Case Study: Veteran Support Services at Southeast Community College

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This research paper contains analysis of and recommended solutions to a case study on the experiences of John Smith, a Veteran student at Southeast Community College (SCC). John confides in Tabitha Cole, a financial aid officer, about his concerns and experiences—in particular, his experience with his Psychology 101 professor, Joni Bradford, a graduate student instructor who violates his privacy in front of his classmates. Tabitha's recommendations lead him to interact with Luke Moore, the lone staff member of the Center for Student Success (CSS) which houses the lackluster Student Veterans Center (SVC) (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018).

Evidence in this case and research conducted indicates that there are various problems with Veteran student support at this institution; most notably, a lack of resources and communication of what little resources exist for the Veteran student population, a lack of visibility of Veterans in the campus community, and a lack of accountability for staff all contributed to John's unfortunate experience at SCC. Proposed solutions include two short-term and two long-term projects: (1A) faculty and staff training, and (2A) the creation of a Veteran student orientation program; and (1B) expanding the SVC, and (2B) creating meaningful connections across campus.

Analysis of Problems at Southeast Community College (SCC)

Communication About Resources to Veteran Students

The first problem identified is the lack of communication about veteran resources available to veteran students. John mentioned to Tabitha that it's "hard to find anyone who would really understand what [he's] been through" (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p.44). John is unfamiliar with the resources at the community college because he was not informed beforehand through some sort of orientation prior to enrolling. Veterans are susceptible to developing

depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and social/cognitive dissonance (Osborne, 2014; O'Herrin, 2011; Heineman, 2016). Between 14 and 19 percent of those deployed have developed symptoms of PTSD, TBI, or depression (O'Herrin, 2011). Veteran students at SCC do not have access to counseling services through the SVC. They need to go out of their way to consult with a counselor at the college campus, and they weren't informed about this beforehand. As said by Luke, "if a student needs assistance adjusting, you could send them to a Counseling Center" (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 46).

Visibility for Veteran Students on Campus

John describes a lack of visibility on campus: his experiences indicate students do not recognize Veterans for their service and that one of his professors singled out his PTSD diagnosis by requesting he speak about his experiences (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 42). Veterans are more likely to be psychologically marginalized and stigmatized than their civilian peers (Coll, 2013; Niv & Bennett, 2017) which make support critical for these students.

For Veterans, visibility is a cycle. Veterans feel less supported by their institution which in turn makes them less likely to interact with faculty and peers, further contributing to their lack of visibility on campus. Visibility for Veterans on campus is key to their academic and social success at higher education institutions (Dillard & Yu, 2018; Osborne, 2014). Lack of visibility creates a hostile environment, and a feeling of helplessness and frustration. John expresses this in his conversation with the Dean of Students (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 49). As John indicates, SCC must address this lack of visibility to ensure that Veteran students feel supported, appreciated, and respected (Semer & Harmening, 2015; Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 50).

Student Veteran Organizations (SVOs) are important parts of creating visibility for Veterans on campus (Dobson et al., 2021; Kelley et al., 2013), and a lack of a strong presence

reinforces invisibility. Currently, the SVC is an office-like room housed in the CSS. Additionally, lack of Veteran ally training for faculty and staff (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 44-45), and lack of campus wide initiatives that focus on community building also contribute to invisibility (Osborne, 2014). Through John's conversations, it is also evident that there are no visible faculty who are Veterans. Visible Veteran community leaders, faculty, and staff are key to assisting Veterans in adjusting to campus life as recognizable and relatable points of contact (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021).

Lack of Accountability for Student Success Center Staff

The third problem that has been identified in this case study is the lack of accountability for SCC staff. First, the CSS is run by only one person, Luke, who oversees all CSS offices as one entity rather than 4 individual groups with their own unique focus, including the SVC. Luke is responsible for the area where students can "meet or work in a safe space" (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 46). The campus prides itself on being a "military friendly campus," yet the director of the SVC refers Veterans to counseling services when they are having trouble fitting in rather than making that connection himself (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p.46).

In addition, a lack of communication between departments on campus prohibits staff from fully understanding the range of resources available across campus. The primary example being Tabitha's limited knowledge about the SVC. She refers John to the SVC without any prior knowledge of what it does or what it looks like. She found out about the SVCs lack of space and resources from a student and by reaching out to the director himself, resulting in disappointment (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p.47).

Proposed Solutions to Better Support Veteran Students

Short-term Solutions

Training for Faculty and Staff

The first solution to improving the Veteran experience at SCC is to provide training to faculty and staff. Students interact with faculty and staff throughout college, making culturally responsive faculty and staff essential for the success of a college campus. A "military friendly campus" requires faculty and staff who are knowledgeable on the needs of the Veteran members of their community. Many institutions have implemented faculty and staff training on veteran-specific issues, which has resulted in positive feedback from students (O'Herrin, 2011). This indicates that faculty and staff should be trained on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and confidentiality.

First, DEI training is needed for faculty and staff to be knowledgeable about the student population. Many institutions have some sort of DEI training; however, most are voluntary, and many faculty and staff believe they "don't have the time" to engage in something that requires an extended time commitment (Artze-Vega, Richardson, & Traxler, 2014; Dwyer & Smith, 2020). Dwyer and Smith (2020) conducted a study measuring the effectiveness of a mandatory 75 minute DEI workshop. Results showed that participants demonstrated confidence, knowledge, and comfort about the topic of DEI after 1 year of taking the training; the area with the highest improvement was in understanding different terminology, including the term inclusive teaching (Dwyer & Smith, 2020). Joni's request for John to discuss his PTSD diagnosis (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p.42) indicates she is not knowledgeable on inclusive teaching. Given that inclusive teaching was one of the most highly retained terms in a 75 minute DEI training shows that a DEI training does not have to be too long for faculty and staff to retain important information.

Second, faculty and staff at SCC should be knowledgeable about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA in higher education enforces students' right to privacy and confidentiality by preventing a student's parent/guardian from having access to their student's education records after they turn 18 or after they enroll in a postsecondary institution regardless of age (U.S Department of Education, n.d.). As is the case here, student record disclosure is the most frequent type of confidentiality violation by faculty and staff (Gilley & Gilley, 2006). A study by Sonja Cantrell (2016) demonstrates the effectiveness of an online FERPA training to over 1,000 participants, where over half of them stated they don't receive any formal training. Results showed that training can greatly improve the knowledge level of faculty and staff (Cantrell, 2016).

A disadvantage to both DEI and FERPA training is challenging SCCs status quo and challenging current ideals may produce a conflict at the institution (Dwyer & Smith, 2020). A second disadvantage is the potential for a "mandatory" training to have negative connotations. Training may be accompanied by feelings of shame and faculty and staff, with their many other commitments, may be inclined to deprioritize FERPA and DEI training (Dwyer & Smith, 2020). Every training is imperative to provide the knowledge necessary to work with veteran students or students of any population.

Developing a Veteran Student Orientation Program

One factor critical to college student's success is the opportunity to engage with peers that have both similar and dissimilar perspectives and life experiences. To facilitate community building amongst the cohort of Veteran students, one short term solution is to develop an orientation program specifically for that population. Research by Evans, Pellegrino, and Hoggan notes that it can be incredibly challenging to readapt to "civilian culture" and success "can be

hindered by the drastic shift from a role where authority is unchallenged... to one where... college students are expected to act autonomously and be self-directed… [creating] stress and uncertainty for Veteran students who are unaccustomed to that type of environment" (Evans et al, 49).

While different types of institutions offer different types of support, all institutions that serve Veteran students must do the work to ensure they are recognized for their service while addressing their larger, overarching academic and socio-cultural needs. The University of Columbia, through edX, offers active duty and transitioning service members who enroll in 2- or 4-year institutions the opportunity to participate in a self-paced course called "University Studies for Student Veterans." The course entails six, 3–4-hour long modules: (1) metacognition and mindset, (2) active reading & note taking, (3) how to study for technical courses, (4) hard reading, good writing, (5) effective time management, and (6) navigating campus culture. Quinnipiac University offers a similar program, designed as an 8-week, 7-credit summer program for their incoming Veteran cohort and invites them to bring any dependents, if applicable. Quinebaug Valley Community College, in addition to transition services and the Veteran Oasis Center, offers Veteran students the opportunity to engrave a brick with their own name—or that of a fallen peer— in the Veterans Garden on campus.

The second proposed recommendation is the development of a "three day, on campus program to be conducted before the start of the fall semester for new and returning Veteran students. On Day one, Veteran students will engage with their peers through a variety of unstructured activities and structured icebreakers before participating in a campus tour that highlights vital student support offices, including the SVC. Students with dependents will also be made aware of any child or spousal support available at SCC and local organizations. Day two

will incorporate time for students to make appointments with advisors and Veteran support staff across campus, and end with a group experience--an outing to a movie or dinner, or perhaps a community builder like a ropes course, if accessible. Day three will incorporate faculty, and allow students to connect with professors of their fall classes, as well as request other support from SCC that they might need to succeed and thrive; furthermore, the final day of the program would provide students who arrived late time to engage with their peers and advisors.

As Veteran students and their needs have not been a top priority for SCC previously, a disadvantage to this proposal is that there will be little to see and share at program launch without other action. As sense of place is prioritized alongside academic success amongst the cohort as mentioned in previous proposed solutions, and as new and experienced staff engage with the SVC as addressed in the next section, the quality of this proposed program will improve year-over-year.

Long-term Solutions

Expand the Veteran Center

The issues addressed herein are not unique to SCC, as institutions across the country are inconsistent in structure and highly bureaucratic which creates significant hurdles for Veterans on campus (Ghosh et al. 2019; Kelley et al., 2013). Veteran students also present unique needs, ranging from advanced age compared to their peers, growing families, and full or part-time jobs (Bryant, 2021; Semer & Harmening, 2015). To improve visibility and properly support Veterans on campus, as well as in support of the proposed orientation program, the first proposed long-term solution is to enhance and expand the SVC by creating a separate and devoted space, and identifying resources across campus for Veterans to utilize.

First, a devoted space is imperative for students to succeed. The current space is empty and lifeless, and has no door to create privacy for Veterans (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 45). A model for reference at a similar institution is the Salt Lake Community College Veterans' Center, where a large space that included both a lounge area and offices for community partners—that was separate and self-contained—was created (Ahern et al., 2015). Spaces like these foster senses of community, safety, and support for veteran students (Ghosh et al. 2019).

Second, identifying faculty and staff who might carry an affiliation with the SVC is an important way to assist students in navigating the college environment. Maintaining a list of faculty and staff who are Veterans themselves and making it accessible to the campus community allows for existing support to be readily identified. Furthermore, having a knowledgeable network of faculty, staff, and administrators serving as liaisons in their respective departments allows Veteran students to have a customized experience (Ghosh et al., 2019; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021). Tabitha is a great example of the potential for this idea: she has experience with assisting Veteran students with GI Bill financial matters (Werkmeister & Jacob, 2018, p. 42) and would be a valuable resource to the SVC as an affiliate or liaison.

This solution is considered long-term because of its disadvantages. While John describes the space briefly, there is no indication of what the scope of a construction project necessary to separate the SVC from other areas of the CSS requires. Furthermore, it is possible that there is no option to renovate the current space; in this case, a conversion of an existing space or the building of a new space is required—and capital funding for this project needs to be considered. Staff affiliates and liaisons are also dependent on the training and hiring process. Though training is described herein as a short-term solution, identifying proper candidates for gaps in Veteran support will take time. Furthermore, SCC currently has a single staff member for all CSS

organizations; this is a trend among many institutions, where unique positions are cut in favor of centralizing administrative positions (Ching & Agbayani, 2019) and is likely to create push back from the administration of SCC.

Facilitate Connection Across Campus

Expanding one of John's own suggestions, to identify non-Veteran allies across campus, SCC should facilitate opportunities for Veteran students to engage with the broader student population to increase the sense of community across campus in addition to the Veteran cohort. Once the college follows through with the short-term solutions proposed SCC should plan events throughout the year dedicated to amplifying marginalized community voices. First, the SVO suggested by John must be developed and supported by staff on campus, and be eligible for student organization funding through SCC which can be utilized to bring relevant speakers to campus and facilitate their own events. Some of these events, developed in partnership with the VSA and other groups on campus, could "provide the sense of camaraderie" Veterans experienced during active duty and allow all to share more about themselves and their trajectories with their peers (Klaw et al, 79).

The VSA, with the support of campus life leadership, should connect with the national Student Veterans of America (SVA) organization to found an SCC chapter, align their practices with those most successful at other institutions, and develop a wider peer support network. Following the example of the University of California, Santa Cruz, SCC should identify a small handful of campus liaisons tasked with educating non-Veteran students, faculty, staff, administration, and campus police. Additionally, holiday celebrations acknowledging the plight and experiences of Veterans and current military personnel should be commonplace. Offering

free food and refreshments, exciting speakers, and campus wide internal communications on these events combat the invisibility described by John.

A disadvantage to this proposal is access to the financial resources required to provide these programmatic changes in additional structural changes mentioned herein. This requires SCC to start this process gradually, and will initially require the prioritization of less expensive speakers and developing relationships with vendors to negotiate discounts or sponsorships when available. The long-term benefits, however, outweigh the costs, especially as it relates to SCC's image as a 'military-friendly campus:' it promotes trust within the current Veteran student population, capitalizes on the success of Veteran focused events with new public-facing communications, and reestablishes themselves as a supportive option for prospective Veterans.

Conclusion

SCC has work to do before it can claim the title of a "military friendly campus." With poor Veteran visibility, a clear lack of resources available to Veteran students, and no faculty and staff training or support, change is necessary in order to properly support the Veteran student community. Proposed changes represent a systematic and holistic approach to addressing these issues. Creating campus connections is impossible without the support of an expanded center for Veteran students, an orientation program for new and returning Veteran students, and proper training for faculty and staff. Where SCC is currently failing Veteran students in nearly all areas, this proposal seeks to rebuild trust and support so that SCC can truly become the "military friendly" campus they declare themselves to be.

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