

**Integrating a Holistic Health Approach into Agriculture Education: An Innovative Model
for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life**

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Introduction

Military veterans returning from active duty are at high risk for mental health problems, including risk of suicide. The first 12 months following separation from military service has been identified as a particularly difficult adjustment time for this population. Risks for suicide among veterans include factors outside more traditional mental health facets, like homelessness, relationship strain, and grief (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). Farmer veterans are a subpopulation of veterans who have transitioned from military service to farming as their occupation. In addition to veteran suicide risk factors, farmer veterans must also consider concerns specific to farmers who have a higher suicide rate when compared to many other occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). Farmers point to factors outside of their control, such as extreme weather events, market volatility, and government regulations, that contribute to the uncertainty of their future (Marcom, 2018). Furthermore, problems in relationships, isolation, and physical health issues are noted to be factors that increase feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression among farm family members (Miller & Rudolphi, 2022). “Soldier to Ag” programs (SAP) are agricultural education programs designed as a variation of “new” or “beginning” farmer and rancher programs. Unlike other new farmer programs, SAP integrate military culture and help veterans navigate the transition to civilian life and with the intention to help prevent veteran deaths by suicide. Since SAP combine a population with a high risk of suicide with a high-stress occupation, an innovation was needed in the SAP model to include multifaceted, culturally competent behavioral health interventions within the agricultural education program. The Veteran’s Farm of North Carolina (VFNC) partnered with the the North Carolina Agromedicine Institute to develop a working program model that integrates a holistic health approach for veterans entering farming as an occupation. It is a three-prong approach built upon peer and network connections, focusing on the participants’ the main areas of wellness, mental-physical, couple and family, and financial and legal.

How it Works

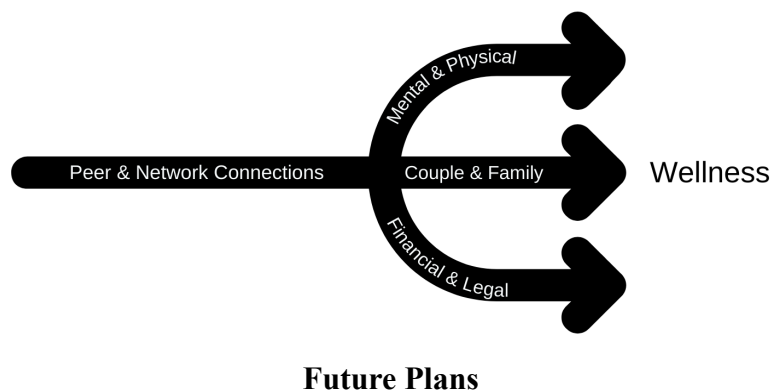
VFNC is a grant-funded program that provides hands-on training and opportunities to learn about agriculture networks, resources, plant and animal production practices, agricultural safety and health practices, and other farm business practices. The target audience includes military personnel who are preparing to transition from active military duty to farming as their next occupation. The Veteran Agricultural Training and Education Program (VATEP) is presented by VFNC in partnership with National Institute of Food and Agriculture as a project funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The VFNC engages participants in VATEP through two, four-hour sessions, each week for six months. The program focuses on four educational outcomes: farmer veterans (1) build a support system through peer and network connections; (2) identify the link between family wellness and whole farm health; (3) understand mental-physical wellness needs as they relate to the occupation of farming; (4) implement sustainable business practices that are safe, savvy, and meet state and federal regulations. NC Agromedicine Institute specialists and VFNC founder collect data using exploratory-sequential mixed methods to shape the working model and inform their intervention strategies.

Results

After synthesizing the literature, participants’ experiences, and anecdotal evidence from other farmer veterans, the team developed a model to summarize VFNC’s behavioral health program. Figure 1 displays the VFNC Holistic Health Approach: Model for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life. The model is depicted as a trident-shaped diagram, highlighting the program’s three major areas of development, mental-physical, family, and business wellness. The trident displays the model as a three-prong approach but actually identifies four essential program components. The three prongs, or the areas of “wellness”, are built upon the trident’s handle, the foundational component that welds the areas of wellness together and connects them at the base of the trident. The trident’s handle is made of “peer and network connections,” which strengthens the stability of the three prongs. The SAP model developed through the work at VFNC is a working guide to aim at helping prevent veteran suicide through agricultural education.

Figure 1

The VFNC Holistic Health Approach: Model for Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life.



Rigorous evaluation is needed to measure agricultural education program outcomes. Future research should use mixed methodologies to evaluate the SAP model and track participants’ long term outcomes upon completion of the program. An emergent research need is the results from the integration of a population with a high-risk of suicide into a field with high occupational stress. There is limited research examining the mental health implications of veterans becoming farm operators. Some research in agricultural education suggests that caring for plants and animals is therapeutic for veterans (Kyle, 2018), but the literature also identifies farming as a significant source of stress (Marcom, 2018). Research is needed to determine the point at which farming transforms from a source-of-relief to a source-of-stress.

Costs & Resources

VFNC is a fully operational farm that focuses on sustainable production using farmland, barn, greenhouse, and aquaponic facilities and equipment. The farm also has a classroom building on site. USDA-NIFA supplied \$50,000 to the VFNC for the development of behavioral health interventions and resources that would be integrated into VATEP. The VFNC used these funds to partner with the NC Agromedicine Institute to develop the educational materials and program model. Other similar organizations may use and adapt the derived SAP model and resources for their purposes without the original development costs.

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