

Tailoring Higher Education Options for Smaller Institutions to Meet Veterans' Needs: Enhancing Inclusion in Higher Education: Practical Solutions by Veterans for Veterans



PROGRAM PROFILE

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ABSTRACT

Many veterans entering higher education institutions are struggling with integrating into the university culture. Many report feelings of alienation, challenges with access, matriculation, experiencing financial need, and difficulty with degree completion. This profile describes the road map that led to the development of a strength-based program to capitalize on veterans' assets during the reintegration to higher education process at a smaller higher education institution. The program described here is the result of five years of observation and research findings on student veteran reintegration and higher education at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). The result is a cost-effective course that integrates classroom instruction and community based, service-learning components to address student veterans' needs and assist them as they transition to higher education. The challenges involved in implementing such an initiative are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND AND NEED

As veterans leave the service, they are seeking higher education degrees in increasing numbers (Semer & Harmening, 2015). Thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Molina & Morse, 2017; Steele et al., 2010) and a fundamental shift in military culture towards an emphasis on “transition services” (Warrior Transition Command, 2014), more veterans are pursuing college degrees than ever before (Walton et al., 2016). Higher education institutions are adapting to the demand by creating centralized programs designed to meet the needs of student veterans. Programs such as “SERV” (Supporting Education for the Returning Veterans), established at Cleveland State University (Semer & Harmening, 2015), help students navigate administrative barriers and offer support services (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This type of programming may suit the needs of larger institutions with financial resources, who receive large numbers of veterans, but this model remains out of reach for smaller institutions who lack the space, funding, and personnel to manage such an endeavor. From a practical standpoint, most smaller institutions also lack the veteran volume to warrant such an undertaking. Smaller institutions have a duty to recognize and address the needs of veterans and provide affordable alternatives to for-profit institutions where veterans accrue disproportionate debt despite the educational benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill (DiRamio, 2017).

Today’s veterans take advantage of opportunities to accrue college credits while on active duty. Many obtain an associate degree before they transfer into a brick-and-mortar college to continue their education towards a bachelor’s degree (Walton et al., 2016). As a result, veterans arrive on college campuses as transfer students. National trends reflect age gaps as well as social and cultural differences that set student veterans apart from their younger classmates (Cable et al., 2021; Rattray et al., 2019; Molina & Morse, 2017).

Many institutions address the benefits and financial issues tied to veterans’ issues but largely neglect the academic and social needs of veterans (Karp & Klempin, 2016). Research points to seven factors that influence postsecondary non-completion (Molina & Morse, 2017). These factors have contributed to the development of a measure by the National Center for Education Statistics (Radford et al., 2015) that examines the risk of non-completion among all individuals who enroll in postsecondary education across the United States (US). The factors include delayed college enrollment, no high school diploma, part-time college enrollment, financial independence, responsibility for dependents, single-parent status, and full-time work while in college. (Molina & Morse,

2017) Across the US 44% of student veterans report four or more risk factors associated with non-completion college rates (Ryan et al., 2011). Research reveals that student veterans tend to “come from historically underserved populations, including first-generation and nontraditional students, low-income students, and students of color” (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015).

These trends are reflected at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU; Cruz et al., 2017; Dixon et al., 2016). To address this lack of reintegration services, the authors began exploring possible solutions. The challenge was to develop a cost-effective solution to meet the needs of increasingly isolated student veterans, while laying the foundation for future growth of student veterans on their campus. The “solution” is the result of years of strategizing, negotiating, and compromising.

HISTORY OF THE PROCESS

In 2016, the first author, a retired US Army Occupational Therapist, joined the FGCU Rehabilitation Sciences Department and established an ad hoc organization to advocate for veteran accessibility and services called the Veterans Support Committee (VSC). The VSC is comprised of faculty, staff, students, and community members dedicated to providing opportunities for student veterans at FGCU. A preliminary research project was created with the help of occupational therapy (OT) graduate students to identify and address the unmet needs of student veterans at FGCU. The initial 2016 mixed-methods study consisted of sending emails to student veterans to inquire about barriers to higher education at FGCU. Fifty FGCU student veterans completed the survey.

Correlations of responses were obtained using a Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient (PCC). The PCC measured the linear correlation between variables. The qualitative data was evaluated using open, thematic coding by the researchers. Open coding facilitated identification of concepts to determine the most important issues facing FGCU student veterans. Nominal data was utilized to establish an understanding of the veterans’ placement in society, school, and life. Ordinal measurements (using a 5-point Likert scale) were used to analyze opinion-based questions in order to present a more in-depth look at the population. Results of the FGCU survey revealed a student veteran demographic that reflected trends found at other US institutions: a mean age of 24, most were married with children. Many worked full and/or part-time and had significant financial obligations with a short timeline to complete coursework. Respondents indicated a desire to contribute and participate in university activities despite significant barriers such as financial obligations,

family responsibilities, and predetermined timelines for completion of degrees imposed by limited GI Bill funds (Dixon et al., 2016).

A follow-up study was designed to explore the impact of a service-learning activity that would bring together student veterans and non-veterans in a community setting. The design of this study was intended to offer a more meaningful and relevant service-learning intervention, where veterans and non-veterans could foster a sense of collaboration and teamwork that replicates the sense of “unit” veterans are used to (Ahern et al., 2015). The study also aimed to expose student veterans to new experiences that could form the basis for new habits and routines which have been found to be beneficial in maintaining good mental health and psychosocial health in times of change (AOTA, 2020). It was hoped that the introduction of new habits and routines would result in enhanced quality of life.

A non-randomized pre-test post-test design was used to assess quality of life measures of student veterans and non-veterans (Cruz et al., 2017). The OT service-learning intervention focused on the more challenging aspects of veteran reintegration, centered on the struggle to relate to classmates and faculty while developing a sense of belonging on campus (Rattray et al., 2019). A sense of isolation and disconnect among student veterans is a

common theme that can occur due to work and life experiences, which can vary widely from their much younger peers. The absence of academic and social support and the faculty’s lack of awareness of military culture can often lead to misunderstandings and stigmatization of student veterans (Rattray et al., 2019). The OT researchers sought to provide experiences for veterans that would promote inclusion through peer bonding, networking, and empowerment. In an era of limited budgets and resources, the authors endeavored to present a convincing argument in support of veteran services for reintegration and a concrete plan for meeting the need.

The VSC implemented recommendations from the initial OT research project. Endeavors resulting from the studies are listed in **Table 1**.

Part of the FGCU mission includes a commitment toward social engagement with an emphasis on service learning and sustainability. Service learning is a key component to the FGCU undergraduate experience and a graduation requirement. All students are expected to complete 80 service-learning hours (40 hours for transfer students). To date, FGCU students have logged a million service-learning hours and have partnered with over 350 locations in the surrounding community (Florida Gulf Coast University, n.d.a.).

EVENT	PARTICIPANTS	PURPOSE
Student veteran orientation	Faculty Staff Students Community support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information dissemination • Community & university support • Peer mentoring • Networking with university and community resources
Diversity certificate program	Faculty Staff Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans Issues Lecture • Awareness of military culture • Faculty resources for outreach
Service-learning opportunities for veterans	Student Veterans Community Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5k Veterans Day Run • Hurricane Irma Relief event to remove debris from Lighthouse for the Blind • Community Cooperative Composting project for food pantry
Veterans golf tournament	Faculty Staff Community Students & Student Veterans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of veterans on campus • Foster collaboration & networking • Develop funding for veteran led initiatives • Scholarship funding
Veterans web page	Faculty Staff Community Students & Student Veterans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • www.fgcuveteranssupport.com web page • portal for prospective students, direct link for inquiries • Centralized site to address veteran issues • Provides social and community resources • Highlights veteran successes • vsc@fgcu.edu-direct email to VSC
Veteran centric colloquium course	OT Faculty Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapted FGCU mandatory course to meet the identified needs of student veterans • Reflects the university mission through service-learning, ecological fit, and sustainability • Incorporates Occupational Therapy tenets from the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF; AOTA, 2020) to optimize veteran success

Table 1 Outcomes Identified and Implemented Based on Research Findings.

In addition to the service-learning hours, students are required to complete a compulsory course called University Colloquium. This course, comprising didactic and service-learning components, is intended to introduce students to the complexities of developing sustainable societal patterns. Civic service programs that engage veterans have demonstrated benefits for veterans in improved psychosocial outcomes and enhanced perception of social support (Lawrence et al., 2017). It is important that any service-learning component be relevant and meaningful for participants to ensure maximum participation.

The 2016 OT survey revealed several veterans felt the current service-learning component of the university colloquium course was neither useful nor relevant to them. One veteran's response to the OT survey cited the following: "Putting me on a bus to go visit the Food Forest is not relevant or meaningful." The results of this OT survey led the authors to consider how they could tailor a colloquium course better suited to this population to capitalize on veterans' assets when considering veteran reintegration rather than focusing on deficits (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Sullivan & Yoon, 2020). The ability to highlight veterans' broad worldview, communication skills with diverse populations, and experiences with mentoring and work supervision are building blocks for a strength-based approach (Sullivan & Yoon, 2020).

VALUE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN THE VETERAN REINTEGRATION PROCESS

OT is an allied health profession that provides a range of diagnostic, technical, therapeutic, and support services designed to allow individuals to participate fully in life. The American Occupational Therapy Association Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (AOTA, 2020) establishes nine domains of practice activities for daily living (ADLs): (a) instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), (b) health management, (c) rest/sleep, (d) education, (e) work, (f) play, (g) leisure, and (h) social participation. OTs help clients address occupational challenges within these nine domains by finding the right fit and providing the just-right challenge. The military lifestyle and its demands require an understanding of topics that include coping and adaptation to stress, ecological and systems theories, family roles and functioning, community capacity to support the population, and the effect of these elements across the lifespan—all of which are in the scope of practice of OT.

Endeavors in **Table 1**, were created and implemented through the lens of occupational therapy tenets. Each endeavor correlates to established domains of the OTPF-4 while recognizing military culture as an ecosystem that requires a unique approach to address reintegration in

a systematic manner. This approach to the reintegration process centers on three major aspects—Awareness, Academic Achievement, and Advocacy. The authors call this the Triple-A Approach.

TRIPLE-A APPROACH

The Triple-A Approach informs the framework of a veteran centric colloquium course (VCC) through three distinct pillars that shape the academic and service-learning components. The first pillar, Awareness, is addressed through topics centered on transitioning from one ecosystem to another and the ecological fit of the nontraditional student on college campuses. The second pillar, Academic Achievement, is addressed through lessons on thriving in the academic environment, writing across the curriculum, and mentoring for success. The third pillar, Advocacy, is implemented through topics on identifying, interpreting, and connecting the common ecosystems in our geographic area and the greater space, as well as cultural considerations of the military. Although these pillars form the specific foundations of these outlined topics, they are also weaved throughout the course as a whole, to best tailor the curriculum and in order to address veterans' needs.

Awareness

Addressing awareness is intended to sensitize the veteran to how the influence of their military training and military culture in general has affected their view of the world (Olt, 2018). It is also intended to help the veteran develop a sense of "place and space" while constructing a newfound identity in civilian life. Veterans are encouraged to reflect on where they come from, where they are, and where they are going in relation to this new eco-system. The veteran's fit in this new role in this new eco-system was evaluated by drawing on several occupational therapy models: The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO), the Person Environment & Occupation (PEO) model, the Ecology of Human Performance (EHP) model, and the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance Enablement Model (CMOP-E).

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement encompasses promoting academic growth in a respectful environment. Mindful that veterans are older, more mature students with very different life experiences who have experienced unique challenges. New learning needs to be presented in a factual, non-nonsense manner. Information must be conveyed in a manner that values veterans' experience without prejudice or condescension. The goal is to empower veterans to be an active part of the learning process. Instruction needs to

focus on developing tactful approaches to address veteran challenges and inequities (academic, social, psychological, experiential). This is best done by applying concepts of social learning theory, adult education framework, and social justice.

Advocacy

Promoting advocacy allows veterans to find their voice and integrate into the fabric of the university. Empowering veterans to channel their ideas into projects can shed light on their situation and help incoming veterans navigate the system. This type of peer support has been shown to improve veterans' overall satisfaction (Kirchner, 2015; Rattray, 2019). Allowing student veterans a role in the development of resources for reintegration (through completion of colloquium assignments such as service-learning projects and presentations) contributes to their sense of efficacy. To capitalize on veterans' expertise and allow the group to create valuable service-centered opportunities allow veterans to draw on their strengths (a core concept of group goals for PEO). This part of the approach centers on offering an opportunity to enable veterans to contribute to the university by pooling their expertise and developing a common project that represents advocacy for change. This experience will allow veterans to share their expertise for the good of the group, fostering communication and participation in university affairs and in the community at large. These objectives draw on PEO and the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance Enablement Model (CMOP-E) designed to "enable" participation (Davis, 2017).

VETERANS CENTRIC COLLOQUIUM COURSE

The Veterans Centric Colloquium (VCC) was created for all student veterans and is intended to address their needs by offering opportunities to challenge and stimulate veterans to excel without additional cost to the university. The VCC uses the existing platform of the "university colloquium" (a required course at FGCU) to provide veterans with a safe environment in which to acclimate, while providing targeted resources to address and meet their specific needs, and introduce a modified colloquium syllabus based on the findings of evidence-based research on veterans' reintegration best practices. As the course is already an existing university requirement there is no additional cost to the university or the student veteran. The benefit for veterans is the opportunity to meet and learn alongside like-minded individuals, offering a peer-connection (Jenner, 2019; Kirchner, 2015; Ackerman et al., 2009), while supported by trained faculty.

The VCC addresses "sustainability" from the lens of the military culture and veteran reintegration process (see [Table 2](#)). The curricular threads woven throughout

the course consider issues that can threaten veterans' academic success (Arminio et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2015; Titunik, 2008). Specific resources such as a dedicated veteran library orientation, peer mentoring, and access to community resources are included in this course (Titunik, 2008). All class discussions and assignments are intended to reflect the overarching university principle of sustainability and aim to identify, interpret, and connect the common ecosystems in the area and the greater space (Lawrence et al., 2017). The VCC offers an element of security to transitioning veterans by using familiar language.

For example, students are given "in-processing" checklists to better acquaint them to campus. Assignments are designed to encourage advocacy and foster better communication with faculty, staff, and peers. Various forms of expressive mediums are introduced to stimulate thought and reflection (poems, short stories, and journaling; Hart & Thompson, 2016). The course culminates with a service-learning project designed by student veterans which offers an opportunity to develop a project that is meaningful, that showcases their skills, and allows veterans to contribute to the community (Elliott et al., 2011; Godsay et al., 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009).

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

The program presented here was originally conceived as an elective course for Spring 2018 called "University Transition" SLS1101. We, the authors, were naïve and quite unlucky! We thought this course could offer a simple, cost-effective solution to help veterans, but hurricane Irma (2017) and an 8-million-dollar budget shortfall (Bland, 2017) resulted in the course being cancelled. In the aftermath we realized that offering a low-level elective might not have appealed to veterans and also could be cancelled at any time other budget constraints appeared. We came to realize, to be successful, we had to tap into the fabric of the institution by building a broad coalition of support through education and advocacy, of faculty, administration, and students. Events such as veterans' specific orientations, 5k Veterans' Run, Veterans' Golf Event, Veterans Appreciation Luncheon, and presentations for diversity and inclusion helped grow our support base. Tying our course to existing university requirements by creating a veteran centric colloquium (VCC) made it more appealing for student veterans. Blending the existing colloquium framework to address best practices in veteran reintegration required intensive, detailed attention and helped us understand that this is not a course that can be taught by "anyone." It requires a faculty member who has knowledge of the military, that is a given, but it also requires an appreciation for the spectrum of military experiences and their effects on academic performance. Faculty working with veterans

CLASS TOPIC	RATIONALE FOR INCLUSION
Transitioning from one ecosystem to another	Developing a sense of belonging and bonding with peers to combat feelings of alienation or isolation that veterans often feel (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Hodges, 2010; Medley et al., 2017).
Ecological fit of the nontraditional student on college campuses	Family responsibilities, academic disparity, offering assistance to fill the gaps often observed from too many transfers; navigating the academic culture to foster better communication with faculty, staff and peers; exploring aspects of structure vs lack of structure and the shift of groupthink to individuality (American Council on Education, 2018; D’Aoust et al., 2016; Lewis & Sokolow, 2008; Marklein, 2007; Rattray et al., 2019; Titunik, 2008; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Beneficial to establish dedicated veteran spaces to provide opportunities for interaction (Daly & Garrity, 2013; Vance & Miller, 2009).
Thriving in the academic environment	Enhancing academic performance skills (self-efficacy, meta-cognition, awareness, study skills, academic performance, tutoring, etc.) as veterans arrive on campus with various experiences and may require tailored tutoring approaches to enhance their academic skills, e.g., offering a veteran’s library orientation (Arminio et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2015; Titunik, 2008).
Mentoring for success and the ecological evolution of self	Providing opportunities for mentorship relationships to aid in reintegration to civilian life academic success and the way forward (Cook & Kim, 2009; Semer & Harmening, 2015). Peer mentoring amongst student veterans is beneficial because of their shared backgrounds. This mentorship relationship has the potential to assist the individuals with their transition (Goldberg et al., 2015).
Writing across the curriculum	Enhancing writing skills to adapt from technical military writing to academic scholarly writing; introducing nuances to literary genres that are applicable to students’ own academic disciplines; introducing alternative forms of creative expression (e.g., poems, short stories, and journaling; Hart & Thompson, 2016). Branching off one individual working for whole military unit’s success (purpose is for team success, not individual), fitting their strengths (Naphan & Elliot, 2015; Norman et al., 2015).
Identifying, interpreting, and connecting the common ecosystems and the greater space	Exploring the student veteran’s view of their place and space in this new world by examining the ecological fit of the veteran in the community and application to their academic majors (Lawrence et al., 2017).
Cultural considerations of the military	Solution focused.
Risk factors; coping strategies and resiliency	Coping with stress: Thinking of a plan to solve the problem (Barlas et al., 2013). Coping with stress through problem-solving.
Parenting challenges	Individuality In the military culture, individualism and autonomy lead to uncertain outcomes and to a mission that can easily become compromised and dangerous for everyone involved (Coll et al., 2013).
Mental health	
Work Culture	Parenting challenges: Transition points for military families may vary due to exit from the military (compromises the normative developmental shifts of children). Use a parent-focused system because the needs of the parents often take precedence over the needs of the children and the needs of the military have taken precedence over the needs of the entire system (Canfield et al., 2015).
Service-learning project that encompasses the mission, vision, and goals of institution	Providing veterans an opportunity to develop a project that is meaningful to them, that showcases their skills, and allows them to contribute to the community (Elliott et al., 2011; Gotsay et al., 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Yonkman & Bridgeland, 2009). Civic service programs impact feelings of social isolation and improve self-efficacy in veterans, resulting in improved psychological and social outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2017).

Table 2 Veteran Colloquium Course Outline.

must have a strong foundation in adult pedagogy that addresses the social, emotional, and cognitive challenges of adult learners. Faculty also have to convey a depth of compassion to connect with veterans. Quite simply, to truly connect, veterans have to trust you, and they have to feel “you have their six.”

We are hopeful that we will have a chance to implement our course in the near future, as we have reached a point where preparation and tenacity have met with opportunity. We have decided to publish our program proposal as we feel strongly that sharing our proposal may benefit veterans at other small institutions, especially when one

considers 40% of colleges and universities offer programs and services for student veterans (McBain et al., 2012).

Providing a dedicated place and space for veterans to meet and discuss encourages veterans to bond, network, and collaborate. A veterans' colloquium replicates the sense of "unit" veterans are accustomed to, is designed to empower veterans to explore their milieu, and look for opportunities to engage and share their own abilities. Fostering a sense of unity leads to a greater sense of belonging, both at the university and in the regional community at large.

CONCLUSION

Occupational therapists are trained to address the fit between the person and their environment and to recognize signs and symptoms of occupational imbalance (AOTA, 2020). This unique perspective makes occupational therapists ideally suited to address the needs of student veterans integrating into environments of higher education (Plack et al., 2013). Threading concepts from an occupational therapy practice framework (OTPF) throughout the veteran centric colloquium course can lead to better outcomes and wellbeing. This enables veterans to establish new habits and routines crucial for maintaining good mental and psychosocial health during times of transition (Cruz et al., 2017; AOTA, 2020). Substituting a mandatory colloquium course with a veteran centric colloquium (VCC) is a budget-friendly approach to ease veterans' adjustment to classrooms. There is no additional cost to the student veteran or the university. The VCC is a sustainable option to address the needs of student veterans in smaller institutions. Such an endeavor provides student veterans with a safe place and space, setting the stage for successful higher education integration (Cruz et al., 2017; Dixon et al., 2016, Philhower & Steele, 2020). A university that creates opportunities such as a veteran centric colloquium shows a willingness to welcome diversity, foster inclusion, and embrace change.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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