Building Camaraderie to Ensure Academic Success for Student Veterans:
Testimonials on the Veterans Student Center
Fall 2010

Nicholas Rattray
Research Assistant
Disabled Veterans Reintegration and Education Project
Disability Resource Center
University of Arizona

Summary
This report presents initial findings from qualitative research conducted in the 2009-2010 academic year by the Disabled Veterans Reintegration and Education Project (DVRE). The main topic of the report is the perspective of veterans on the Veterans Student Center in terms of how it influences the integration of the veteran community on the University of Arizona (UA) campus. The report includes background on the project and trends in student enrollment, a description of the research methodology, and key findings.

The main findings of the report characterize three functions that the Vets Office plays on the UA campus. First, as enrollment of student veterans has risen in the last four semesters, the office has become a central site for socializing and working. By making use of the shared experience of being in the military, the office has capitalized on the camaraderie of veterans to promote a cohort mentality that encourages accountability and commitment to success. Second, the office has begun to function as a one-stop resource center aimed at centralizing where students can connect to other services on campus. Third, the office has become a site of refuge, or a geographic center on campus where student veterans can relax and feel safe from the environmental triggers present in many parts of the UA campus. One of the main challenges facing the office is finding a way to reach the large number of student veterans who either are not aware of its existence or visit infrequently.

Background
The broader purpose of DVRE project is to create a pilot project that will assist in the successful educational advancement and reintegration of student veterans. The ultimate goal of the DVRE is to develop a replicable model to inform higher education in ways to create programs, services, and strategies that promote inclusive learning environments on university campuses. The project uses a multifaceted approach to understand the impact of disability within the student veterans’

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1 The Student Vets Center was the name adopted in Fall 2010. The Center has been commonly referred to as “the Office,” the “Vets office,” and also by the acronym for the wider campus initiative called the Veterans Education and Transition Services (V.E.T.S.), or “VETS office.” From here forward in the report, I will use “Vets office” or “the office” since those were the most meaningful terms used by interviewees during the data collection period.
community and implications for higher education. In the long term, we intend for the research findings to inform the programs and services put in place to aid in the success of student veterans on the UA campus.

The number of students enrolled on campus has significantly increased over the last two years. The chart below shows an increase of over two hundred students from Spring 2009 to Spring 2010 semesters.

To help serve this growing population, the Vets office was established in Fall 2008. The student-run office serves a central hub for students veterans on the UA campus. It is staffed by trained student veterans whose mission is to assist veterans with adapting to university life. In the last four semesters, the office has seen exponential growth in usage. In the Spring 2010, the office sees roughly 300 visitors per week, and occasionally has as many as one hundred veterans visit in a single day. Since Fall 2009, it has been located on the fourth floor of the Memorial Student Union. The office offers a study room, tutoring, food and refreshments, and serves as the site for the social functions of the Student Veterans of America club on campus.

Methodology

The research design combines qualitative research methods with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. The researchers utilize participant-observation, personal interviews, natural conversation, and focus groups. Through these methods, veterans have been interviewed to understand their experience in adapting to university life at the UA. In addition, they have given feedback on the program that has been created on campus, including components such as the “Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran” (SERV) transition courses, the Vets office, recreational and competitive adaptive athletics, and support through major and career exploration and university matriculation. The qualitative approach strives to understand the challenges and opportunities that veterans encounter in accessing and completing higher education, with a particular focus on how the dynamics of disability affect the veteran community.

Participatory research offers a framework in which people overcoming social barriers can recognize broader causes of their experience in a collective way so that that knowledge can be used for social action (Park 1993). The PAR approach has two distinct advantages in comparison to traditionally positivistic research methodology. First, in contrast with traditional social science research based solely on the expertise of the researcher, PAR accommodates the knowledge that
participants bring by including their opinions is the research process (Park, 1993). Participatory approaches are particularly useful when the domain being studied is relatively unknown, such as in the case of the reintegration of veterans. Second, such approaches empower participants to help craft hypotheses and make the research more relevant to their goals (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991). In other words, this is not simply scientific research for generating basic knowledge, but also is intended to be applied toward improving people lives.

Implementing PAR within a project with veterans builds on their interest in helping their peers. From prior research, we know that veterans are eager to better understand how they might contribute to making campus life and adjustment easier for other veterans. Furthermore, they have a range of skills and experiences that can be brought into the data collection process through peer-to-peer techniques and focus group formats. Ideally, our research design would include instruction to participants about research design, collection, and presentation so that they can play a more active role in the process. Since veterans have demonstrated an interest in making the transition to higher education easier for their peers, the process emphasizes the goal of creating a replicable model that can influence the way in which veterans services operate in similar educational settings. The guiding principle from PAR – that veterans are experts on their own experiences – means that their input will help the wider campus initiatives identity additional areas that could aid in their successful integration to campus.

The data collected for this report are derived primarily from interactions with students who have military experience in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Potential subjects were asked to give informed consent after full verbal and written explanation of the study; these procedures were approved by the Human Subjects Protection Program of the UA Internal Review Board. Data was collected primarily through three qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and focus groups. A purposeful sampling approach was employed to insure to develop a robust set of data. These included a special focus on recruiting subjects who were female, graduate students, and minorities. Snowball sampling was used through referrals from interview participants in order to contact harder to reach participants and further diversify the sample. These data were supplemented by demographic information collected during the course of interviews. We collected the following basic variables: age, gender, hometown, marital status, dependents, branch and time of service, ethnicity, current military status, and disability status.

The sample of twenty interviews was 30% female, which is slightly higher than the percentage of veterans on campus. Just over half identified as originally from Arizona. Their ages ranged from 23-58, with a large majority between with ages between 25 and 34. Sixty percent of interviewees indicated that they still have “active” military status, and three out of four had been stationed in a combat theatre. In terms of self-identification of race/ethnicity, the sample was 70% White/Caucasian; 15% Hispanic/Latino; 15% Black/African American, 10% Asian/Asian American; and 5% “Other.” These percentages closely mirror the proportions in the overall UA student population. Roughly one third had children, 45% had been divorced or separated, and 30% classified themselves as single. Seventy percent of respondents had sustained a service-related injury, and 60% self-identified as having a disability. Of those disabilities, two thirds identified as having psychological or traumatic brain injuries; mobility (42%), orthopedic (33%), and health conditions (25%) were also reported in significant numbers. Nearly all respondents
(95%) were utilizing educational benefits, whereas three in four reported receiving medical benefits.

**Key Findings**

The Vets office provides student veterans a place that they can claim as their own on campus. According to the students interviewed in this research, it serves a number of symbolic and material purposes: i) a place to cultivate a sense of pride and camaraderie around being a student veteran; ii) a central hub for conducting campus business; iii) a safe space or site of refuge from unwanted stimuli present in other parts of campus.

*Relaxing and socializing*

Since it serves as a focal point and refuge on campus, it also represents the primary venue for socializing among student veterans. The staff has gone to great lengths to attract students to the office by offering a range of inducements. These include unlimited cold drinks, computers, free printing, a quiet study room, and a large television and video game console. They have likewise decorated the office with military icons, regalia, and other items intended to promote pride and a sense of belonging. The office has been highly successful in attracting students. Statistics on usage demonstrate a sharp increase in the number of students visiting the office in each semester that it has been open.

Many people referred to the office as a place where they knew they would find friends. Even if they were new to campus or just happened to drop in, people feel as though they can quickly get to know people who visit the office. Often, students spend the majority of their time on campus at the office. This is especially true for a core group of students who spend most of their time there apart from the library or classrooms. As such, the office serves as a convenient place to conduct personal business. This includes eating lunch, making phone calls, checking email, studying, and meeting with other students.

While people certainly make use of video games and spend time relaxing, there is also a sense of diligence toward being a student that has been cultivated. One student explained that one challenge in coming back to school is that there is much less structure than in the military. Some people feel as though since no one is telling them what to do, they could just play video games or procrastinate all day and avoid doing their school work. Even though video games remain a fun option, many students have led by example by taking their schoolwork seriously and setting an example in the office.

In addition to the lack of triggers the office provides, it also offers a refuge from what student veterans sometimes perceive as the narrow-mindedness of the general campus population (or more specifically, the undergraduates). One person commented that the office is a place where it’s easy to socialize, and that it “feels like a safe place to be, instead of being out in the open and worrying about people kind of stereotyping if they find out who you are.” In other words, the office is a place where students can be themselves without fear of being judged.
Cultivating the cohort mentality
A second critical function that the Vets office provides is a site for developing pride and identity for student veterans on campus. One of their main objectives, as interviews with students revealed, is to transform veterans into student-veterans, with an emphasis on the student part of the equation. The office does this through prioritizing academic success, cultivating a sense of camaraderie, making members feel accountable to the group, and offering a place to socialize. By encouraging students to work together as a team and especially with those individuals with whom they have a common experience, the staff strengthens the feeling that each student is part of a cohort.

Reinforcing the common bonds that veterans share leads to a sense of camaraderie. Although these student veterans have arrived at campus with vastly different ranks, from different branches of services, and with divergent personal histories they share the experience of being part of the military of the United States. As compared to the differences between veterans and non-veterans, the shared military experience far out-weighs differentiation by branch or other markers. One student who started coming to the office in the spring 2010 semester described how he felt when he first arrived:

It felt like, it was a seamless transition as far as the camaraderie. It’s instant, it’s there. It wasn’t like we had to feel each other out. We all, you know, right away. I already know where you went man. Some people have a higher degree of what they’ve been through and whatnot, but it’s all the same pretty much. We got a basic understanding.

Many people expressed similar feelings of instant camaraderie which often stands in stark contrast to other parts of campus. Another person described how even though they don’t know other veterans personally, they know what type of person they are:

You’ve been surrounded by people that you know. Even if you don’t know them, you kind of have an idea of who they are just because they’re in the military and share the same values you do while you’re in.

Office staff does their best to capitalize on the shared values of student veterans to generate a sense of solidarity. This can be important as some students arrive with ambivalent feelings about their military experiences. From the interviews, it seems clear that the military experience is something to be valued but not dwelt on, and that the shared camaraderie is used to propel forward the common interests of individuals in a new identity: UA student veteran.

Another important shared value that those interviewed highlighted is a sense of accountability. Being in the military involves a high degree of accountability. Being in the military requires one to be responsible for objects, decisions, and people. In terms of objects, “ownership” is important in terms of chains of command and keeping track of missions and equipment. Likewise, interdependence is not just an ideal but rather a means of survival. There is recognition among veterans that their decision-making affects more than just themselves. At times, this might make them risk-adverse as compared to their non-veteran peers, who often have been encouraged to take risks and/or have been relatively unaccountable for poor decisions.
One of the major transitions in civilian life is the shift from this high level of accountability to relative independence. The Vets office provides the opportunity to re-establish a positive sense of accountability. What this means is that on a day to day basis, the other people who visit the office care about the well-being of other student veterans. “Checking in” and having people hold each other accountable was cited as a major benefit to visiting the office. It helps student veterans feel less isolated since people care about their progress and both academic and social progress. On a campus perceived as large and impersonal, structures of accountability can be important factors in student success.

It is important not to underemphasize the importance of socializing in creating a sense of cohesion among student veterans. Venues for socializing in the office include eating facilities, video games, study rooms, and the computer lab. Equally important are activities that take place outside of the office often through the medium of the Student Veterans of America campus club. Student veterans have become increasingly involved in intramural sports, volunteering projects, “tailgating” before athletic events, professional development, and social networking events to name a few activities. These opportunities to further develop camaraderie play a large role in cultivating a cohort mentality and go a long way to making student veterans feel like they are integrating into campus life. Allowing veterans to take part in typical college activities with other veterans gives them the opportunity to experience the college lifestyle in a protected environment. Additionally, this type of exposure affords veterans and non-veterans the opportunity to learn about each other and dispel common stereotypes which can further promote integration.

One-stop location for information

The Vets office plays a critical role as a central hub for student veterans who are conducting campus business. Since the office’s inception in 2008, it has increasingly become the key site where veterans can come to find any information that they need. This is vitally important for two important reasons. First, new students arriving on campus face a bewildering terrain of offices and departments that must interface with in order to be registered for classes. Prior to 2008, there was virtually nothing in place to address the particular needs of veterans. Secondly, the advent of increasingly complex paperwork associated with the post-9/11 G.I. Bill means that it has become even more confusing for students to transition from military to civilian to student life. A one-stop model addresses the labyrinth of procedures that many students understand to be a necessary but undesirable aspect of enrolling at the UA.

The office also offers students a place where they can ask questions among trusted colleagues. In the era before the office existed, students often felt uncomfortable asking what they considered to be silly or inappropriate questions about the way that the university works. Lack of knowledge about campus mechanics and the inability to figure out problems represented a significant barrier for many students. This situation has been remedied in part by the office:

Now that there’s the Vets office, there’s a place to actually go to. There are always guys in there that you could ask the dumb questions about. Hey, what about this, you know? And they might heckle you a little bit but it’s all in good fun. You know, it’s a very comfortable environment that you can go in there and ask those questions of, you know, and not feel like a complete idiot.
Office staff members repeat often that there are no questions that are too dumb or silly to ask which put students at ease. Moreover, they have begun to establish repositories of knowledge so that each new student doesn’t feel as if they are reinventing the wheel. These may include textbook exchanges, class notes, tutoring programs, and contacts for jobs on campus.

These tools for assisting new students entail one-on-one instruction tailored to specific individuals, often called the “warm hand-off” approach. For instance, task lists for application are often service-specific. When a Marine comes in, the checklist contains information pertaining to Marines, such as military transcripts. The Marines use a system called the Sailor/Marine American Council on Education Registry Transcript (SMART), while the Army uses AARTS, and the Air Force uses the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF). Many veterans are unaware that each branch use different systems. Additionally, the “warm hand-off” approach eliminates miscommunication and creates an instant-on relationship with the veteran and the staff member. The “warm hand-off” refers to the personalized approach to giving someone directions to get help. For example, a new veteran asks for help with financial aid, and instead of pointing to a map or across campus, another veteran who has navigated the process before walks the veteran to Financial Aid, explains the process, then introduces him or her to a known staff member there.

In addition to knowledge sharing, the office also offers several services that help make it a one-stop location for conducting campus business. Free printing has encouraged students to do their work in the office. In the Spring 2010 semester, a weekly Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) clinic was established for students to meet collectively with a counselor. The office has an established procedure for referring students to key representatives in units across campus including admissions, the registrar’s office, psychological services, disability services, and financial aid among others. They likewise have developed off-campus relationships with Veterans Affairs, Pima College, and several other local organizations. In this capacity, the office refers students to other units to receive services, find internship or job opportunities, and otherwise increase their chances of academic success. The faculty and staff that help veterans on a consistent basis are known as “friendlies”. The term “friendly” or “a friendly” is used in the military to discriminate between allied forces and the enemy. In the campus environment, the enemy is considered the system or process, not so much as an individual.

The Vets office provides a platform for student veterans to establish and maintain a voice on campus. In this regard, offering a one-stop location that cultivates a cohort mentality and presents veterans with a refuge on campus increases the political power of the student veteran constituency. As the numbers of student veterans swells, the office will continue to be a site where student veterans can organize for services and opportunities that benefit their population.

The office as a refuge and sanctuary
Many of the students interviewed talked about how the office serves as a place for them to feel safe and at ease on campus. One of the key reasons for this feeling is that the office is staffed exclusively by other veterans, who are seen as people that can be trusted. The office represents the one site on campus where they can go if they want to be around others who can understand their experiences, relax with friends, or go if they need to “blow off steam.” The office has a number of physical features that make it defensible, protected space which is important for people with lingering effects of having been in combat theatres. The information brought in to
the office is considered “safe” and trusted. Military and ROTC recruiters are prohibited from sitting and trying to recruit, as well as, researchers looking for participants for experiments or studies. The information board is also screened to eliminate junk postings, schemes, or untrustworthy offerings or organizations. Likewise, information on untrustworthy sources is posted to educate veterans on un-reputable products, services, organizations, and businesses.

Part of the reason that the office functions as a refuge stems from what it lacks: triggers or stimuli that exist in other sites on campus. Throughout campus, there are many situations that can trigger memories from military service that can cause anxiety, unease, or other stressors. These triggers include a wide variety of stimuli that include sights, scents, and sounds. Triggers can include situations that are very common on campus, as one person explained how his hyper-vigilance can be activated:

Things that trigger it for me are also if I walk by a dumpster during the summertime you get the smell of rotting garbage. The smell of a dead body is very distinct. A lot of times just a part of that will trigger, the smell that will trigger. Someone that’s wearing a plaid shirt will trigger it for me; seeing barbed wire.

Each of these triggers relates to some stimuli that occurred in the combat theatre. For instance, plaid shirts (or even checkered picnic tablecloths) can trigger the memory of people wearing headscarves in Iraq. It is these situations that student veterans prefer to avoid.

The office provides a space where such stimuli are limited and do not require reactions such as the situations described below. One man explained the relationship between stress, hyper-vigilance, and how students react in typical campus situations:

It raises that hyper-vigilance along with the stress. Stress is good and it’s bad. Stress is good because it keeps you on the edge, it keeps you focused, but too much stress takes you over that line, over that bell curve where you start to be able to not function. That’s when hyper-vigilance sets in. Once you’ve reached that point, it’s very hard to get out of it. That equates to – I go into a room when I’m feeling this way, into a classroom, and I’m in the corner and I’ve got the view of the whole classroom, I’m controlling the door, I need to physically be able to visually see the door. Every time someone in the classroom moves or makes a noise I’m straight to them, I’m following around, and when you’re doing all that it’s really hard to listen to the teacher and take notes and to comprehend what’s going on because you’re functioning about everything else around you.

These types of reactions to classroom settings are difficult to control since they have been engrained into the mental and physical makeup of veterans through military training and experience. As a site of refuge, the office represents a place where people can go to speak with someone if they have a rough day and are looking for a place to settle themselves:

When you get to these classrooms where there are 500-600 people, like my psychology class, I literally sit in the back right hand corner, the seat closest to the emergency exit door. It’s not because like if something happened I’d want to get out, it’s because if something happens, and it’s a weird mindset, it’s still that I have to protect, I’m still in that “I have to protect” mindset. If something happens, I can facilitate people getting out, or I can see everything that’s happening. You keep all the action in front of you, nothing gets behind you.
In addition to large classrooms, other students cited tunnels, open grassy areas, and anywhere where there are large concentrations of undergraduates as places where they may feel hyper-vigilant. If these are typical situations on campus, the office serves as a respite. Students feel less concerned about keeping their guard since they know the space quite well, know that their buddies are watching out for them, and that the people who hang out in the office are unlikely going to exhibit behavior that will trigger stress reactions. It is a place, as it was often said, “where people have your back.”

**Challenge: Reaching students veterans on campus**

One of the primary challenges facing the Vets office is to encourage students to come into the office. While there is a consistent group of people that visit the office on a regular basis (including many who come in daily), there is also a sizeable population that does not tend to visit more than once. In part this dynamic stems from students who feel that they do not really need the services offered by the office, as one person explained:

> In the office I see almost everybody at some point in time. I see the different people and a lot of them don’t realize, even though we promote the office for them to at least come look and see if it has anything that they need, a lot of them are like, “I don’t need that. I don’t need to go there. I don’t need to waste my time.” They’ll do free lunches here and they’ll have a huge turnout for a free lunch but a lot of those people don’t come back to the office.

Another dynamic that impacts interest in visiting the office relates to the stigma of the veteran identity. For some students, they are concerned about how veterans are perceived and try to avoid being identified as such:

> It’s just one of those hit and miss things like yes there’s a sense of community and camaraderie to some extent. The people that don’t want anything to do with it avoid it at all costs. The people that are concerned about being identified as a veteran because a lot of them don’t want to be seen as veterans, they don’t want people to notice them for that. They’re the ones that are avoiding this place tooth and nail. The ones that aren’t avoiding it or come in once and a while or may have personal preferences to not come in because of personal issues.

Ambivalent feelings about being a veteran can contribute to avoidance of the office. One person estimated that about “20-25 percent” of student veterans on campus use the office, with some percentage of that being on an occasional basis.

On the other hand, the fact that higher numbers of veterans are not visiting the office does not mean that the office is not supported by a larger “shadow” group of students. Another student pointed out that while the “Vets office is really awesome” and “very important in the first semester,” it has been easier to “hide out at an academic office. This student explained that “if my coping strategy is that I want to be left alone then there’s not much other people can do.” This point emerged in several interviews with student veterans who are generally happy that the office exists but choose not to visit on a regular basis. Another issue is avoiding the office, due to a bad experience with the military and thinking that the office will have the same negative feel to it. Another common experience for those who choose not to visit relates to veterans who have had a negative military experience. They often assume that the Vets office will either bring up
negative emotions or that people in the office only promote positive views of the military, which is untrue.

Acknowledgements

The researchers greatly appreciate the contributions of the students who offered their time and insight during the course of interviews, with special recognition for the student workers in the Vets office. We would also like to thank Maralynn Bernstein and Dan Standage for assistance with compiling statistics on enrollment and office usage.