



Journal of Veterans Studies

It's Time: The Case for a Veterans Studies Association

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This is a commentary and call to action in which the author makes a case for establishing a scholarly association of veterans studies. After making his case, which includes a tentative infrastructure for governance, the author invites readers to respond by participating in a survey.

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Introduction

In November 2015, I presented a paper and moderated a conversation at the [Veterans in Society Conference](#) titled, "[Bounding Veterans Studies](#)." In that paper, I wrote "Although this paper will propose a definition of veterans studies, it is not intended to end the conversation. On the contrary, it should be considered the start of the discussion about the size and range of topics in the discipline." To me, the paper and the conversation that followed, was an attempt to better understand what veterans studies actually was, and what it could be.

That conversation has evolved, expanded, and improved during the past three years. In fact, I believe that veterans studies could be on the cusp of a major increase in both scope and academic acceptance.

Should I be so optimistic? *Yes.*

We have [a conference series](#) that grows in interest, submissions, and attendance every time it is held. We have a dedicated group of faculty, practitioners, and other interested parties who regularly contribute to the field with their research, scholarship, programs, and advocacy. There has been a steady growth in academic programs that, although they are not all labelled "veterans studies," fall clearly under our big tent. (Many of these programs were influenced or driven by the research and programmatic prowess of our core group.) We have a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal that not only promulgates the latest scholarship of our field, but it also expands our ability to reach new audiences and attract new scholars.

If we have all that, then why are we simply "on the cusp?" Is something missing from our academic structure that can solidify veterans studies as a legitimate field in the myriad of other academic endeavors? Yes. We are missing a disciplinary association. It is time to establish the *Veterans Studies Association*.

What does an association do?

An association is a group of people, institutions, and/or organizations that gather together to promote an idea. In an academic sense, associations accomplish at least three key goals. First, they provide a venue for members (and non-members) to congregate and associate. Second, they establish a shared understanding of the field for researchers, practitioners, and teachers. And third, they work to advance the discipline. I will address each of these briefly.

Venue: Among the most important aspects of associations is that they create conditions for networking, collaboration, and the exchange of information and ideas that are generated from the gathering of individuals who share similar interests. Venues include conferences, digital networks like email listservs or social media groups, all of which exist for the purpose of uniting individuals with a common interest who are willing to learn from one another.

Shared Understanding: Academic associations establish structure for an academic discipline. They bound the field internally and in relationship with other disciplines; and they create processes for the field to evolve.

Advancing the Discipline: Academic associations work to improve the scholarship in their field and disseminate their best works beyond the discipline. They help fledgling programs launch and established programs grow. Some of the most advanced academic associations serve as accreditors for new and existing programs in their field.

What would *our* association do?

Because alliances and partnerships of scholars form the backbone of effective academic disciplines, the Veterans Studies Association (VSA) is the critical next step in the development of our field—a field that believes research and information on, about, with, and for military veterans is of essential interest. The goal of this association, our association, would be to promote the interdisciplinary work of veterans studies in academic, community, and creative settings, among others. It would establish a working definition of veterans studies and it would work to unite the many siloed strands of effort that are already happening in our field. It would incorporate the [*Journal of Veterans Studies*](#) as its flagship publication and the Veterans in Society conference as its primary conference venue. While I don't foresee VSA being the arbiter of what is or isn't veterans studies, I do believe that a formal association could serve as a "first contact" for any institution that is considering establishing a program in veterans studies on their campus.

We must acknowledge that other associations with overlapping interest already exist. Arguably, the most developed of these groups in the United States are the [*Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society*](#) and the [*Veterans Knowledge Community*](#) of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). These organizations are fantastic and I am a member of both. But neither covers the broad scope and interdisciplinary work of veterans studies. Only a new organization, one that is born of the "big tent," can achieve the academic acceptance and disciplinary growth potential our field has.

Why now?

Less than a decade ago, scholars at [*Eastern Kentucky University*](#) established the first-known academic program in veterans studies. Since that time, at least three more veterans studies style programs have been established. For the past six years, the [*Veterans in Society*](#) group at Virginia Tech (VT) has been at the forefront of our field. This organization held meetings, ran four [*conferences*](#), and executed a [*summer NEH institute*](#). That three-week long workshop was formative for the development of our field. Because of the efforts at VT, we have a strongly connected core group of veteran studies scholars and a larger diaspora of scholars, teachers, and practitioners who care deeply about this subject.

What we are missing is a place to congregate that rises above the resources, orientation, and inherent limitations of a single institution and a small set of organizers. We need an association that can run or conference in an institution agnostic and field-centric manner. We need to spread the logistical and organizational pain.

Just in the last year, Arizona State University established a veterans studies program ([*Veterans, Society and Service*](#)). By my count, there at least four university-level programs, focused on researching and studying veterans and veterans' experiences. There may be more and there are sure to be more soon. VSA can help the growth of our field by becoming the first stop for institutions considering this important field. While we won't accredit such programs, we can establish guidelines, goals, and academic objectives for programs to consider.

What might our association look like?

The structure described below is a first draft. It was designed with the support and feedback of a handful of veterans studies practitioners. It is my attempt to answer the question above, but it is not set in stone. I invite conversation and debate, with the caveat that we must balance our desire to debate structure with our need to move reasonably quickly. If we don't move soon, I believe that our window for real progress may close. I encourage your prompt and constructive feedback.

Leadership Structure: Our organizational structure will consist of an executive board and an advisory board. The five-member executive board will be elected by the voting membership, which will include a president, immediate past president, a vice-president, a secretary, and a treasurer. Also, essential to our structure is an advisory board nominated by the executive board, which will consist of three to nine individuals or institutional representatives. Executive board members serve a two-year term. President and vice president are elected in even years; treasurer and secretary are elected in odd years.

Membership: All who care about this field are invited to join. There will be dues involved in membership, but I propose a scaled fee structure based on academic position/rank or similar non-academic "rank". Value in the membership will come from connections to others in the field as well as discounted conference fees. Other values (financial or otherwise) will be added as those opportunities arise (one example is the goal to have competitive grant opportunities for members).

Dues: Membership dues are essential for funding the Association and, at least initially, they will be our most important revenue source. All members, including those on the executive and advisory boards, will pay an annual membership. Membership dues could be based on an individual's institutional affiliated rank and/or status. For example, graduate students and independent scholars will pay less than full professors. Based on feedback from members funds could be allotted to subsidizing costs associated with running the conference, costs associated with the pursuit of external grants and gifts, filing taxes and other legal requirements, establishing outreach programs, and creating an internal membership grant program.

On the cusp

I am so very proud to be a member of the veterans studies community. The connections I have made, and the work we have done together, has been the highlight of my academic career (granted, a short career thus far). We can do more; we can reach higher and achieve better. But that higher reach needs a scaffolding—a structure to support our weight and movement. Without academic and institutional structure that an association provides, we will remain earthbound—stretching with all our might, but unable to reach the highest (and the toughest) vistas. Without an association we cannot grow. It is time to establish the *Veterans Studies Association*.

Get involved

Whether you find this idea valuable or you think it is dumb, share your thoughts. The big tent exists, so I believe that we should not move forward based on the ideas or efforts of only a small group of people. I have also created a short survey to help me (and others) understand your thoughts and ideas. [Access it here](#) and thanks for taking the time to fill it out—and hear me out. It's time.

Author Bio

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