Welcoming Warriors Home & Veterans Embracing Transition (VET) Connect at SJSU

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Methods

- Blue Shield Foundation of CA funded a solicited proposal by Dr. Anne Demers & Dr. Elena Klaw to assess the needs of college student Veterans regarding having healthy relationships.
- Following IRB approval of the project, survey administered to online sample of 169 post 9/11 student Veterans on CA campuses who reported they were in a relationship.
- 131 male participants completed surveys. Ages ranged from 19-50, mean of 29.3. All branches.
The Welcoming Warriors Home Project was developed as a unique collaboration between the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.
On average, Vets did not report they were clinically anxious or depressed on standardized scales.

80% were satisfied with their relationship.

However, many reported experiencing “some” to “a huge amount” of symptoms of distress:

- 65% worrying too much about things
- 51% low energy or feeling slowed down
- 43% blaming self for things
- 39% feeling blue
- 39% loss of interest in things
- 34% scary thoughts and images
- 31% nervousness or shakiness
- 29% feeling trapped or caught
55% noted “moderate” to a “huge amount” of anger.
38% stated they were lonely.
36% reported problems in their relationship.
34% reported low social support.
26% no close friends.
68% insulted or swore at partner, 67% had shouted at partner, 12% threatened to hit or throw something at partner, 12% had grabbed their partner, 10% destroyed thing of partner’s.
Over 25% of male student vets endorsed beliefs related to domestic violence.
Confirmed IPV risk is associated with distress/substance abuse, hyper-masculine attitudes, and low social support.
Discussion group: Series of 7 meetings designed to support vets on campus, build healthy relationships, and to allow us to develop a program manual to disseminate to colleges nationally to support vets.

1. Transitioning Home
2. Dealing with Feelings
3. Healthy Relationships
4. Relationship Communication
5. Bringing it all Together
6. Masculinity and Getting Support
7. Happiness
Assessment

- Open-ended and standardized survey questions were used pre and post-sessions.
- Newsprint used to identify and record reactions to open-ended questions in discussions.
- Qualitative analyses by team to identify themes.
Strengths expressed by student veterans

- Really good at taking crap
- Learned to “suck it up”
- Highly skilled
- Professional
- Work well with other veterans
- Flexible
- Work well with structure
- Respect expertise
- Leaders

- More serious than other students
- Trivial stuff doesn't matter
- Discipline
- Focus
- Initiative
- Drive
- Effective communicators
- Done more in life than most people
Values expressed by student veterans

- Honor
- Courage
- Commitment
- Doing something bigger than yourself
- Protect, defend
- Being a hero
- Having an identity based on accomplishments
- Feeling useful
- Being part of society
- Being connected to others
- Job satisfaction
- Trust and respect as earned
Supports student vets identified as helpful

- Military friends
- Veteran Centers
- Faculty support
- Opportunities for accomplishment and service
- Veterans Student Organization (VSO)
- Media attention to Vet issues e.g. University Daily
- Getting information for/about student vets out
- University Counseling Center
- 12-step groups for addiction
Comments about the effects of the group fell into two main categories:

- Participants emphasized the value of support for student vets.
- Participants emphasized that they learned skills to help them have healthy relationships.
Support is available.
There are many issues regarding being a student and veteran. There’s a lot more going on than I realized.
I’m not alone and not the only person with similar feelings.
There are other people who feel like me.
There are resources available to help veterans who need help.
That I need help.
“What was most beneficial/what would you say to other veterans?” Wrap-up theme: Support

- Its a great opportunity to speak about your feelings and see how others have felt since leaving active duty.
- I would highly recommend to every veteran I know. I wish more veterans had access to similar opportunity.
- It let me know that I was not alone, explained the reasons behind some of the troubles that I’ve been having, and provided a safe environment to talk about my challenges as well as pointed towards helpful resources.
“How has your participation affected you?”
Wrap-up theme: Healthy relationships

- I have a better understanding of what a healthy relationship is and how to deal with someone in a relationship.
- I have learned new skills for creating a healthier relationship. I am better able to discuss the issues that bother [sic].
“Three most important things you have learned?”
Concluding theme: Support & healthy relationships go together

- Relationships are key to a healthy and happy life. Developing relationships is a skill that can be learned. Being a veteran adds an additional spin to how I relate to people, and what I can do to make it better.

- Self respect, optimism, value of a healthy relationship.

- Relationship communication, stress management, personal strengths and weaknesses.

- I am not the only one struggling with readjusting into society. I have been able to recognize some of the problems I had communicating.
Suggest college student vets felt “alone” “like no one cares,” “emotional,” ”frustrated” and that they do not get “respect” they are due.

Sense of culture shock and alienation is often experienced upon returning home.

Discussed how painful and difficult it is to shift from “warrior mindset” to focusing on others’ day to day concerns, for example those of classmates, partners, and family members.

Cultural differences between military and civilian life create unique barriers to succeeding in relationships and in school.
Vets discussed how difficult it is to express feelings and ask for help instead of “eating it.”
The group allowed participants to feel they are “not alone,” “some people care,” and to connect to counseling.
Provided an opportunity to take a “partner’s perspective.”
Showed Vets “The University is finally doing something.”
Conclusions from WWH Project

- Given that psychological distress (depression, PTSD, substance abuse) increases risk of drop-out, violence, and suicide, and many vets are not connected to services, outreach through discussion groups and workshops are essential.

- Risk for mental health problems, drop-out and partner violence, will be reduced by decreasing isolation, providing healthy coping skills, increasing self-esteem, and providing new ways to relate.

- Must address strongly held scripts and allow vets to honor their “warrior self” while helping them transition and build skills for success in college, work-world, and relationships.
Developed the Warriors at Home Class on transitioning home, to college, and to relationships.
In collaboration with Student Affairs, developed the VET Connect Peer Leadership Program allowing student Veterans to provide outreach and resources.
Worked with VSO to increase support and resources for students vets: Welcoming Warriors Home (WWH) Event, and ongoing one-shot workshops e.g. Happiness & Stress Management, Loving a Vet, Healthy Relationships, Adjustment to College.
In partnership with Blue Shield, our team conducted a professional development conference for college student personnel working with returning vets. Disseminated the manual created for WWH Discussion Groups.
Expanded collaboration across offices and divisions
Goals of the course

- To enhance veterans’ success in life post deployment/separation from the military, in having healthy relationships, and in college.
- To train Veterans to serve as peer leaders in helping other Veterans transition to college.
8 of 9 military students in the undergraduate course, Warriors at Home, completed open-ended assessments. Seven students were male, one was female.

**Procedures**
- Pre-test, early-semester, mid-semester, and post-test open-ended assessments were administered.

**Analyses**
- Responses were analyzed iteratively and recurring themes were identified by the researchers.
First Day of Class: Goals Expressed By Student Veterans

- 62.5% of the veteran students expressed the desire to learn about Campus Resources and the benefits provided to them.
  - *Gain knowledge in how to obtain and/or acquire tools to become more successful as a student.*

- 25% of the student veterans reported Emotional Stability as something they wanted to work on.
  - *I am still prone to aggressive behavior. I would like to change this*
Early Semester: Goals Expressed By Student Veterans

- 57% of the student veterans felt they would like to address and work on **Stressors** throughout the semester.
  - *It seems as if in the military I built endurance for high levels of stress, but cannot handle the least bit of stress.*
  - *My biggest problem with me is at worst I have a shutdown reaction when things become overwhelming.*

- 43% of the student veterans specifically reported wanting to address **Anger and Anxiety**.
  - *For me, stress brings anxiety and anxiety brings depression.*
  - *I unquestionably get anger quicker and tend to snap at the small things more often.*
87.5% of the student veterans felt this class had a Positive Effect.

- Honestly this class has also helped. It is always nice hearing that we are not alone and I believe our classmates will help each other achieve new goals.
- Definitely will help me move forward as a better person.
62.5% of the class reported this class benefitted their ability to engage in relationships, share about past, and learn more about PTSD.

- Helped me identify triggers
- It helped me to better understand and communicate in my personal relationships.
Veterans benefit from specific classes that pertain to transition issues and healthy relationships.

Students hoped to see the course offered as a GE so that it would “count.”

The Warriors at Home Class was most relevant to individuals who had been deployed, and needed to be modified to meet the needs of other military members and significant others.

Longitudinal studies of graduation rates, college engagement, and satisfaction in veterans who participate in vet specific programs vs. those that don’t is essential.
Implications

- Student vets are a unique population with many distinct risks and protective factors related to serving in a hierarchical, highly structured, high-threat, high-demand environment.
- Providing support for student vets is an obligation of Universities.
- Multiple forms of support in multiple contexts are needed.
- An ecological prevention approach is essential because it is non-pathologizing (no diagnosis needed), community-based and institutional.
- Provides culturally competent referrals and help accessing care, thus building connections within and beyond the University.
VET Connect Peer Leaders

- VET Connect Peer Leader Program grew out of the class. Currently funded by Lockheed Martin with support from both Academic and Student Affairs.
- Over the past the years VET Connect Peer leaders have served as interns with the Career Center, the Accessible Education Center, the Bridging Borders AmeriCorps Program, Undergraduate Studies, and the Center for Community Learning & Leadership to raise awareness and expand services, outreach to student Vets.
Current Directions: Accessible Education Center & Career Center

- Continue to expand services and outreach to Vets through dedicated Veteran liaisons that understand military culture and Vets’ unique assets and challenges.
- Informational video and pamphlets developed by student Veteran interns encourage Vets to connect to resources across the University.
A key effort of the Veterans’ Advisory Committee, an Office of Military and Veteran Student Services was established this year.

The office houses a full time certifying official who conducts programming and outreach in conjunction with the University’s VA VITAL Program.

Intent is to hire more staff to expand assessment, program and remove barriers to completion.

Will be housed in new Student Vet Center under construction.
In summary, none of us can do it alone. Although it isn’t easy (especially with scarce resources, and inevitable turnover) collaboration is essential to moving forward.

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