



Engaging Student Veterans in Meaningful Service-Learning Experiences: A Practical Guide

Christopher L. Stockdale, Jeffrey A. Huffman, Elizabeth Crawford, & William Burgess

Abstract

Student veterans face some barriers to fully engaging in postsecondary education experience, in addition to sometimes struggling to complete their degrees. This article highlights a university program that annually engages groups of student veterans in meaningful service-learning experiences through a partnership with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. The theoretical foundation, program structure, and lessons learned are shared so that other institutions or organizations may similarly engage their veteran population.

Keywords: Service learning, high impact educational practices, student engagement, outdoor programs

Introduction

“Never volunteer for anything.” For years, this phrase has served as an unofficial general order for all branches of the United States armed forces. Although there’s certainly some irony in the statement, its premise is that servicemembers should do what they’re told and not much else. While many would argue this is excellent advice while serving in the military, maintaining such military norms in civilian settings can sometimes prove problematic for veterans (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014); on even the most engaging college and university campuses, this could mean that a student veteran attends class, completes assignments, but not much of anything else.

This article presents best practices developed through the design and implementation of a summer service-learning program. Established in 2015 through a partnership between the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and the University of Central Missouri (UCM), the program sends student veterans to volunteer for a week of hiking trail maintenance in remote wilderness locations. Each author has participated in one or more years of the project, and their perspectives as faculty, staff, and student veterans offer insight for both veterans studies scholars and higher education professionals who may wish to engage student veterans on their own campus in similar service opportunities. In addition to their written contributions herein, the authors carried notebooks and digital recorders into the field in order to document their experiences while “deployed” on the trip. Several quotations, as indicated below, have been transcribed directly from these sources.

Literature Review

Veterans in higher education

Higher education provides both opportunities and challenges to student veterans: several iterations of the GI Bill have made college more affordable for qualified veterans; many college campuses now have veteran-focused centers and staff; and, more efforts are being made to translate veterans’ military skill sets into both college credit and civilian employment opportunities (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Greater access to higher education, however, doesn’t mean veterans have seen greater levels of success (Kapell et al., 2017). Perhaps the most obvious hurdle to student veteran success in higher education is that most veterans are “nontraditional” students; in other words, they often enter college at a later age, after an absence of academic practice, and with an array of competing responsibilities that many traditional college students don’t have. This would include such obligations as full-time employment, families, and non-educational financial commitments (Falkey, 2016). Consequently, such students may struggle to complete their degrees (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

High-impact educational practices

While many students struggle to complete their postsecondary education, efforts are being made across the United States to better serve them. In 2005, the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) launched the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, promoting what are referred to as high-impact educational practices (Kuh 2008). High-impact educational practices are defined as those "that educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement" (Kuh 2008: 9). The list of recognized high-impact practices includes first year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, diversity, service-learning, internships, and capstone projects (AAC&U, 2017). What each of these practices share are increased opportunities to do the following: dedicate time and effort to a meaningful problem; engage with faculty and peers; work with individuals from diverse backgrounds; gain feedback from faculty, peers, or community partners; apply what students are learning in the classroom to real world problems; and participate in a potentially "life changing" experience (Kuh, 2008). While every student could benefit from such educational experiences, underserved populations of students have demonstrated greater benefits from engaging in high impact practices (Kuh, 2008). Despite the fact that veterans are not always included in the definition of "underserved" students, the well-established indicators that "put students at risk for not completing a degree" —delayed entry, financial independence, full-time employment, part-time enrollment, dependents, single parenthood, and lack of a high school diploma—may be reason enough to include this population in an institution's definition of underserved students who might benefit from high-impact practices (Wheeler 2012, p. 776).

Service-learning

Research suggests student veterans are already participating in high-impact practices on some campuses (Kapell et al., 2017); however, a gap in the literature exists regarding the extent to which student veterans are participating in one particular high-impact practice: service-learning. Service-learning has been defined as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Service-learning differs from traditional forms of community service or volunteerism by maintaining an academic focus equal to that of the focus on the service itself (Jacoby, 2015). This uniquely engaging academic experience is founded on the principle that "service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990, p. 40). For a campus seeking to aid veterans with their transition from a culture of *service* to a culture of *learning*, engaging in *service-learning* experiences may help bridge this gap.

Veterans and the outdoors

Any service-learning experience may prove beneficial to a student veteran participant, but there seems to be something uniquely beneficial about situating the service in an outdoor environment. While being outdoors contributes to positive effects on veterans —particularly those who may struggle with post-traumatic stress (Wagenfield, Roy-Fisher, & Mitchell, 2013)—veterans who participated in just a six-day wilderness experience in Australia showed an "increase in self-reported wellbeing and mental health" following the activity-based program which included opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions (Bird, 2015). The Appalachian Trail (AT) is another location that has proved to be a positive environment for veterans: Earl Shaffer, an Army veteran, became the first person to hike the entire AT; in addition, the *Warrior Hike* program provides long distance hiking support for veterans, helping them to reconnect socially, make life-improving changes, and reflect upon their experiences (Dietrich, Joye, & Garcia, 2015).

While some veterans service organizations have realized the positive impact of wilderness experiences and others are engaging veterans in service opportunities, few campus-based programs exist that assist student veterans with a successful transition from a service to a learning mindset.

UCM on the Appalachian Trail

During fall 2015 the faculty and staff authors of this paper met and began to discuss the potential for a new, collaborative program that could engage student veterans in meaningful experiences outside of the classroom. Using the “alternative break” model of service-learning, a model promoted by the national organization *Break Away*, the authors designed a seven-week experiential education program for student veterans centered on the social issues of environmental sustainability and veteran engagement. Although many alternative break programs are coordinated solely by registered student organizations or centralized offices of service-learning, the authors hoped to garner more attention from the university’s student veteran population. In partnership with UCM’s Student Veterans Organization (SVO), the authors coordinated the program directly through UCM’s Military and Veteran Success Center (MVSC). Although informal, the goals of the program were to increase student veteran involvement in out-of-class campus activities; provide student veterans with a safe, culturally-responsive environment in which to reflect upon their own transition experiences; increase the true “military friendliness” of the university by offering student veterans with more than just the standard services that are expected to be provided by a college or university; and increase the visibility of the student veteran population—which at UCM is approximately 10% of the overall student body.

With a team of six students, the MVSC staff director and the SVO faculty mentor, the UCM on the Appalachian Trail program set out to accomplish these goals. The group met for the last six weeks of the spring semester to participate in team-building activities, study academic content related to environmental sustainability, learn about the ATC’s mission and operations, and discuss the logistics of the week-long service trip on the AT. Following the six weeks of curriculum and the end of the spring semester, the participants traveled to Virginia to an ATC trail crew base camp where they were assigned two crew leaders and received additional training, personal protective equipment, and the tools necessary to conduct trail maintenance.

Camping near the base of Standing Indian Mountain in North Carolina and hiking each day to its summit to work on a trail reroute, the team installed erosion control measures; cut brush from the trail; and, placed large rock steps into the tread which would assist future hikers with the changes in elevation. Following each eight-hour workday, the group convened for an additional hour of reflection during which time each member considered the day’s work, their time spent with the group, and previous military experiences the day may have brought to mind.

Although some were at first reluctant to speak, it was the reflection component that the participants reported to be the most meaningful part of the experience. Many of the veterans shared things that had, they admitted, not been shared with many others. Within the reflection circle, stories of childhood trauma, battlefield struggles, and substance abuse were brought into the open. Students listened to one another offering words of encouragement and acceptance. Ultimately, this intimate sharing of personal challenges created bonds so strong that the group eventually made plans to reunite during the first week of the following semester.

The first year of the UCM on the AT program made great strides toward meeting the aforementioned goals, but with only six student veteran participants, the authors knew more work was needed. After discussions with ATC staff, subsequent years of the project saw the participant numbers grow from six to 16, and eventually 20. With four iterations of the project now complete, the authors are able to share their challenges and successes with the hopes that other campuses may similarly engage their student veteran population.

Planning a Service-learning Experience for Student Veterans

Determining program viability

Before committing to engage student veterans in an intensive service-learning experience, it's important to first explore the viability of such a program on a given campus. Interested faculty and staff may choose to investigate which service-learning or community-based programs already exist, what internal funding might be available to cover expenses, what policies are in place that govern how students engage in off-campus educational experiences, and how such an experience would support the institution's mission.

It has been shown that service-learning programs that are closely connected to institutional priorities enjoy greater success and longevity (Jacoby, 2015). At UCM, faculty and staff volunteers easily associated the service-learning program with the university's motto: "Education for Service." Interested faculty and staff at other campuses might choose to draft a service-learning project proposal that shows a direct connection between the intended outcomes of the experience and the institution's priorities.

Funding the program is another important aspect in determining its viability; the authors have found that pooling funds from several available sources is helpful (and sometimes necessary) to obtain the amount needed for the trip as well as increase buy-in from the community. The UCM on the AT program has been funded in part by internal grant awards earmarked for service projects, private donations solicited through the university's charitable foundation, and general operating funds from the MVSC.

Student leadership

Since high-impact educational practices demand greater levels of student involvement, each service-learning trip to the AT has been led by appointed student leaders. This does not lessen the work that volunteers put into the planning process, but the primary leadership roles for the experience should be filled by students. Subsequently, one of the first tasks after determining the viability of such an experience is locating and appointing student leaders. For the purposes of this project, UCM faculty and staff have appointed both experienced and inexperienced leaders. Depending on the institutional context, leaders can be hand-picked or solicited through an application process. Although the criteria for selecting student leaders may vary, service-learning experiences provide excellent opportunities for all students to practice leadership techniques in real-world settings (Jacoby, 2015). One UCM student leader discussed her reason for taking on a leadership role: "I was interested in becoming a leader on this trip because I felt like I needed to...kinda break out of my comfort zone and really try to experience new things and...get to know different people" (E. Crawford, personal communication, May 2016). Because they may be unfamiliar with their role, leaders should be provided clear expectations, receive training in the skills needed to fulfill those roles, receive mentoring from their assigned faculty and staff, and be allowed to fully participate in the planning processes of the service-learning experience.

Community partnership

One of the best ways to engage student leaders early on in the service-learning project is to allow them to identify and contact potential community partners. Ideal service-learning partnerships are those that are mutually beneficial to both the community organization and the institution (Hammersley, 2012). Through an authentic service experience, students should be able to engage in real world problems while the community organization should have an established need met. When investigating potential community partnerships, faculty, staff, and student leaders could already begin identifying what the benefits of a given partnership might be for both organizations (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). In order to locate potential service-learning community partners, student leaders might begin by searching online for organizations that regularly put out calls for

volunteers. Faculty and staff may also use their professional networks to locate nonprofits or other community agencies that require volunteer assistance.

While there are many considerations that influence a decision to partner with a particular community organization, at a minimum, the institution will need to ensure that the organization's mission aligns with that of the institution, the organization can accommodate an appropriate number of student volunteers, volunteers will have an appropriate amount and kind of service work to complete, and the logistical needs of the organization align with what the institution can accommodate (Jacoby, 2015). Selecting an organization which provides a service that would be attractive to student veterans is an important consideration as well. Anecdotally, UCM's student veterans have communicated that they want to be outdoors, work with their hands, and go somewhere "fun." While the ATC presents an excellent partnership to meet the needs and interests of UCM's students, each institution's context and its student population should help determine the partnership(s) it establishes.

The learning experience

While planning a service-learning experience, it is quite easy to get consumed with details of the project itself. Yet, faculty and staff should be just as focused on the learning experience that will be created by engaging in the service project (Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999). Similar to drafting a syllabus for an academic course, the service-learning experience should have a focused description, intended learning outcomes, several forms of assessment, a timeline for the project, and clear expectations for participant conduct. Some service-learning projects are even embedded within an academic course. While a course-embedded service-learning experience may be an option for engaging student veterans, the authors have found that co-curricular service-learning projects are more marketable to a diverse student veteran population that may not be enrolled in the same courses. Co-curricular service-learning experiences are also excellent opportunities for collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs (Frost et al., 2010). Whereas a student services staff member might be more aware of how to recruit and engage students in programming outside of the classroom, a faculty member might be more prepared to write learning outcomes, design pre-trip curricula, and align assessment protocols. The authors have found this to be the case in their experiences, and both the faculty and staff roles have been crucial to the success of the project.

Recruiting

Recruiting student veterans to take part in a service-learning experiences may be the most challenging aspect of launching a new project or program. The student veteran's "mission" is to complete the checklist items required for graduation and not deviate from the path (Kapell et al., 2017). This is why marketing the experience specifically to veterans is vital. The authors have employed several strategies to recruit a greater number of students than available spots on the trip:

- *Plan an enticing experience.* The combination of partnering with a known community organization, traveling to a "bucket list" location, and building something that will last a lifetime has proved enticing to UCM's student veterans.
- *Design a culturally-relevant flyer.* Keep in mind that the student veterans are already flooded with flyers for various campus activities (likely, service-learning experiences included) which they may routinely ignore. Something about this flyer needs to stand out to veterans. In the past, the authors have included images of individuals carrying rucksack-like backpacks in a wilderness environment, emblems representing each service branch, and, of course, the words "military" or "veteran" in large letters.
- *Use appointed student leaders as recruiters.* As most education practitioners have realized, students listen more to each other than they do campus faculty or staff. Therefore, a successful recruitment plan should be driven by the appointed student leaders who

have already signed on and are excited to participate in the experience. These leaders are best equipped to increase awareness of the program and recruit a diverse body of participants (Garcia-Pletsch & Longo, 2016).

- *Hold informational sessions.* Particularly for new programs that lack ubiquity on campus, it is important to provide student veterans with more information about the experience than can be featured on a flyer. Veterans may want to know more about the time commitment, trip logistics, and availability of course credit along with other individual concerns. The authors have found such sessions to be key recruitment points for the service-learning experience.

Pre-trip curriculum

While many service projects throw participants right into the work, service-learning can be more intentional about initiating learning opportunities before the hands-on portion of the project begins (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014). UCM's project engages student participants in six weeks of an academic curriculum prior to the service-learning trip itself. Activities and topics covered include the following: team building, goal setting, a service-learning overview, background on the community partner, history and culture of the geographical region, behavioral expectations for the trip, trip logistics, safety concerns, and many opportunities for critical reflection. The meetings are held for up to two hours on a recurring weeknight during the six weeks immediately preceding the trip departure. The meeting agendas and curriculum are the result of a collaboration between the faculty, staff, and student leaders, but it is the student leaders who guide the participants through the activities of each session. The results are an informed group of participants who have the skills they need to be successful and who are ready to begin working as a team the moment they arrive at the community partner's location (Cooke et al., 2017).

The service experience

When the vans arrive at the service site, UCM's faculty and staff volunteers fade into the background, becoming full participants themselves. The student leaders introduce the team of participants to the community partner, receive a briefing, and begin to assign participants to various tasks. The assignment of sleeping quarters, meal schedules, and work objectives are all communicated to participants through the student leaders. As one leader noted, "The weekly meetings leading up to the departure allowed me time to get to know the strengths of my peers and easily assign roles that would both benefit the group and challenge the individual" (W. Burgess, personal communication, May 2016).

In the authors' experiences, days with minimal downtime and minimal phone or internet usage contribute to the intensity of the service-learning experience. During each workday, participants wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast, pack a lunch, and hike to the worksite. After engaging in eight hours of physical labor, they hike back to the campsite, cook and eat dinner, conduct an hour of reflection, and retire to their tents to sleep. During the trip, one student leader shared his thoughts on the challenges and rewards of the experience:

So, third day in...it's getting a little better...still a tough hike. We go about a mile and a half up to the site...mile and a half back...and...uh...first day we didn't see any hikers...second day we must have seen...whew...about a dozen or so...and...uh...you tell 'em that you're crew maintenance...and...uh...it's nothin' but thank yous. Some even want to stop and take a picture with you, they've never seen a trail crew before....It's pretty cool. (W. Burgess, personal communication, May 2016)

Reflection

Opportunities for critical reflection are a cornerstone of any successful service-learning project. As Dewey (1916) noted, "Thought or reflection...is the discernment of the relation between

what we try to do and what happens in consequence” (p. 112). This very concept could even be the basis for a reflection discussion: “What did we attempt to do today, and what actually occurred?” After each day of service, typically following the evening meal, student leaders facilitate one hour of reflection. While this generally involves participants sitting in a circle and responding to one or more general questions from the group, it can also be time for participants to jot notes in a journal, perform a skit, complete a group activity, or anything else the leadership feels may assist the participants in processing their experience, perhaps even those related to their time serving in the military. UCM’s faculty and staff volunteers have found that veterans will make the link between the service-learning trip and their past military experiences without much coaxing from the student leaders:

Something happens with manual labor that...you may be crushing a rock into some smaller rocks but you might also be crushing something else that you’re working on...you know? We’re climbing this hill in the morning...um...yeah, we’re climbing a physical mountain, but there may be...a mental mountain that you’re climbing, too. So every evening, that’s what comes out in our discussions. (C. Stockdale, personal communication, May 2016)

Dewey (1916) also suggested, “the occasion of reflection lies in a personal sharing in what is going on” (p. 114). This personal sharing is essential to the success of the overall experience, but it can be highly sensitive for some student veteran service-learning participants. In the authors’ experiences evening reflection is heart-felt and tear-filled, especially near the end of the trip when interpersonal bonds are at their strongest. The student leaders, in their role as reflection facilitators, need guidance as to the sort of questions that, while keeping away from potential pitfalls, can elicit meaningful responses. Faculty and staff volunteers should all be aware of anything shared by a participant that may require additional attention following the session or that may even necessitate a referral for supportive services.

Concluding the experience

It’s important that the service-learning experience doesn’t end the moment the participants return home. And anyone who engages in such an experience will quickly find out that it won’t. The bonds established on the trip will often be strong, even between faculty/staff volunteers. One volunteer discusses the inspiration he received from one of the student veteran participants:

Seeing my friend and student [name retracted]—who lost both legs in an IED explosion—made it up to over 5,500 feet elevation...anybody who thinks you can’t do something...all you need to do is use him for inspiration...because you can do it. (J. Huffman, personal communication, May 2016)

Beyond continuing the relationships established during the experience, there are also ways to both formally and informally celebrate the experience. Most of UCM’s post-service activities originated organically and were often student-initiated. The follow-up activities have included sharing photograph slideshows, videos, and poster presentations during campus events; reuniting for a backyard barbeque; engaging in a volunteer workday with *Homes for Our Troops*; and, reconnecting for a group lunch and cultural tour.

As important as it is for the participants to follow-up after the experience, stakeholders can also be included in this process. Regardless of how such an experience might be funded it is likely that an entire team of faculty, staff, and students helped make the experience successful. It is important to recognize those contributions and inform such stakeholders of the experience’s impact. In fact, by completing the communication loop, it can ensure such experiences have the support needed to continue into subsequent years.

Opportunities and Limitations for Program Growth and Development

Successful service-learning experiences have a broad appeal, especially as they reach the level of a “win-win-win” situation (Bushouse, 2005); students bring home stories about a life-changing

experience, the community partner reports on the massive amount of work accomplished, and the university spreads word to its stakeholders through media releases or social media. It doesn't take very long for someone to ask, "When's the next trip?" or "How many students are you going to take next year?" Faculty and staff will need to carefully plan for any potential growth or development of the service-learning experience in order to maintain quality of the program, ensure financial stability, and avoid placing undue pressure upon the community partner(s).

In its first year, the UCM/ATC service-learning program began with just six students, one faculty member, and one staff member. After several successful iterations, and through careful considerations with the ATC staff, UCM now sends 20 participants to the AT each May. At present, this is the maximum number of volunteers the ATC can support from a single organization.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The UCM on the AT program has implications for both higher education professionals and veterans studies scholars. The foundations of the program can provide university faculty and staff with a research-based approach to greater student veteran involvement on campus. Highlighting the benefits of service-learning for underserved students and the positive impact of wilderness experiences for veterans, practitioners would be well-equipped to design a program that best fits their institutional context. The best practices outlined in this paper can be used as a guide toward that end.

Veterans studies scholars may find it fitting to apply quantitative and qualitative methodologies to veteran-focused service-learning projects such as UCM on the AT. Other than the anecdotal evidence gathered informally from the four iterations of this project, rigorous research methodology has not been applied to the program, its components, or the past participants. While many of the participants have reported that the program has been "life changing," it has yet to be determined what has made the program so impactful, the extent of the impact, or what the lasting impact may be for the participants. Veterans studies scholars may use the following questions to initiate future empirical studies: do participants report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience than similar students who don't participate? Do participants persist, are they retained by the university, or do they graduate at higher rates than nonparticipants? Do participants continue to engage in service opportunities following the experience, or even after graduation? What are the remaining barriers that prevent others from participating? The authors welcome research that further reinforces the importance of engaging student veterans in meaningful service-learning experiences.

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Christopher L. Stockdale
University of Central Missouri
Jeffrey A. Huffman
University of Central Missouri
Elizabeth Crawford
Appalachian State University
William Burgess
University of Central Missouri