

Engaging Student Veterans as Researchers: Libraries Initiating Campus Collaborations

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Student veteran enrollment in higher education has increased significantly following the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Molina & Morse, 2015). The professional literature of academic libraries includes several examples of outreach to this growing population, most of which involve marketing to student veterans differently, customizing existing services and spaces for student veterans, and honoring student veterans for their military service. But reaching out to student veterans can be difficult. Student veterans frequently have work and family responsibilities competing for their time and attention, and, as outreach librarian and former Army sergeant Sarah LeMire notes in her 2015 ACRL contributed paper, they are often reluctant to participate in programs that make them seem more needy than other students.

We expanded our library's outreach to student veterans by hosting a symposium for student veterans to present their research projects. This approach is distinctive insofar as we address potential participants foremost as competent researchers, emphasizing their strengths rather than their needs. We also collaborated with various campus offices to integrate student veteran researchers into campus-wide research showcase events. This paper shares strategies for working with student veteran researchers and for securing buy-in among relevant campus stakeholders.

Background on Student Veterans

The literature on library outreach to student veterans includes both important information about student veterans themselves and a range of suggestions for outreach programming. Lemire and Mulvihill's (2017) *Serving Those Who Served* pulls together much of this information in their chapter on student veterans and academic libraries. They draw upon a study by the American Council on Education (Cole & Kim, 2013) that reinforced our decision to pursue a symposium as a means of outreach to student veterans. Most notably, this study found that compared to civilian students, student veterans exhibit higher rates of:

- Studying 11 or more hours per week
- Enjoying positive relationships with faculty
- Pursuing independent study and capstone experiences

Each of these indicators suggest that faculty-mentored research is a good fit for student veterans' dispositions, though it may take very careful marketing to convince student veterans that the extra work of presenting their research publicly is worthwhile. Kappell (2017) found that competing work and family obligations and a mission-driven orientation may lead student veterans to regard undergraduate research and other non-mandatory High-Impact Practices as "avoidable distractions" (p. 39). Kappell notes that this orientation can be overcome if marketing messaging stresses the benefits of participation, especially preparing students for their future careers.

Most veterans are post-traditional students, which means that they are likely to have financial obligations that most traditional students do not. They are likely to be paying their own

way through college, though with the help of government funding. Since they are likely to be older than other college students, they may have family responsibilities, car payments, and mortgages. Many student veterans hold a job while attending college (LeMire & Mulvihill, 2017). Due to their military and life experiences, student veterans have a wide range of life and work perspectives that they bring to their courses and research. The strengths and dispositions of the veteran population are as varied as the students themselves, and engaging them as researchers recognizes their value and the seriousness of their pursuits. Many have faced obstacles and challenges in their path to higher education, and recognizing their research is empowering.

Why a Student Veteran Scholarship Symposium at UNLV?

The student veteran population at UNLV is significant, with over 1,850 active-duty, reserve, or veteran military students on campus. From our overall student population of about 30,000, veterans make up over 5% of our student body. UNLV's Military and Veteran Services Center has been recognized for its excellent work providing services to veteran students, including tuition assistance and campus training, and UNLV has been named one of the nation's best universities for veterans by *Military Times* magazine.

When Mark stepped into the role of outreach lead for student veterans at UNLV in 2015, he met with representatives of the student veteran organization and the director of the Military and Veteran Services Center in order to gain a better understanding of this population. All expressed an interest in working more closely with the Libraries, but both the students and the director stressed a crucial insight: "Student veterans are not broken." This idea echoes Lemire's (2015) recommendation that outreach messaging to student veterans needs to be crafted with care, as veterans may be turned off if they sense that they are being considered needier than other students.

As we thought about ways to take the Libraries' outreach to student veterans to the next level, we kept this idea of avoiding need-oriented messaging in mind. The concept of a research symposium was appealing because, rather than an offer of help, it is essentially a challenge to student veterans to share their excellent academic work in a public forum. Instead of saying that student veterans need us, we are sending the message that we want to see them deepen their level of professionalism as researchers because we believe in their potential to excel.

Our Symposium

We sent a call for proposals to all student veterans, graduates and undergraduates, with an invitation to propose their research topic. Students were invited to propose either a podium talk or a poster, and the judges selected eleven research proposals from twelve different students for presentation at the symposium. We had seven graduate and professional students from Boyd Law School, Public Health, Sociology, History, Computer Science, and Marriage and Family Therapy. There

were five undergraduate students from Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Physics. An interdisciplinary group like this makes for an engaging symposium. Winners included projects from Philosophy, Computer Science, Public Health, and Physics, which demonstrated to our audience and our participants that research happens in every discipline.

Questions to Consider When Planning a Student Veteran Research Event

Libraries that undertake sponsorship of a symposium will need to make a number of important decisions regarding the organization and scope of their event. This section explains how we made these decisions at UNLV.

Should the library run the symposium on its own, or should it collaborate with other units?

At UNLV, taking a collaborative approach to planning and hosting the symposium resulted in more efficient planning and a better event overall. Colleagues in some of our partner units have extensive experience in running events to showcase student work, and their expertise saved us from “reinventing the wheel” in many aspects of planning. Other collaborators offer student support in ways that complement the research support programs that the Libraries offer. All of us had room to improve our outreach to student veterans, and working together seemed like a good way to get started.

At a minimum, we would recommend that libraries collaborate closely with the campus veteran center for institutions that have one. Veteran services administrators have an informed perspective on the types of programming that “works” for student veterans. They also should have established channels of communication with student veterans and can help ensure that the call for proposals and announcements about the event reach the veteran community.

Furthermore, the Military and Veteran Services Center performs a vital role at UNLV, but is mostly engaged in transactional work on behalf of veterans such as making sure they: get G.I. bill funding, are able to register for courses, can drop classes without penalty in case of a deployment, etc. On their own, they did not have the bandwidth to manage a symposium to highlight student research, and were exceedingly grateful that the Libraries and other campus partners were able to run the event.

Which other units should the library collaborate with?

Librarians who intend to plan this type of event should take stock of campus partners and consider who should be engaged. Important things to consider are 1) what do the partners bring to the collaborative enterprise? and 2) what incentive or motivation is there for this stakeholder to participate? It is important to consider potential collaborators strategically in order to distribute the workload, capitalize on other units’ knowledge and connections, and secure buy-in from the most relevant campus units.

Engaging student veterans as researchers is also an appealing proposition for potential collaborators, so long as the library plans in a manner that supports collaborators’ interests. In our case, the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Graduate College already offer showcase opportunities for students to share their research. By scheduling our event early in

the spring, we are giving these partners an opportunity to recruit successful students for their events later in the semester. For the Writing Center and the Academic Success Center, collaborating on the symposium gives them a chance to build rapport with a student community that is frequently hard to reach. In return, the Libraries benefits from the expertise of these units in planning the symposium and supporting students along the way.

Should research projects focus on veteran issues, or should it be left open to other research areas as well?

After consulting with the Director of the Military and Veteran Services Center, we decided that the symposium should be open to student research in any discipline on any topic. We had previously considered narrowing the focus to veteran issues, but the Director encouraged us to keep the scope broad, as some students may want to take their civilian careers in directions that do not involve the military.

Do students need to be on campus to present? Or should we be open to presenters sharing from off-campus?

Student veterans may need to be away from campus for any number of reasons. Some may still have military obligations that involve a transfer to a remote location. Others may have family or career circumstances that make it necessary for them to be away on the day of the symposium. Because our library has the technological resources and expertise to facilitate remote presentations relatively seamlessly, we made it a priority to open up the symposium to students who could not be in the area on the day of the event. As a result, one of our eleven presenters delivered a podium talk via Adobe Connect. A committee member gave her a practice run the week before the event and facilitated her presentation on the day of the symposium. Our remote presenter was able to share her work and field questions with no problems.

Lessons Learned

We collected feedback from presenters in order to improve the event next time. When asked what they gained from the symposium, student responses focused on gaining additional exposure for their research, getting experience in presenting, and hearing their peers present. Another question asked, “What was the most helpful thing we did to support you as a presenter?” Students responded that they were grateful to have a platform for sharing their research, found it helpful to receive written and video instructions on how to prepare a poster or podium talk, and appreciated the opportunity to experience academic presenting as students.

Once word spread about our symposium, we heard from our Congresswoman, who asked whether she could attend and say a few words. To accommodate her request, we adjusted the program a week before the event. The day of the event, we learned that she was unable to attend, but she did send a staff member in her place. Although the last-minute change in plans was a bit disconcerting, our Congresswoman’s interest demonstrates the importance of veterans for many stakeholders in the community, and the potential for an event like this to draw VIPs to the university.

We recommend using multiple channels to promote the event. The Director of the Military and Veteran Services Center emailed the call for proposals to all student veterans en-

rolled at UNLV, and UNLV Libraries promoted the event on the website and via social media, but we still heard from students who said that they would have participated in the Symposium if they had known about it. We plan to involve our Student Veteran Organization in promoting the Symposium in the future, in hopes that hearing about the event from other students might make it more appealing for potential participants.

We held workshops to give students additional support as they wrote their proposals and planned their presentations. These were too sparsely attended to justify continuing them in the future. Student feedback indicates that students value the tips and examples we sent via email, so we will continue to provide asynchronous support. We will also emphasize contact information for the Libraries and the Writing Center, so that potential presenters can schedule individual appointments as they see fit.

Consider the optimal size for your planning team. On the one hand, a large team means that each individual needs to do less and helps to cultivate broader buy-in for the event. But having too many people can make scheduling and planning unwieldy. We plan to have a smaller planning team next year but still encourage buy-in by asking a larger group to volunteer to review proposals, serve as judges, and help staff the event.

Next Steps

We plan to make this an annual event, and in the next iteration will rely more on student veterans themselves to plan and run the Symposium. We asked participants in 2019 if they would be interested in helping to plan the event in 2020—we will likely have two or more students play an active role in recruiting peers to present their research, recruiting judges, spreading the word about the event, and managing the event itself.

As the Symposium program grows in the future, we would like to see student veterans take over the bulk of planning and implementation with guidance from a faculty or staff advisor. Behind-the-scenes experience in conference planning is an important professional development opportunity for many of our students. We look forward to seeing how the student veterans build on the symposium program as they make it more completely their own.

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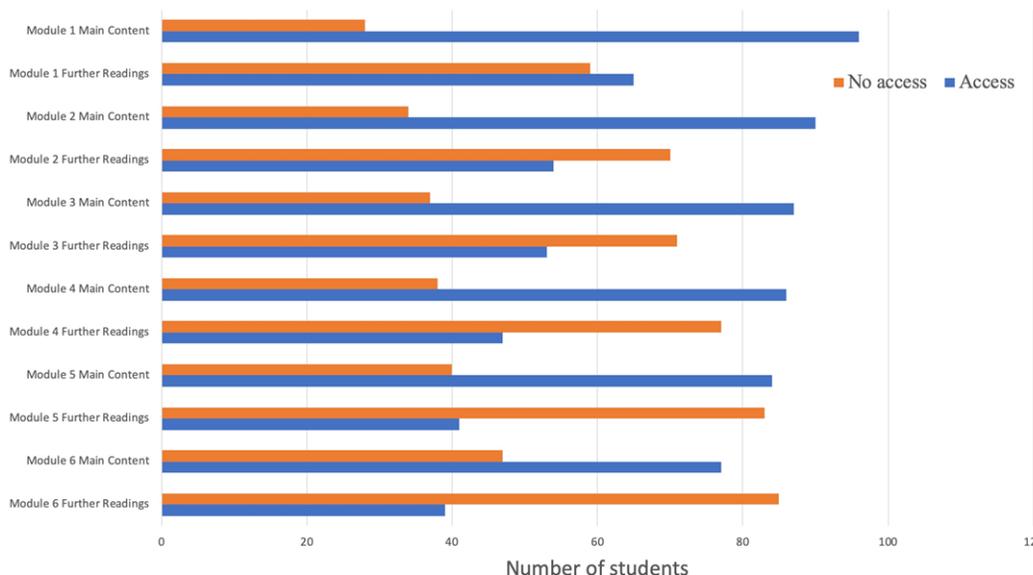
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Figure 3: Distribution of Student Access to Module Content



(New Graduate...
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