



# Journal of Veterans Studies

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## Teaching Veterans Studies: Bridging the Gap Between U.S. Civilians and Veterans through the College Classroom

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the development and instruction of an undergraduate seminar focused on increasing student understanding of military veterans in American society. Since the institution of the all-volunteer force in 1974, the number of citizens with military service has been steadily decreasing. This reduction in military experience has led to a lack of understanding between American civilians and veterans. The literature suggests that many reintegration challenges faced by veterans (employment, health, education) are exacerbated by this knowledge gap. The intent of the course was to educate undergraduate students, mostly civilian, on what it is like to be a veteran in America, with the hopes that increased awareness would aid veterans in their transition. Given that goal, the course also contained a significant service-learning component. Service-learning, when well-executed, has been found to impact learners in ways other forms of teaching may not. Relevant to the outcomes of this course, the pedagogy has been found to improve cultural competence (Einfield and Collins, 2008) and lead to stereotype reduction (Conner, 2010). In addition to improving learning outcomes, service-learning also provides a tangible benefit to the community. In this paper, I discuss considerations for designing college classes focused on military veterans and service-learning projects that involve veterans.

*Keywords:* Veterans, Cultural Competence, Service-Learning, Civil-Military Relations

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Since the institution of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1974, increasingly fewer U.S. citizens are serving in the military. During the Vietnam era, approximately ten percent of Americans served in the U.S. Armed Forces (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). Currently, that number has dwindled to less than one half of one percent (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). Additionally, the declining numbers of Americans with military service has created a social environment in which fewer citizens are familiar with any veterans. Given the lack of first-hand, or even second-hand, experience with the military, we should not be surprised that the public would have significant misunderstandings of veterans. According to a Pew Survey (2011), 71% of participants reported that “most Americans have little or no understanding of the problems faced by those in the military” (p. 59). I experienced these misperceptions during my transition from the military to civilian life, when well-intentioned individuals often did not know how to relate to my time as a U.S. Marine.

Interestingly, Pew respondents from the same survey also expressed an intent to help veterans, with 76% saying that they had “thanked someone for their service” and 58% reporting that they had “done something to help someone in the military or a military family” (p. 60). While good intentions are laudable, the previously noted lack of knowledge poses a problem. If an individual has a desire to help but does not understand the population they intend to aid, their good intentions run the risk of going astray. Given this milieu, I designed and taught an undergraduate seminar titled

Veterans in America with the intent of addressing this problem. The course explored many elements that constitute the American veteran experience in order to educate college students, primarily civilian, about the challenges faced by military veterans and their families.

This paper is a case study into the course's design and delivery and is intended to serve as a starting point for other instructors who wish to teach a similar course. The data for the paper is drawn from the instructor's reflections, literature, and student feedback and reflections. To contextualize the course design and outcomes, I begin by considering some difficulties associated with defining the word *veteran*, along with a brief discussion of two developments that have problematized modern veteran reintegration. I then discuss course design elements such as learning objectives, assignments, and format. Finally, I reflect on the obstacles I faced, strategies to overcome those challenges, and student evaluative and reflective comments to suggest promising practices for future courses.

### Defining Veterans

One of the fundamental challenges of developing a class focused on veterans is defining the term *veteran*. As noted above, given declining levels of military service, there is public confusion regarding the term. During the past eight years while conducting veteran-related research, I have heard the following queries about veteran status: Does one need to participate in combat? Does one need to serve twenty years? Are active service members considered veterans? Are Reservists and members of the National Guard considered veterans?

The federal government sets the legal criteria that an individual must satisfy in order to qualify for veterans' benefits. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), "A person who served in the active military service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable is a Veteran" (38 U.S.C. 101). There are three essential characteristics to the VA definition. First, is the past tense verb: *served*. Those who are currently serving on active duty are legally classified as service members rather than veterans. As such, a course on veterans requires a focus on what happened when an individual departs the military and reintegrates into civilian life. This focus on the post-service experience is consistent with an emerging scholarly definition of veteran. *The Journal of Veterans Studies (JVS)*, the flagship publication of the emerging academic field of Veterans' Studies, also places an emphasis on the experiences after active service:

Veterans studies, by its very nature, may analyze experiences closely tied to military studies, but the emphasis of veterans' studies is the "veteran experience," i.e., what happens after the service member departs the armed forces. (*JVS*, 2018)

The second characteristic of the legal definition is that the individual must have served on active duty. This is an important distinction for those who serve in the Reserve Forces and the National Guard. When an individual joins the Reserves or National Guard, they attend basic training and military occupational school full-time. However, these activities do not count as active duty time for the accumulation of most veterans' benefits. (38 U.S.C. 101) After completion of basic training and occupational school, members of the Reserves and National Guard resume civilian life, except for training called inactive duty training (IDT), which consists of one weekend per month, along

with two weeks of full-time training each year. However, neither IDT nor Active Duty Training (ADT) counts toward active service requirements for veteran's benefits. The U.S. President and Secretary of Defense can activate those in the Reserves or National Guard at any time in order to increase efforts on certain military projects. In most cases, the tenure of this active duty does count toward veterans' benefits. (38 U.S.C. 101)

The final characteristic of the legal definition of veteran is that it only includes service members who were discharged in other than dishonorable conditions (honorable, under honorable conditions, general). Veterans with "bad paper" discharges (other than honorable, bad conduct, dishonorable) often lose VA benefits, such as the G.I. Bill for education or a VA home loan. In some cases, they also do not qualify for VA health care and disability services. Bad discharges can also lead to a loss of civil rights, such as preventing an individual from owning or possessing a firearm, voting, and from holding certain governmental positions.

While this legal definition does provide a standard for awarding veteran benefits, it also raises many questions regarding who deserves to be esteemed for their service. For example, should not those who serve honorably in the National Guard or Reserves be afforded the same status as legally classified veterans? And, what about those service members who receive bad paper discharges? Many such discharges are the result of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI) sustained while in service. (Penzola, 2013, n.p.)

Eric Highfill spent five years in the Navy fixing airplanes for special operations forces. His discharge papers show an Iraq campaign medal, an Afghanistan campaign medal, and a good-conduct medal. According to Highfill, none of that matters for VA benefits because at the bottom of the page it reads, "Discharged: under other than honorable conditions." Highfill claims that he got addicted to painkillers he was taking for a knee injury. He received a ticket for driving under the influence (DUI), among other things, and so the Navy kicked him out with a bad paper discharge.

We address these borderline cases in class by comparing the legal definition with the public perception of what it means to be a veteran in America. Public perception provides a broader, albeit somewhat ill-informed, picture of who counts as a veteran. Most civilians I have interviewed tend to conceptualize a veteran as a grizzled old guy with medals and the "veteran hat." Similarly, veterans are almost always conceived as white, male, and combat experienced. This perception misses the large number of veterans who are women, non-white, and never deploy in support of a war mission.

Given the increasing lack of direct military experience, public knowledge of veterans is largely derived from secondhand sources, such as the media or the entertainment industry. A reliance on the media to inform the public understanding of who counts as a veteran is problematic for several reasons. According to Stephanie Merry (2015), "In Hollywood, there are two basic types of military veterans: Mark Wahlbergs and Bradley Coopers. The former are super-heroic killing machines, like the Navy SEAL played by Wahlberg in the action hit *Lone Survivor*." (np) The latter are fragile ticking time bombs, like the PTSD-afflicted Navy SEAL personified by Cooper in the Oscar-nominated "American Sniper."

One problem with the Hollywood portrayal is a tendency to conflate active duty military experience with the post-service veteran experience. For example, in *Lone Survivor* Marcus Luttrell was not a veteran, but rather a service member. Looking to Luttrell's exploits in the film to explain

the veteran experience is misleading. While also problematic in other ways, the second film mentioned by Merry, *American Sniper*, provides a better example of the distinction between veteran and service member. Chris Kyle, the film's protagonist, was represented in the movie as both an active service member and a veteran. It is noteworthy that in the film Kyle was portrayed as a hero while on active duty and a ticking time bomb as a veteran.

The second major issue regarding the public perception of veterans has to do with the dichotomy presented by Merry: superheroes versus fragile powder kegs. Chris Marvin, the founder of the non-profit organization, *Got Your Six*, has been working to counteract this stereotype since leaving the service in 2009. In a *New York Times* article, he observed: "The truth is, 99 percent of us are neither heroic nor broken, we are people — people the public has invested in who have a lot of potential. And it's time to get over the pity party" (Phillips, 2015). While the number of veterans diagnosed with PTSD is significantly higher than one percent [11-20% for OIF/OEF veterans, 12% for Desert Storm, 15% for Vietnam (National Center for PTSD, 2018)], Marvin is right that the dominant media trope of the damaged veteran accounts for less than one-fifth of the veteran population.

### **Current State of Veteran-Civilian Relations in America**

In order to reach an understanding of veterans that transcends legal criteria and public stereotypes, our class focused on two factors that have radically shaped the tenor of veterans' reintegration experiences: the dwindling number of Americans with military experience and the nature of modern warfare. Taken together, these issues have led to numerous reintegration challenges for contemporary veterans, including finding employment (Kintzle & Keeling, 2015), homelessness (Balshem et al., 2011), educational difficulties (McBain & Cook, 2012), family issues (Taft & Panuzio, 2008), cultural shock based on the transition from military to civilian culture (Demers, 2011), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Seal et al., 2009), moral injury (Litz et al., 2009; Nakashima, 2012), and, in extreme cases, suicide. (Jakupcak et al., 2009)

The current lack of familiarity with the military among American civilians can be directly traced back to the institution of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). As the Vietnam War drew to a close, Americans were war weary and anti-war protests were ubiquitous. In 1969, President Nixon established the Gates Commission to focus on the feasibility of ending the draft. In 1973, the draft law expired and, based largely on the findings of the Gates Commission, Congress elected not to renew the draft and institute the AVF. (Rostker, 2006) When the AVF was instituted, approximately 14% of Americans had military experience. (VA, 2016) Forty-four years after the institution of the AVF (2017), that percentage has been reduced by half to around seven percent. This massive reduction of Americans with military experience has reduced the number of citizens who directly understand the experiences of service members, thereby problematizing veteran reintegration.

This knowledge gap is exacerbated by significant differences between military and civilian ways of life. In *Making the Corps*, Thomas Ricks (1995) argued that the "classic military values of sacrifice, unity, self-discipline, and considering the interests of the group before those of the individual," were at odds with the "more fragmented, more individualistic, and less disciplined" values of American society (p. 72). A Pew report, "Millennials in Adulthood" (2014), echoed Ricks'

conclusions, by observing that the Millennial generation of Americans is the least institutionally-affiliated and least patriotic generation in American history. (p. 4)

I first became aware of this cultural clash when I departed the Marine Corps. I served in the Marine Corps for four years as an 0311, Basic Rifleman, and an 8156, Marine Security Guard (MSG). For my last assignment, I commanded a small detachment of Marines responsible for protecting an American embassy. We secured the building, protected embassy personnel and dignitaries, and were a quick-response force in case of emergencies. Our teamwork was impeccable and our mission was important. Imagine my surprise when I left the military and entered college. *About face.* Two months prior I was a leader of Marines, now as a student, I had few responsibilities, no mission, and no team. I felt alone and adrift.

This was my (re)introduction to civilian culture and more specifically, to the culture of higher education. My daily life in college simply did not have the same gravity as in the military. In the military, you are often dealing with issues of national security, which require intense focus and commitment to your mission. In the university, issues such as preparing for a quiz, while also important, do not carry the same weight. Taken in isolation, either of these worldviews are acceptable. The difficulty that I, and many of the veterans I know faced, lies in the transition. How do I go from being “locked on” 24/7 with the recognition that my life, and the life of my team, could be at risk, to a situation in which my major concern is what will be on the next quiz?

Fortunately for me, halfway through my first-year I met another Marine. He had been at the university for a year and had experienced many of the same challenges. We had many conversations about how to adapt to the new operating environment and he introduced me to many of the people who would become my friends and support system for the next four years. Without his mentorship, I am not sure I would have made it through college. The primary reason he was able to aid in my reintegration, was his familiarity with military culture and the difficulties inherent in the transition. The decrease in military understanding among the American public, reduces the likelihood that other veterans will share my good fortune in finding a similar guide through the maze.

The second factor that informs the contemporary veteran experience has to do with the nature of modern warfare. Since the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan in October 2001, more than 2.1 million US troops have served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), with 37% having deployed at least twice. (Lee et al., 2010) Wars in two countries and ongoing military commitments elsewhere in the world, have required service members to be deployed longer and more frequently than in the past. According to the Pew Report “War and Sacrifice in the Post 9-11 Era” (2011), these deployments have also put veterans more directly in harm’s way: six-in-ten veterans who served since 9/11 were deployed at least once to Iraq or Afghanistan or another combat zone. Nearly half (47%) report that someone they knew and served with was killed in the line of duty. Six-in-ten say a comrade was seriously injured. One-in-six (16%) report they themselves were badly hurt while serving. Back on the home front, nearly half (48%) say deployments have strained their relationship with their spouses and nearly as many have had problems with their children (p. 31).

The decreasing numbers of Americans with military and veteran experience, along with the multiple deployments that characterize modern military service, has created an urgent need for

reliable and accurate information regarding what it means to serve in the military. While there are many worthy efforts to alleviate the challenges faced by veterans, programs that focus on educating the public about military and veteran culture, such as this course, could play an important role in reconciling the two groups and improving veteran reintegration.

### **Course Design**

The course was designed to be a broad survey of veteran studies: a history of American veterans, military culture, combat experiences, military families, the current discourse surrounding veterans in our country and healing the moral and psychological wounds of war, and the intersectionality of the veteran identity. Intersectionality is defined as, “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity (e.g. race, gender) when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1989). I initially proposed the class as a special topics course within my discipline, political science. However, it quickly became apparent that understanding the positionality of veterans in American society requires knowledge that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. For that reason, an effective investigation into the issues faced by contemporary veterans should be interdisciplinary.

The first step in designing any course begins with class goals. As previously mentioned, my primary goal in designing and teaching the course was to aid in the reintegration process of veterans’ by bridging the knowledge and culture gaps between civilians and veterans. Given that aim, the overall learning goal for the course was to educate students about the experiences of veterans and military families, with the hopes that a greater familiarity could smooth the transition from the military to civilian life.

The next step was to design learning objectives that would enable that goal. Keeping in mind my goal of attempting to bridge the knowledge/cultural gap between veterans and civilians, I drafted the following set of learning objectives:

Based on instructional materials and course activities, students will be able to:

1. Define the term veteran and identify the perceptual challenges associated with that definition
2. Discuss the role of intersectionality in shaping the identities of veterans
3. Identify the basic organizational and cultural characteristics of the U.S. Armed Forces
4. Describe the fundamental role that combat and combat readiness play in the experience of all veterans
5. Discuss the social, cultural, political, physical, and psychological obstacles veterans face upon re-entering American society
6. Describe the role that representations of veterans in popular culture, the media, and memorials play in shaping American attitudes regarding veterans (Hodges, 2014).

The course met once a week for three hours in a seminar format, which required students to complete the assigned readings and/or viewings, and then, under the guidance and direction of the instructor, grapple aloud with the ideas they had encountered. Our classes would begin with a student-led discussion on the assigned material. After the conversation, I would lecture on the topic for a short

period of time, usually around 30 minutes. The second half of the class took a couple of different forms. Often, I would invite virtual guest speakers to videoconference into the classroom to supplement the course readings, discussions, and films. Invited guest speakers lectured on topics such as the representations of veterans in popular culture, women veterans, and moral injury. Additionally, we frequently visited local sites of relevance such as the National Veterans Cemetery. When visiting these sites, I would assign reflection prompts, such as the following:

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Collection curators, Duery Felton and Marita Sturken, described the Vietnam Wall as a place for ritual and reconnection. They claimed that there were four broad categories that described why people visited the Vietnam Memorial: apology, communication, eulogy, and commemoration. As you explore the Patriot Pavilion and the burial grounds, write below how you think the design of the cemetery/memorial might enable those four motivations. (Hodges, 2014)

The course consisted of three major assignments: leading discussions, a service-learning project, and a research paper. As discussion leader, each student had three assigned presentations. The article discussions were expected to be around thirty minutes and were based on the readings for that week. In order to ensure that students were aware of my expectations, I modeled the role of the discussion leader. As this was an undergraduate class rather than a graduate seminar, I utilized a phased model that required students to complete different tasks for each discussion assignment. The first exercise required students to formulate five reflection questions for discussion. The second discussion allowed students to work in teams of two to lead a discussion on the material. Finally, students were individually responsible for leading an article discussion. This assignment comprised twenty percent of the students' final grade.

The second major assignment was to complete a service-learning project. According to Campus Compact (2018), service-learning is defined as "incorporating community work into the curriculum, giving students real-world learning experiences that enhance their academic learning while providing a tangible benefit for the community" (n.p.).

There were four components to the service-learning assignment. First, students had to complete a project proposal. The project proposal asked students to consider elements such as the proposed activity, site, learning goals, and timeline. It also included a pre-reflection component, i.e., a reflection on their positionality and why they chose a particular project. In the pre-reflection, I asked the students to address the following issues:

- Why did you choose this particular topic? Is there something in your background that led you to this particular project?
- What do you think might happen during this project?
- What are you looking forward to?
- How do you think you might be viewed by the recipient of service?
- What are you nervous about?
- What do you think you might learn from this project? (Hodges, 2014).

The second part of the assignment was the service activity. The essential criteria for the service project are that the activity must be related to course learning objectives and be beneficial to the community. As long as the project meets those conditions, activities are very flexible and could range from working with local non-profits, such as a homeless shelter, to more individually focused activities. For example, one student chose to build a tiny house for a local homeless veteran. This component was not graded as the successful completion of the last two items would rely on their completion of the service activity.

After completing the required service, the next step in the assignment was the project reflection. In the reflection, I asked for a three-page written contemplation on the student's experience of the project. Items in that reflection included:

- What is the most valuable thing you learned during your project? Why was it valuable?
  - Did your service experience meet the expectations of the project that you discussed in your pre-reflection assignment? How/how not?
  - If you could make changes in the lives of the people benefiting from your project, what would they be and why did you choose those things?
  - What have you learned about yourself and your community by doing this project?
  - How do you (or do you) think differently about veterans after completing this project?
- (Hodges, 2014)

Finally, the students had to present the results of their projects to the class and invited guests from the community. In the presentation students reported on the progress of their projects, whether the projects lived up to their expectations, learning outcomes, lessons learned, and advice for future students.

The final class assignment was to write a research paper related to military veterans or families. The paper assignment consisted of three parts: a paper proposal, annotated bibliography, and the paper itself. The proposal included the following items: a statement of the topic and its importance, research questions, and hypotheses. The bibliography was a list of ten reliable sources relevant to their chosen topic. The final papers were to be 8-10 pages and demonstrate familiarity with their topic, provide possible explanations for their research questions, and suggest future lines of research.

### **Lessons Learned**

University courses in veterans studies are still relatively new to the academic curriculum. As such, there was much to be learned from my first attempt. I faced two fundamental challenges in the inaugural course: an overly broad focus and the implementation of the service-learning assignment. In this section, I focus on these specific challenges, along with some of the strategies I utilized to overcome these difficulties.

My intent in structuring the course broadly was to provide a glimpse into the myriad number of challenges faced by veterans. However, trying to teach an array of topics ranging from military culture, history, combat, the veteran identity, and representations of veterans in our society proved extremely challenging. While I have both first-hand experience as a veteran and many years of

research on the topic, I still did not have the encyclopedic knowledge necessary to teach the students about all the facets of military veterans and families. After offering the course, I believe that a narrower focus could accomplish many of the same objectives. However, as previously noted, Veterans Studies requires an interdisciplinary approach. With that said, my experiences suggest that the course can be taught within a discipline, in an interdisciplinary fashion. For example, if public policy is your focus, you could address other disciplinary items, such as socio-economic status, through a focus on the social factors that led to the creation of a particular policy.

Nonetheless, the wide-ranging nature of the veteran experience will likely require you to cover materials that go beyond your expertise. Given my background with this course, I strongly suggest the use of guest speakers to provide expertise on topics that go beyond your knowledge. The benefits of inviting guest speakers into the classroom, such as increased student engagement with class materials and networking, is well-documented in the literature (Paderenga, 2014, Armstrong-Stassen, 2006). However, there are also many challenges associated with utilizing impactful guest speakers in your classroom, such as costs, accessibility, and scheduling.

We are fortunate to live in an era where the relative ease of videoconferencing technology has alleviated many of these challenges. It cost me virtually nothing to invite experts from across the country into my classroom. This pedagogy proved exceptionally successful in the class. The students were very engaged with the speakers and vice versa. According to course evaluations, all the students found the speakers to be a very meaningful addition. One student was so impressed with a guest speaker that they worked together to co-present a paper at a national veterans' conference.

During the session, the speaker would spend 15-20 minutes discussing their own work and its relation to the class topic. After this brief introduction, I would moderate a Q&A session between the students and the speaker. After the discussion, I found it useful to have a guided reflection to see how students were interpreting the speaker's comments and whether they found the session useful. Finally, consider conducting a debrief session with speakers after their presentations to get their feedback on the session. This is also useful in building a relationship with those speakers if you would like them to present in future classes.

Another strategy I recommend to address the broad focus on the class is the inclusion of films and documentaries that depict the various dimensions of the veteran experience. While there are many excellent choices, we watched the following films/documentaries that addressed the learning objectives of the course:

1. *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* - a collection of writings by veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with news footage and photographs. The 81-minute version of the film (which will be in theatres), includes 11 pieces of writing with different visual strategies, along with interviews with the writers, and with more established American writers who are also veterans. In the latter group are Tim O'Brien, Yusef Komunyakaa, Tobias Wolff, Joe Haldeman, James Salter, Anthony Swofford, Richard Currey, and Paul Fussell. The visual approaches range from poet Brian Turner reading directly to camera, to archival footage, to an animated "graphic novel," to a still photo sequence shot by photographer Antonin Kratochvil.

2. *Lioness* - For our discussion of women veterans, we watched the documentary *Lioness*, which chronicles the story of a group of female Army support soldiers who were part of the first program in American history to send women into direct ground combat. Without the same training as their male counterparts, but with a commitment to serve as needed, these women fought in some of the bloodiest counterinsurgency battles of the Iraq war and returned home as part of this country's first generation of female combat veterans.
3. *BRATS: Our Journey Home* – The course included a unit on military families. The film I chose to pair with that unit was *BRATS: Our Journey Home*. *BRATS* is the story of a hidden American subculture - a lost tribe of at least fifteen million people from widely diverse backgrounds, raised on military bases around the world, whose shared experiences have shaped their lives so powerfully, they are forever different from their fellow Americans.
4. *Born on the Fourth of July* - the autobiographical account of Vietnam veteran, Ron Kovic. The film was intended to convey to students the sense of disillusionment that many veterans encounter based on their military experience and how participating in the act of war can lead to moral injury. Kovic was paralyzed in the Vietnam War, and he became an anti-war and pro-human rights political activist after feeling betrayed by the country he fought for.

The second major obstacle associated with this course was implementing the service-learning (SL) assignment. In retrospect, there were several elements that required more instructor attention, including greater intentionality regarding service activities, and more thorough vetting of community organizations. First, I did not set a minimum time limit for service. I certainly should have done so. The experiences are simply too uneven to assess when one student spends two hours at a homeless shelter and another student spends 50 hours building a tiny home for a homeless veteran. Additionally, it would have been advisable to contact veterans service organizations prior to the class, to establish relationships and learn more about their undertakings.

In order to develop a well-functioning service-learning course, I would highly recommend Howard's (2001) *Service Learning Workbook*. The workbook contains many useful elements, including sections on clarifying the concept of service-learning, the especially useful principles of good practice for service-learning pedagogy, notes on the importance of reflection in service-learning, and how to align course learning objectives with service-learning activities. Some of the principles of good practice that I utilized were preparing students for learning from the community, maximizing the community responsibility orientation for the course, and minimizing the distinction between the students' community learning role and classroom learning role. Some of the principles that I could have better implemented include, establishing criteria for service placements and providing more-sound educational learning strategies to harvest community learning and realize course learning objectives. Some thought was given to learning strategies, such as the project proposal, pre-reflection, and reflection, but more careful thought should have been given to integrating the experiential and academic learning.

There are also cultural challenges associated with designing service-learning projects for students who wish to work with veterans. Effective service-learning requires a basic cultural understanding of the population one is planning to serve. As one of the primary objectives of the course is closing the

culture gap between vets and civilians, service-learning would seem to be a good fit for the class. However, as class duration is limited, a challenge arises: how much time can you spend in the classroom preparing students to interact with veterans before the service exercise? If you do not provide students with enough background into veteran culture, you run the risk that students will not have the cultural currency necessary to succeed. If you spend too much time on the background learning, you will not have the time necessary to devote to the project. With this challenge in mind, I employed several strategies to increase students' cultural awareness of veteran culture, while still maintaining sufficient time to undertake meaningful projects.

The fundamental challenge in educating students on veteran culture, is that the veteran population is not monolithic but quite diverse. The experiences can vary widely for different demographics and different individuals. To meet those challenges, we explored themes that diverged from the dominant public discourse that focuses on white, heterosexual, male veterans. Films such as *Operation Homecoming* and *Lioness* presented perspectives that diverged from the norms. Students also had the opportunity to interact with the guest speakers, many of whom are veterans or veteran scholars. Each of these diverse speakers had the opportunity to showcase both the commonalities and the differences among veterans in culture.

Additionally, I would preface our classroom discussions with my own personal experiences of reintegration, with the proviso that my experience was not to be taken as universal, but simply another perspective to consider. Likewise, other veterans in the class would often contribute to the discussion with their own experiences. Each week, we would also read literary veteran accounts, such as "Redeployment" by Phil Klay, or poetry by Brian Turner. As previously mentioned, we also watched films, which were also used to illustrate military and veteran culture.

In addition to these techniques, I asked students to examine their own cultures and perspectives in preparation for working with veterans in service-learning. I had students in the course complete an auto-ethnography exercise. According to Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011), auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that "seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." For the assignment, I required the students to write a one to two page "pre-reflection" on why they chose to engage in a particular project, their familiarity with the issue, and any connections their personal background might have to the topic.

A final cultural challenge in designing service-learning projects for veterans is that, as a group, they prefer to be the ones that serve rather than being served. (Hoge, Castro, & Messer, 2004) A veteran from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars put it poignantly: "We are not charity cases. We are an American asset" (Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). While this cultural norm should inform service learning projects with veterans, it also provides a teachable window into the veteran identity. Recent research (Tivald & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2016, Hodges 2017) indicates that veterans are more likely to be involved with community service than their civilian counterparts. Given this proclivity to service, our class found that service-learning activities that allow students to partner with veterans can be especially effective.

For example, in one project, the student's service included participant observation with the veteran service organization Team Red, White, and Blue (RWB). Team RWB's mission is to enrich

the lives of America's veterans by connecting them to their community through physical and social activity. The student described her experiences in the following way:

Having the veterans welcome me into their lives and volunteer work enhanced the learning experience greatly because I was a part of an experience that I would not have been able to be a part of in a normal classroom setting. Rucking to the pet shelter to drop off donations of food and toys for pets, while following a veteran that carried the American flag shared a glimpse into their passions and purpose in life, as well as strengthened my communication and team working skills. Being out in the community and in contact with veterans during personal interviews made it an even more unique learning opportunity because of its experiential nature.

In order to allow the students to become as familiar as possible with the cultural considerations when working with veterans, as well as to provide time for reflection regarding their own backgrounds and motivations for choosing a particular project, I recommend not to begin the service-learning project until at least mid-semester.

Finally, I would recommend integrating the research component of the course into the service-learning assignment. This integration would enable the service experience and research to function synergistically. In its first iteration, the paper included the following elements: proposal, annotated bibliography, and manuscript. Students were free to choose the topic of the paper and it did not have to be related to their service-learning project. In future courses, the proposals for the service-learning project and final paper would be integrated. Crafting an annotated bibliography for the paper could also serve as useful cultural preparation for the service activity. Furthermore, students' knowledge that the service activity will result in a research paper would likely encourage them to focus more fully on service projects. A revised exercise could be as follows:

- Service Activity Proposal – students describe their background and how it influenced their choice of topic (pre-reflection), the proposed topic/activity, which organization they will be working with, and contact information for the organization
- Annotated Bibliography – students will find and annotate 10 reputable sources regarding their approved topics
- Service Activity – at least 20 hours of service with chosen activity, starting at the semester's midpoint
- Guided Reflection Journals – each week the student is involved with the service organization, they will complete a guided reflection assignment
- Final report – the student will write a paper that provides an overview of their topic, the organization they chose to work with, their research question, their service experience, data collection, and conclusion

### **Course Evaluations**

As this was the first time a course like this was offered at my university, only eight students enrolled. Of those eight students, three had direct exposure to the military (two were veterans, and

two were from military families). The students who enrolled in the course had various motivations for registering. While there were a few student veterans who wanted to explore their experiences in greater depth, the vast majority of students were civilians, who either had family or friends that had served, or had a curiosity to learn more about the population. With a sample size this small, it would be ill-advised to make generalizations about their evaluations; however, there were two major themes that emerged from the student comments that might suggest considerations for future courses.

The first theme was the perceived value of bringing guest speakers into the class. Of the eight students that took the course, six mentioned the value of including those external perspectives. One student commented, "I was so impressed with one of the guest speakers from this class, that I flew to Colorado to meet with, and present alongside, her at (my first!) professional conference." The student's comments illustrate that inviting guest speakers not only can be informative, but also can build connections that will serve students in their professional lives. Another student commented, "The guest speakers were heartbreaking. After hearing their stories, I realized how little I knew about veterans."

Additionally, a majority of the students discussed the importance of experiential and community-based learning. One student commented, "Getting our hands dirty with self-selected service-learning projects forced us to encounter IRL the group that we're studying. This project woke me up from being a sleepwalking student." Another student discussed the emotional impact of visiting the National Cemetery: "I cried at the Veteran's cemetery. I certainly did not expect to be sobbing at a cemetery in this class!" Similarly, a student observed, "This class IS important and taught me a lot about the issues that veterans in our country currently face."

Another student commented that one should, "[n]ot just tell veterans thank you because they're just words and in society today words are not as powerful as they used to be. We throw words around and they don't express their true meaning anymore. I need to thank them through my actions and help give them that sense of mission back." While serving at a local food bank, one student observed that,

[m]any veterans thanked every volunteer along the way, while picking out food and trying not to take too long. Multiple veterans limited their own food selection, to refrain from being "greedy" as they saw it. There was no conflict, no one was in much of a hurry. They were the most-polite group of people that I have been around in a long time. There were veterans not much older than me, and some who were probably my grandmother's age, men and women, from all branches of service. Any extra cold food goes home with the veterans who volunteer every week. Basically, the experience blew all of my expectations to smithereens, in the best way.

Another student reflected on what she learned about veteran culture through our community visits:

Terms like "honor culture" and an understanding of what that means, I've gained mainly through our class trips this term. Those are where my understanding of veteran culture, my values, and myself have come. My "service-learning" has come from leveraging the

opportunities this class has provided me, into chances to throw myself into environments which change me, and permanently alter my perceptions of the subject matter and more.

### **Conclusion**

Despite this being a pilot course there were several positive outcomes associated with the class. One student was recognized as a Newman Civic Fellow for her service-learning project, which involved building a tiny house for a homeless veteran. Another student conducted interviews with Vietnam veterans, which were later archived with the Library of Congress Veterans History Project (VHP). Several class participants did construction work for disabled veterans, including building a wheelchair ramp for an individual and repairing a local Disabled Veterans of America facility.

There were also important relationships built during the course. One student connected with a virtual guest speaker and chose to collaborate with her to deliver a conference presentation at the Exploring the Value of Veterans Symposium. For her presentation, she was recognized in the University's Student Showcase for Research. As an instructor, I was similarly able to develop relationships with several veterans' organizations in the community. These connections aided me in future research endeavors and also developed a network of service opportunities for future iterations of the course.

Finally, several students from the course have continued to work with veterans after the course concluded. According to them, the lessons learned in the Veterans Studies course opened their eyes to the needs of this population and provided them with the cultural knowledge necessary to engage with veterans. The student that built a tiny house for a veteran has since started a non-profit dedicated to providing co-living housing options for student veterans. Two of the students went on to write honors theses on veteran-related subjects.

Given my experiences as a veteran and instructor, and reinforced by the reflections of my students, I believe that an academic course attempting to improve veteran reintegration by addressing the information gap between veterans and civilians is a positive step. However, it is worth considering a potential problem associated with the creation of Veteran Studies courses or Veteran Studies degree programs. While this topic merits a larger discussion, I would like to briefly address this concern. The primary issue seems to be that rather than building bridges between veterans and civilians, such a program of study could reify the distinctions between the two. Put differently, if the overall goal is reintegration of veterans, why call attention to their uniqueness, rather than focus on the commonalities shared by all American citizens?

The obvious answer is that the two populations have had significantly different experiences. The question then becomes where to draw the line. There are a large number of groups who have unique experiences that require reintegration (e.g. missionaries); why focus on veterans and not those groups? One possible answer involves civic responsibility. Since the implementation of the AVF, all members of the military have made a free choice to serve the nation and its residents. As recipients of that service, we have unique duties to the individuals who make that choice. This is not a controversial statement when one considers the vast amount of resources allocated to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and similar state agencies. If we have a duty to support those who

serve in such a capacity, and a lack of understanding is a barrier to that support, then the creation of an educational program designed to overcome that obstacle seems rational and justified.

If one accepts that justification, the question of how to teach Veterans Studies in such a way that does not reinforce differences still remains. One possible solution is to plan these courses primarily for civilian students. Currently, there are many courses on college campuses designed exclusively for aiding student veterans in adapting to higher education. While these classes serve an important purpose, my pedagogical goal focused on the other side of the gap, i.e., orienting civilian students to the military lifestyle. Increasing understanding among civilians of the veteran experience creates common ground between the two that should create a more inclusive public discourse. The inclusion of a service-learning project where students are required to interact with the veteran community also serves as an important conduit between the two groups.

Was I successful in my pedagogical aim of creating common ground between civilians and military veterans? In a 2014 editorial, Phil Klay observed that,

Veterans need an audience that is both receptive and critical. Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility — it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain. You don't honor someone by telling them, "I can never imagine what you've been through." Instead, listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels.

Given the course evaluations and their continued involvement with veterans, I believe that the course did create such an audience among the students. Granted, given the elective nature of the course, the students who enrolled in the course already had an interest in military veterans. But, considering that 75% of U.S. citizens have expressed a similar desire (Pew, 2014), it is not much of a leap to say that the student experiences in this class could likely be replicated among most of the American public. If so, I would argue that a guided program of instruction that exposes Americans to the multiple dimensions of veteran reintegration, supplemented with experiential learning, could create the conditions for the type of audience veterans need.

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