are capitalizing on this integration and positioning library resources and other academic support services in a more well-rounded fashion.

Cadets and Veterans in the Classroom

Student veterans and cadets are diverse groups that resist stereotyping. For example, some veterans may have had an office job, while others may have served in combat. Some cadets may be first-generation college students, while others are following a family tradition of military service. Yet there are characteristics common to student cadets and veterans that are important to consider when developing and providing library services to these populations.

Core guiding values at military institutions prepare students to enter the workforce as effective leaders in the military, government, or civilian sectors.

Similar to their civilian counterparts, commissioning cadets are expected to operate in complex environments that require a transdisciplinary perspective in order to confront tasks for which they might have been given little to no senior leader oversight or training. A number of students also wish to develop leadership skills but choose not to commission upon graduation. For these students, the self-discipline and management skills they learn as cadets distinguish them from civilian peers, regardless of their chosen career track.

Veterans tend to be older and more mature than their nonveteran colleagues. Many have lived and served overseas, and have developed a broader global perspective as a result. There is a strong emphasis on trust and teamwork in military service, which also develops leadership and initiative. Student veterans take this spirit of persistence and sense of duty with them into the classroom. Historically they have performed better in the classroom and have higher retention rates and more successful transfer rates from community college to four-year institutions than their non-veteran colleagues.²³

Within the classroom, DiRamio, Ackerman and Mitchell found that some veterans preferred anonymity and did not want to be called on in class to discuss their military experience.²⁴ A consistent message in this study was that they hoped faculty would instead “acknowledge their veterans status and attempt to understand them as a student population.”²⁵ Some veterans might also prefer to sit with their backs against the wall and near the door, finding classroom distractions and loud noises disturbing.²⁶

It would be wrong to assume that veterans automatically enter the university setting more academically prepared than their peers, regardless of whether they are returning to college or attending for the first time.²⁷ Likewise, cadets may enter universities on par academically with civilian students, but with a stronger sense of discipline that helps them complete tasks or assignments. However, some Rooks need guidance in time management to balance academics and military training. Military structure at any level is rigid with a clear chain of command, whereas in academia discourse is encouraged and students are encouraged to question their professors. Respect for authority or a natural fear of appearing inferior causes many in both groups to avoid seeking help when needed.

Veteran Outreach at The University of Alabama Libraries

The University of Alabama (UA) is a large research university located in Tuscaloosa. It is the state's flagship institution of higher education. The fall 2012 enrollment was over 33,000, with almost sixty percent of the students coming from inside the state. The freshman class was approximately 6,400. For the past decade, UA has been ranked in the top fifty public universities in the nation in *U.S. News and World Report's* annual college rankings.²⁸

UA's Center for Veteran and Military Affairs supports veterans, current service members, and dependents and survivors of veterans by offering a broad range of services, including assistance with VA certification and coordinating university and community support. The Transition Assistance Program offers academic support, as well as assistance in family and career matters. The center also works closely with the local Veterans Affairs office, which holds office hours for the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program at the university twice a week. VITAL's mission is to assist in the transition from being a service member to being a veteran and academic leader. The university currently enrolls over 450 veterans.

The Center itself has computer workstations, a student lounge and study room. It is also home to the Campus Veterans Association, which is nationally linked to the Student Veterans of America and is open to veterans, dependents and service members. The group hosts a golf tournament and 5K run to raise money for emergencies funds and scholarships. They also work as a social networking group through intramural sports and community service.

The UA Libraries supports the academic initiatives of the Center by providing outreach and instruction specifically geared toward first-year, non-traditional students transitioning to university. Staff at the Center teach a one-credit course, "Military to College: Making the Transition," to help students learn the skills to transition to college academically, culturally, socially and financially. The course is part of UA's Freshmen Learning Communities, where first-year students with common interests take core classes and study sessions together. The course is also part of UA's Living Learning Community (LLC). LLC participants take the FLC courses but also live and study together in a residential setting. There are on-campus resi-

dence halls and apartments available for both military dependents and veterans.

One librarian serves as the designated liaison to the Center and embeds two library classes per semester into the "Military to College" course. As part of the course, students are assigned to write a story of their experiences as a student. The goal is to have a collection of stories on transition from different perspectives of veteran students with the eventual plan to publish a book. The library session outcomes are to introduce students to an academic library environment, give a brief overview of the research process and locating and evaluating sources, and establish a foundation for subsequent instruction to build upon. There is also an online course guide with links to key library resources, contact information for assistance, and web resources for veterans.

Cadet Outreach at Norwich University

Norwich University is a unique, private institution that combines military tradition and civilian student lifestyles. The oldest of six senior military colleges, Norwich is comprised of approximately 2,300 students, civilians, and commuters and 1,200 graduate students (approximately 3,500 total students). Sixty percent of undergraduates are cadets and thirty-five percent are civilians. Distinguished programs include nursing, criminal justice, information assurance, engineering, and history. Norwich prides itself on its guiding values, which derive from the influence of a long and proud military history: integrity, leadership, service, self-discipline, challenge, and rigor. The acceptance rate is approximately sixty-five percent, and fifty-eight percent of Norwich cadets will commission into the armed services each year.

Freshmen Rooks face a demanding schedule that begins at 5:30 am with Army Physical Fitness Training Standards and ends at 11:00 pm, six days per week. Rooks must wear a uniform 24/7 and endure a loss of personal space and privacy, with an open-door policy during the entire day prior to lights out. Rooks are under pressure to do the right thing at all times, adhering to strict room cleanliness standards, Norwich customs and courtesies, and participate in drills and ceremonies in addition to completing traditional coursework. Academic focus and time management are often casualties of this new lifestyle.

In 2010 the university Academic Support Center launched a revised Corporal Academic Mentor

(CAM) program for Rooks that dually served as a learning opportunity for freshmen and a leadership opportunity for sophomores. The new, theme-based approach for 2012 focused on goal setting, time management, note and test taking, learning styles, online research, and plagiarism. During Orientation Week, the library and Academic Support Center trained mentors on aspects of developing a peer leadership style that they would impart to Rooks as they made their initial transition to university culture.

In addition to the acquisition of leadership skills, outcomes include learning how to become part of an academically supportive team for new students and developing the ability to recognize when a Rook is in need of further academic support. CAM leaders set an example for the Norwich University lifestyle and provide incoming students with the opportunity to learn how to simultaneously balance a rigorous physical schedule with academic time constraints.

CAM leaders are each assigned up to six students. A small group is essential in allowing leaders to develop a mentor style that suits their personality while also giving them space to create a trusting atmosphere whereby they will learn when and how to direct Rooks in need of professional academic support from either the library or the Academic Achievement Center. Small groups are also conducive for Rooks to feel comfortable putting into perspective their newfound freedom, increased responsibility, while establishing their identity away from home, particularly as the use of cellphones and other popular social technologies are restricted. Operating by similar standards as career military personnel, CAM leaders are briefed on appropriate relationships, which include respect, common courtesy, and ethical behavior. They must also adhere to a zero-tolerance fraternization policy, and leaders are not permitted to date mentees. Mentors offer a tri-fold support mechanism by learning to offer support (emotional, physical, and informational), creating goal-driven and intellectual challenges, and sharing the Norwich vision by demonstrating guiding values. Moreover, support constitutes a “safe” space for Rooks. At Norwich, campus-designated safe spaces, such as the Kreitzberg Library, serve as locations whereby Rooks are at ease from the pressures of the cadet life.

Throughout the CAM training, leaders are taught how to acknowledge stressors by relying on intuition and listening skills. They are made aware of how judg-

ment can affect the self and others, and are trained to admit uncertainty and respect vulnerability within a realm of confidentiality. In addition to the skills required to develop and maintain an effective working relationship with Rooks, mentors are briefed on the risk factors associated with the position. These include the danger of placing others’ academic and emotional needs before ones’ own. Mentees and Rooks are educated on stress-busting techniques, which include nutrition, rest, and exercise.²⁹

While a number of the challenges represented here are social in nature, an equal number are academic. The library portion of the CAM program includes an assignment created whereby a librarian coaches mentors in techniques that serve as the first line of peer assessment in order to recognize when a Rook should be referred to the library for further research support. The Library’s online research session directly follows an orientation session on time-management and study skills. The aim of the lesson is three-fold. Students begin by watching a brief TEDtalk, and a discussion follows the video that focuses on understanding how online information is organized. Students are encouraged to assume greater responsibility for their search habits and work through one of three real-life case studies as a method for determining the focus of an issue, which information was lacking, and where one might look to find answers to support a particular viewpoint or argument. Students are given handouts and video tutorials in order to assist them in their task. The librarian essentially serves as a mentor to CAM leaders during this training period, in order for leaders to discover methods for delivering an identical session for Rooks early in the semester. CAM leaders are also given focus questions for their session with the Rooks, which jointly serves as a form of assessment. Leaders (and Rooks) are asked what works well, if there are any issues/difficulties in completing the assignment, to identify and share any differences in their personal online research process, and to explain the results of the assignment.

Discussion

While very little has been written specifically about library involvement with veterans and cadets, academic libraries are in a unique position to foster the development of twenty-first century skills to this audience by customizing information literacy services. Providing customized collaborative instruction for

veterans, Rooks, and cadets is one option. Supporting introductory courses, however, has its challenges. In a course without a research component, it is important to make the information relevant and engaging to the student.

Tailoring instruction to an audience is not a new concept, but librarians must first understand the experiences of veterans and the unique traits of a Rook or a cadet in order to provide a meaningful learning experience. Classes or workshops can play to the strengths of veterans and cadets garnered by military training by featuring group work and goal-oriented active learning in an intelligent, competitive atmosphere. Promoting self-services tools such as virtual reference and research tutorials will also encourage independent-minded cadets and veterans to seek help.

Librarians must also recognize the personality differences and needs of a classroom comprised entirely of veterans or cadets and one that is also mixed with civilians of no military affiliation. Another challenge for both faculty and librarians is to separate personal feelings on military and war from professional obligations to the students. In a study of faculty who teach student veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), Barnard-Brak et al. found that faculty perceptions about current military involvement were related to their self-efficacy to teach and work with veterans.³⁰ Faculty members with negative perceptions of war were less likely able to put those feelings aside and respect veteran students.³¹

Libraries can also support cadet and veteran populations through collection development initiatives. Materials on combat-related PTSD resources, for example, could support courses and research while also serving as resource for veterans. A comprehensive source for all forms of PTSD, for example, is PILOTS: Published International Literature on Traumatic Stress, a ProQuest database sponsored by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. Collaborating with support units to create a lending library of material related to time management, life transitions and other related topics is another way to utilize a library's experience in developing collections.

Workshops with common but practical themes, such as personal finance management and career planning, will also serve to support veterans and cadets. Offering these workshops in partnership with other campus units can increase the visibility of library-related events. Libraries can also support stu-

dents with nontraditional forms of outreach or via space re-considerations. At Norwich University, the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) department is housed in the library, serendipitously affording students the privacy of seeking confidential support in a campus-designated safe zone. The library and CAPS maximize on this partnership by co-hosting relaxation training sessions prior to finals week. Acupuncture and transcendental meditation sessions are also regularly offered at Norwich University for students free of charge. Due to its popularity on campus, acupuncture was held in the library prior to finals week. As a result of this outreach, weekly evening yoga classes are now held in the library upon request and are proving to be popular among Corps and civilian students.

Conclusion

Enger, Jones and Born state that "the demands placed on our twenty-first century military are nothing short of extraordinary, and officers are being asked to do things that would have once been considered unimaginable."³² They further add that "to succeed in these conditions, they need to prepare in many of the same ways as their civilian counterparts."³³

Libraries are in a unique position to support students who are embarking on or concluding their military careers. It is essential that librarians take the time to understand the characteristics and personal motivations that correspond with the military lifestyle. A combination of public services, campus outreach and tailored instruction will provide the framework for meeting the unique needs of this specialized student body.

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