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Facilitating Library Support for Student Veterans

The Libraries and Veterans Toolkit

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there are approximately half a million service members and veterans using educational benefits to pursue higher education annually.[1] That number is likely much larger, as many veterans may not be eligible for educational benefits or may have exhausted those benefits before completing their education. What this means, in layman's terms, is that there are more student veterans and service members enrolled in higher education than one might expect. Whether you are at a community college, an Ivy League institution, or a regional comprehensive university, there are student veterans and service members on your campus.

Although student veterans and service members can be found on virtually any campus, libraries often do not identify students as a unique population with particular needs and strengths.[2] Student veterans and service members can differ from their civilian counterparts in several ways, including age, work responsibilities, and time spent caregiving.[3] These factors can impact student success; indeed, military-connected students are likely to exhibit multiple risk factors for non-completion of higher education.[4]

Despite the challenges that student veterans can face, they also bring unique strengths to the classroom. They bring a wealth of life experiences with them. They have lived around the world, worked in high-pressure environments, and functioned as a member of a team. Student veterans and service members are often highly motivated students; they have returned to college for a reason, and they are focused on completing their studies. These and many more strengths highlight that student veterans and service members can be highly successful in higher education, despite the challenges that they may face.

Programming and Services for Student Veterans

As the number of student veterans enrolled in higher education increased following passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, colleges and universities increased their level of support for student veterans. Many institutions created new veteran centers on campus, which were often tasked with developing programming and services for veterans in addition to processing educational benefits.[5] Following their campuses' lead, some academic libraries have begun to develop programming, resources, and services for student veterans. For example, research has indicated that academic libraries have increasingly begun to assign student veterans their own library liaison.[6]

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However, targeted library support for veterans is far from ubiquitous. Research suggests that libraries providing this type of support are likely to have a staff member who has close ties to the veteran and military communities.[7] Library employees who are veterans or military family members themselves may feel a personal connection to the student veteran population and be more likely to advocate for or undertake this work. However, student veterans at all institutions can benefit from targeted support, regardless of whether there is a library employee with ties to the military.

Getting started with this work can be a challenge, especially for library employees without connections to the military. Librarians may feel discouraged if a program they develop has poor attendance. They may not have ideas about potential partner organizations or how to connect with them. They may even feel apprehensive about finding the right tone for programming or inadvertently offending a student veteran. These challenges, and more, are commonly encountered at the outset of developing a library support program for student veterans.

There are also many library employees who have surmounted these obstacles and have developed robust and successful veteran programs. These librarians have a wealth of advice and experience to share with those just getting started (or those looking for new ideas). But how can you find these experienced librarians? How can they effectively share their knowledge and expertise with the profession? The Libraries and Veterans National Forum was created as an answer to these questions.

About the Libraries and Veterans National Forum

The Libraries and Veterans National Forum was an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) sponsored project intended to help library workers, from all types of libraries, to better understand and support veterans and service members. Developed by a team of librarians at Texas A&M University, one of the six senior military colleges in the United States, the Forum brought together library workers to share what they are doing in their libraries to support veteran and military-affiliated patrons. The format of the forum was shaped by the pandemic, and ultimately became a multi-part initiative. The major elements of the forum included the following:

1. A virtual symposium held in September 2021. The symposium spotlighted successful library programs and services designed to support veteran and military-affiliated patrons.
2. A microgrants program which was offered following the symposium. This program was developed to provide support for libraries interested in piloting new ideas from the symposium.
3. A toolkit designed to collect and share programming ideas in an easily accessible, searchable format.

The forum intentionally brought together library workers from public, academic, military, and special libraries to share ideas across the boundaries of library type. Because all libraries have patrons who are members of the veteran and military communities, library workers can garner ideas for programming, collections, exhibits, and more from all types of libraries. The Forum's schedule and recordings, as well as news stories outlining the work of the microgrant recipients, is available on the Libraries and Veterans National Forum website.

Introducing the Toolkit

The Libraries and Veterans Toolkit[8] was designed to gather examples of successful library support for veterans into a single searchable and shareable resource. The toolkit was initially seeded with resources contributed by five teams of library workers known as the toolkit committees. Each committee had a specific focus, including a committee with an academic library focus. The committees were tasked with compiling successful library programs, events, exhibits, and collections for veterans and service members. Each item became a toolkit entry, which included a

Women Veterans Throughout History

Description

A celebration of Women Veterans who have contributed to history. One can choose from the following:

- Photo gallery exhibit: an exhibit to display photos of women veterans who have contributed to history through their service in the Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Air Force, and Space Force. Recommended websites of photos are listed in the Additional Resources/Bibliography.
- Book display: a book display in the adult/young adult department (also during programs on a table) showcasing books regarding women veterans. Recommended books are listed in the Additional Resources/Bibliography.
- Friday film: every Friday showing a film regarding women veterans. Recommended movies are listed in the Additional Resources/Bibliography.
- Guest speaker(s): a woman veteran who would like to come in to discuss her experience in the military and her contributions. A woman veteran from your local community or Veterans Health Administration.
- Presentation: PowerPoint presentation (or Prezi, Visme, Zoho Show, Canva, etc.) to present about women veterans.

Audience

Figure 1. Screenshot featuring part of a toolkit entry.

description of the program and its timing, cost, strategic partners, and other tips for success. The entries can be be tagged with relevant terms for end-users to be able to browse the toolkit entries by library type, resource type, audience, or topic. An example of a toolkit entry is depicted in figure 1.

The toolkit committees developed more than 70 unique toolkit entries and forum attendees contributed additional submissions. Toolkit entries were aimed to support libraries with a range of resources, including entries such as Stony Brook University's Library Resources for Veteran Students LibGuide as well as robust, resource-intensive efforts such as the University of Toledo's Carl Joseph Commons and Reading Rooms. The toolkit also includes entries on a variety of topics such as exhibits (e.g., University of Illinois' Gold Star Illini Exhibit), orientations (e.g., Jacksonville University's Military and Veteran Library Orientation Video), and oral history (e.g., Duquesne University's Duquesne Veterans' Oral History Project). The purpose of the toolkit is to make it easier for library workers to come up with ideas for programming, collections, services, and policies that their library can implement to better serve their student veterans and service members. For this reason, each entry is Creative Commons licensed to facilitate reuse and modification.

Although the toolkit was initially seeded by the toolkit committees, it is intended to be a living repository of veteran-related programming. Since its launch, library employees from a variety of library types have submitted their work for inclusion. For example, Appalachian State University's recent submission, *Publicity Strategies for Library Services in the Student Veteran Lounge*, shares fun ideas for library promotion within the campus veteran center. If you have a successful initiative that you'd like to share, please use the link on the Libraries and Veterans National Forum website[9] to submit to the toolkit.

The Toolkit in Action

The Toolkit website has seen steady usage since its launch in November of 2021 with an average of 366 visits a month. Although the toolkit is particularly popular with public libraries, the three most commonly used resources are also well suited to academic libraries:

- Digital Resources for Veterans
- Honoring Military Service Display
- Cultural Competencies: Best Practice for Librarians Serving Veterans, Active Military and Military Families

These ideas can provide inspiration or a launching point for developing ideas, or they can serve as a road map for replicating an event in a new institutional context. In one local example of the latter, the Texas A&M University Libraries adapted an idea developed at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Libraries.[10] UNLV's Student Veteran Scholars Symposium, which spotlighted student veterans as researchers,

Figure 2. Screenshot of the toolkit homepage.

seemed a perfect fit for Texas A&M since many of the University's student veterans are graduate and professional students. Based upon this program idea, the Texas A&M University Libraries reached out to the campus Veteran Resource and Support Center about partnering on a similar research symposium. The inaugural Veteran Research Showcase was held March 31–April 6, 2023, in locations across the Texas A&M University campus.[11]

The ideas shared in the toolkit can be adapted and used in other library contexts. For example, the Whittier Public Library's Paint Night/Crafterhours could be used by an academic library, in partnership with the campus veterans organization, to do outreach to veterans groups. Similarly, Barr Memorial Library's "Soldier Stories: Writing Workshops for Active Duty, Veterans, and Military Affiliates"[12] could provide a model for a collaboration with the campus veteran center and creative writing program. With a little creativity, librarians can find programs they can adapt for just about any organizational context.

Conclusion

Although student veterans can be found on nearly every college and university campus, many libraries have yet to begin working with student veterans as a unique population. Because getting started with this work can be a challenge, experienced librarians from all types of libraries have come together to share their successful programs, exhibits, collections, and other resources. If you are thinking about building connections with student veterans on your campus, please visit the Libraries and Veterans Toolkit for ideas that might work well for your library. ✂

Notes

1. "Annual Benefits Report: Education," Veterans Benefits Administration, 2022, https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2022-education.pdf.
2. Sarah LeMire and Kristen Mulvihill, *Serving Those Who Served: Librarian's Guide to Working with Veteran and Military Communities* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017).
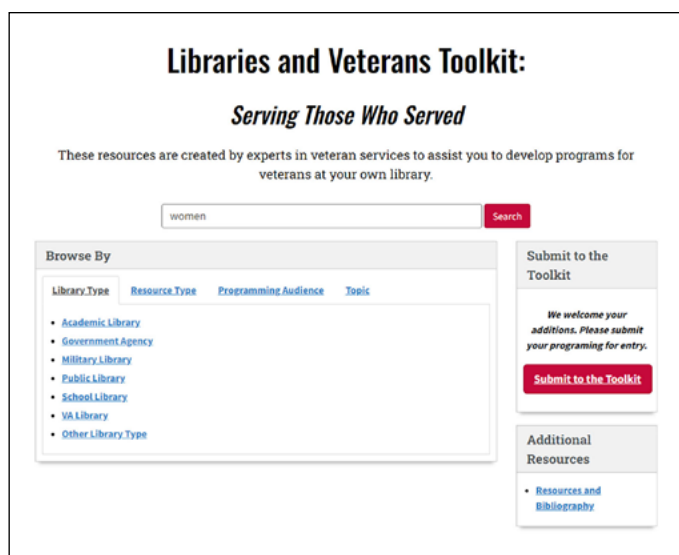
3.   Sarah LeMire, "Beyond Service: New Outreach Strategies to Reach Student Veterans" (paper presented at the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Indianapolis, IN, 2015), http://hdl.handle.net/11213/17834.

4.   Dani Molina and Andrew Morse, *Military-Connected Undergraduates: Exploring Differences Between National Guard, Reserve, Active Duty, and Veterans in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015), https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Military-Connected-Undergraduates.pdf.

5.   Lesley McBain, Young M. Kim, Bryan J. Cook, and Kathy M. Snead, *From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2012), https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/From-Soldier-to-Student-II-Assessing-Campus-Programs.pdf.

6.   Sarah LeMire, "Supporting our Troops: Library Services and Support for Veterans," *Public Services Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2017): 160.

7.   LeMire, "Supporting our Troops," 162.

8.   "Libraries and Veterans Toolkit: Serving Those Who Served," Libraries & Veterans National Forum, last updated November 11, 2022, https://veterans.libguides.com/home.

9.   "Libraries and Veterans Toolkit."

10.   Mark Lenker, "Collaborative Partnerships to host a Student Veteran Scholars Symposium" (lecture, Libraries and Veterans National Forum, September 23, 2021).

11.   Ashley Drake, "Veteran Research Showcase to Highlight the Research Efforts of Aggie Veterans," *Texas A&M Today,* https://tday.tamu.edu/2023/03/30/veteran-research-showcase-to-highlight-the-research-efforts-of-aggie-veterans/.

12.   "Soldier Stories: Writing Workshops for Active Duty, Veterans, and Military Affiliates," Libraries & Veterans National Forum, last updated January 25, 2022, https://veterans.libguides.com/c.php?g=1193509.

Acknowledgments