

Developing a Learning Community of First Generation College Student Veterans

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Introduction and Need for Innovative Idea

Incoming students who are also first generation college students and veterans represent a sub-population that pose unique challenges to universities. Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell (2009, p.12) describe veterans in academic settings as a “population with special needs.” Veterans are faced with transitional challenges while assimilating into a college campus. Adjusting from the military to academic life makes veterans shift from the “strictly defined structure” with a chain of command, to a “loosely configured campus” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 12). While many veterans value the change to a college culture away from the restrictions of the military (i.e., military attire and combat decisions), others struggle with the aspects they were accustomed to (i.e., respect from their peers and positional ranks) (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011).

Returning veterans have stated frustrations of being in classes with younger students and find relationships with fellow veterans to be helpful (O’Herrin, 2011). Also, student veterans have similar disadvantages to first generation students including a “lack of ability to navigate the systems and bureaucracy of a college campus” (Vacchi, 2012, p.19).

According to Ackerman et al. (2009, p. 12), veterans “represent a potential campus resource” with their leadership experiences and background in working with difficult challenges. While veterans, like most university level students, are categorized as adult learners (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1994), “there is a widespread lack of knowledge about the unique needs of veterans in higher education...College administrators and professors must update programs and services to better accommodate and support the large number of veterans returning to campus” (Hermann, Raybeck, & Wilson, 2008, p. A99). Learning communities in higher education have been proven to increase, “academic achievements, better retention rates, greater satisfaction with college life, and improve quality of thinking and communicating” (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 6).

Due to Texas A&M University’s (TAMU) identification as a military-friendly university that attracts many veteran students (Veteran Services Office, 2017), it is imperative that they create programs to reflect student veterans’ unique needs. According to the Veteran Services Office at TAMU, TAMU has a total of 676 undergraduate student veterans, of which 274 are first-generation college students (2017). The purpose of this innovative idea is share how TAMU created a learning community with an environment that fosters relationships between student veterans and faculty and staff within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (AGLS) and equips first generation student veterans with the tools and resources necessary to be a successful student at TAMU. While student veterans do not exclusively exist within colleges of agriculture, this innovative idea is a tool on how to connect sub-populations to faculty and staff within colleges of agriculture through learning communities and individualized mentoring programs. Therefore, this model which caters to a nontraditional population serves as a response to National AAAR Research Agenda Priority 4 to develop meaningful learning environments which meets the needs of a nontraditional audience (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Methodology

Recruitment of first generation veteran students happened in partnership with TAMU's Office of Veterans Services and academic advisors in TAMU's College of AGLS. The student veterans participate in a learning community structured with bi-weekly meetings. At the meetings, speakers focus on topics identified as areas of interest or need by the student veterans.

Each veteran is paired with a mentor from the College of AGLS. The mentoring program includes a minimum of monthly interactions that are tailored to the individual student veteran's needs while developing a relationship with an employee of TAMU. Each student veteran finds a service project related to the six grand challenges TAMU has identified from which one service project will be completed at the end of their first year. As this is instructed as a 0-credit or 1-credit course, students are evaluated through participation, speaker evaluations and reflections on a pass/fail scale.

Results to Date

The first cohort of the First Generation Veterans' learning community is eleven students from six colleges at TAMU enrolled in the year-long program. Four faculty members and one staff member from the College of AGLS are coordinating this project. Eleven faculty and staff members from the College of AGLS have volunteered as mentors for the first year of the program. Topics for fall 2017's meetings, identified by the student veterans, include study skills, TAMU's Veterans Resource Center, TAMU's grand challenges, money management and StrengthsQuest evaluation.

Future Plans

With successful completion of the first year, a second cohort of the learning community will be recruited. The learning community is currently structured to allow up to 30 veterans per cohort. The coordinating group of faculty members are currently pursuing corporate sponsors to alleviate the cost of the program on the university. Also, a long-term goal of this program includes having a cohort exclusively of student veterans from the College of AGLS.

Resources Needed

Funding for the following items have been identified for the learning community: breakfast for learning community meetings, service project resources, learning assessments including the StrengthsQuest evaluation, recognition of veterans at the College of AGLS awards ceremony, branded clothing and scholarships. A grant was obtained through the Provost office at TAMU to cover expenses for the first year. Students also received a \$500 scholarship per semester to help with academic-related costs. The total cost of the program is approximately \$15,000 a year.

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