



Creating a Student Veteran Resource Center

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"[At a community college], we are more likely to be a student from the community which means we are likely to be leaders in the community."

– Student VRC participant



Figure 1. Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at a VRC. Used with permission from the author.

Taking Care of Student Veterans

Over the past decade, colleges have seen a steady rise in student veteran population. Nearly one million veterans have attended or are currently pursuing post-secondary education on the post-9/11 GI Bill (Cate, 2014). Student veterans are typically older than traditional students, must often balance their education with family responsibilities, and take longer to complete their education. Additionally, many are facing challenges as a result of physical or psychological injuries and encounter difficulty in transitioning to civilian life. Thus, student support programs addressing the specific needs of the student veteran population is vital for their success.

In this participatory action research study, student veterans at a small midwestern community college collaborated to develop engaging programs and resources for veterans transitioning from soldier to student. Most notably, the veteran group worked with college administration as well as veteran organizations and community partners to develop a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) on campus. The center, complete with computer stations, a small library, and a snack area, offers a physical space where student veterans can receive veteran-related resource referrals, study, and socialize in a safe and comfortable environment. Further, the college's Veterans Association utilizes the space to conduct leadership meetings and host community veteran partners.

Highlights

Student veterans can differ from traditional college students in important ways.

A Veteran's Resource Center (VRC) can provide resources and a place of belonging for veterans transitioning to civilian life.

Developing a VRC offers an empowering opportunity to use leadership skills cultivated by military service to enhance a sense of duty and community.

Methods

Following a needs assessment to identify the most urgent needs of the college's veteran population, a student veteran group and college staff created an action plan to propose, design, and develop a Veterans Resource Center. Questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups informed the design of the Center.

Project Results

Outcomes of the VRC:

- Offers “safe space” to student veterans
- Fosters sense of community among student veterans
- Enhances access to veteran benefits and veteran-related community resources

Outcomes of the participatory action process:

- Cultivates leadership skills
- Empowers student veterans in decision-making process
- Highlights sense of purpose through community action
- Enhances sense of community through collaboration

ON HOW A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORMED THE PROJECT

Consistent with a Community Psychology perspective, a strengths-based approach was used. On campus, participants reported a loss of purpose after military separation. Rather than suggesting specific actions, the college administration offered leadership training to enhance the skills already developed through military service. Consequently, the student veterans' strengths were leveraged to initiate projects. Further, student veterans were viewed as the experts in their own community, and thus were involved in the decision-making process. In other words, the college was mindful not to develop programs for student veterans, but rather *with* them.



Figure 2. 1802 BeatNavy Used under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](#).

What Does This Mean For Colleges and Universities?

As institutions of higher learning commit to enhancing veteran programming, it is vital to bring student veterans to the table. Student veterans are a diverse population with a variety of individual needs. Though empirical evidence may suggest a course of action, the student veterans of the institution may be the greatest authority of what course of action is most appropriate to meet their needs.

For more information about creating a VRC, please contact Dr. Cari Stevenson at cstevenson@kcc.edu

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