PERSPECTIVES ON

On the Front Lines: Serving Ohio's Best

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Presenters from a June, 2015 Academic Libraries of Ohio conference titled "Serving Our Veterans: A Call to Action" discuss the state of outreach and service to student veterans, students currently serving in the military, and military dependent students at their respective academic libraries.

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WHY VETERANS?

As Sarah LeMire, Texas A&M's First Year Experience and Outreach librarian, so ably explained in her 2015 ACRL presentation, a majority of academic libraries have lagged behind other campus entities in providing targeted outreach and support to the burgeoning number of military personnel, dependents, and veterans among the higher education student population. Aside from a handful of institutions located near military bases or medical facilities, few academic libraries have thus far made this underserved group a priority despite compelling evidence of the "positive correlation between library usage and student success" cited by LeMire (2015) and others. Note: there is more to come from LeMire in the chapter of a forthcoming Libraries Unlimited book with the working title *Serving those who served*: *Librarians' guide to working with military and veteran communities*.

Rather than a lack of interest in or empathy with challenges faced by student vets – except where the mandate to reach out to this group is obvious because of the large number of veterans or active military personnel or veterans' facilities located near college and university communities – libraries face real albeit not insurmountable barriers in extending service to this group.

- Needless to say, as the pool of traditional 18–24 year old students diminishes, the student bodies at four year institutions are beginning to display more of the diversity that 2-year institutions have long faced. Not surprisingly vets are not the most prominent subgroup among the diverse segments of the under-served student body at seats of higher learning: students of color; those with non-dominant sexual orientation; transfer students; older post-traditional students and other specialized groups outside the mainstream.

- Academic libraries strapped for staff have a difficult time spreading resources among all the opportunities emerging, as the role of academic librarians is changing from narrow specialties of practice defined strictly as instruction, reference, and cataloging to more of a collaborative model. The crux of the human resource issue is that every time the Provost/VPAA, who has been constrained by a focus on "right-sizing" all academic faculties in an extremely competitive higher education sphere, says "yes" to a library position request, s/he is turning down an equally compelling request for replacement or new faculty positions in an academic department.

- Sufficient staffing resources for adding new services to the universe of current responsibilities is far from assured except in the largest, most prestigious academic libraries, where the collaborative model of librarianship has spawned all manner of new titles and responsibilities. Examples include "informationists" with Ph.D. credentials charged with assisting researchers in the hard sciences (University of Cincinnati, 2015) and digital research specialists to collaborate in research of the "quantitative, qualitative, business, and spatial/GIS data" variety

(Georgia State University, 2015) responsible for facilitating access to and application of "big data". In such a fast-evolving higher education environment, what opportunities does the librarian in today's small-to-medium-sized institution choose? Setting priorities may be a matter of triage. In order to reach out to veterans, libraries must find a rationale justifying this new resource commitment and figure out how to incorporate a focus on vets into the portfolio of existing services.

- Characteristics of the majority of veterans and military students can make them a difficult group to reach, much less serve — primarily the facts that 1) unless they are using GI benefits or self-identify, they are not easily distinguished from other undergraduates; 2) they have been immersed in a culture where self-reliance and affiliation with a small team of comrades are the norm and asking for outside help or seeming needy is frowned upon; and 3) like other post-traditional students, vets often have outside jobs and/or family responsibilities that keep them from participating in many facets of the academic and cultural environment taken for granted by most traditional students and by those accustomed to working with this demographic group (Le Mire, 2015).

DIVERSITY WORKSHOP

One indication that the tide may be turning is the growing awareness in Ohio of the importance of outreach to veterans. This was brought into sharper focus at a 2015 Academic Library of Ohio Diversity Committee workshop titled *Serving Our Veterans*: *A Call to Action*.

Initial inspiration stemmed from legislation requiring all public colleges and universities in the state to provide high-quality academic and career counseling and other services for veterans. A quick search of most of the larger Ohio academic libraries' web sites conducted by members of the Diversity Committee of the Academic Library Association of Ohio (a state branch of the Association of College and Research Libraries) confirmed LeMire's contention that – for the most part – libraries lag behind other campus entities in providing services tailored to this growing segment of the student population. Accordingly, in 2015 the Diversity Committee planned and sponsored an all-day workshop focused on on-campus and remote library services for this population.

The call for proposals garnered a strong response from the library community. In order to include a range of experts in this field, organizers selected members of the Ohio Department of Higher Education's staff (formerly known as the Ohio Board of Regents) along with staff from college or university student affairs divisions to share their experience together with librarians with active or emerging outreach programs for student veterans.

Keynote speaker, Danny Eakins, Military and Policy Director of the Ohio Department of Veterans' Services, was followed by staff from Columbus State Community College Military & Veterans' Services and three presentations by librarians from Bowling Green State University, Miami University, and The University of Toledo respectively.

All 35 people who registered – ranging from staff at community college libraries to personnel from large research libraries – were in attendance at the workshop at Columbus State Community College. Most traveled over 100 miles to attend, with one attendee coming all the way from Urbana-Champaign. To facilitate a virtual community interested in continuing the conversation about focusing library services on veterans, a contact list of names and email addresses was distributed.

The workshop concluded with facilitated roundtable discussions about ways to provide services to this underserved population. Ideas for getting started included beginning conversations with other organizations on campus, becoming part of orientation for veterans, providing office hours in locations that work for student vets, and in some cases providing designated space for vets in the library. Several groups mentioned the need for the library to either conduct its own needs assessment or to work with existing veterans' support services on campus to collaborate in gathering information about the characteristics and needs of this population.

An obvious next step after analyzing survey results would be to tailor outreach efforts to address the unique demographics, lifestyles, and other factors critical to working effectively with veterans. Campus leadership and potential campus partners might provide insights as to how the library can fit into overall support of student veterans. Implementation of library support could be as simple as focusing existing programs on meeting the needs of this population (e.g. making presentations and library events accessible to distance students as well as those on-campus) or it might entail developing new library services and programming.

Focusing on outreach, strategies for effective marketing, and creating green zones (meaning identifying or creating physical locations in the library especially suitable for vets who may prefer a quiet, uncongested space with clear lines of sight, seating with a wall at one's back and so forth) were explored in roundtable discussions.

Workshop evaluations indicated that all attendees found the content of workshop sessions consistent with stated objectives. All rated presenters as both knowledgeable in content areas and clear in presentation techniques. Participants clearly gained both knowledge about this type of outreach and a sense of collegial support for doing so.

FEDERAL AND STATE SUPPORT

A first step for libraries is understanding resources available to current and former service members and their dependents. On most Ohio campuses this simply involves having contact information for a veterans' center or for various entities responsible for guiding prospective student veterans through the bureaucracy involved in identifying and qualifying for financial support and in completing admissions applications. Depending on the organizational effectiveness and visibility of such entities, however, the library may need to take a significant role in smoothing out such complicated and daunting processes.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

There are three major federal resources to support higher education for veterans, active military personnel, and dependents. First is the "8 Keys" program introduced by President Obama in late 2013 after a comprehensive team of education experts identified specific actions that post-secondary institutions can offer to help this student population transition from a military culture to the classroom. Site sponsors caution that – while colleges and universities listed on a screen linked from the home page have affirmed their commitment to these principles – no evaluation is offered of how effectively they have implemented the following suggestions and no endorsement is given or implied:

The 8 Keys

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)