

Virginia Sojdehei

Boots to books

Helping college student veterans through library outreach and engagement programs

Last year, I met a student named Clay, who is a focused, well-spoken, and resourceful college senior. He is majoring in psychology with plans to pursue a master's degree in social work. Clay is also a student veteran, who funds his education through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, with the express purpose of becoming a clinical social worker for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, assisting both veterans and their family members.¹ In the past year, I have had the opportunity to meet many other student veterans during my weekly library assistance sessions at the campus's Veteran Support Services Office (VSS). I have helped them with their library research needs and listened to many of their enlightening stories. Often, I sense a palpable camaraderie and mutual support system among them as they proceed through the next journey in their lives.

U.S. colleges and universities have witnessed a monumental increase in the number of veterans using their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, with numbers totaling 555,329 in 2011.² It is considered the best educational benefit package offered to veterans since World War II. An estimated 2 million veterans could take advantage of this benefit. It is designed to cover tuition and fees, an annual book stipend, and a monthly housing stipend. In recruiting for today's all-volunteer armed forces, this benefit has become a motivating factor for enlistment.³

My interest in this generation of veterans stems from having been the child of a WWII

veteran who used the GI Bill, a fellow college student of Vietnam veterans, and now as an educator for currently enrolled college veteran students. Last year, I attended a seminar that addressed the cultural and clinical concerns of student veterans, soon after which I contacted the campus director of veteran support services to discuss ways in which the libraries' outreach and engagement efforts could be designed to benefit our student veterans. First, we developed a pilot program for which I provide weekly library assistance in the VSS student lounge. Another project involved contacting academic and student services personnel across campus to discuss our various roles vis-à-vis student veterans. This networking effort was met with great enthusiasm, and has now led to scheduling a campus-wide discussion group.

The knowledge that I have gained through these endeavors is what led to a poster presentation at the 2012 ALA Annual Conference, which focused on the multifaceted challenges facing student veterans nationwide. During my poster session, I noticed two themes emerging from the conference attendees' comments. They voiced their appreciation for spotlighting a topic that calls for librarians to respond, and asked

Virginia Sojdehei is associate librarian at Indiana University-Bloomington Libraries, e-mail: sojdehei@indiana.edu

© 2013 Virginia Sojdehei

how they as librarians could assist student veterans with their academic needs.

Research in higher education has addressed the pressing need for campus faculty and student services departments to develop student veteran support mechanisms. For example, at Western Michigan University, their program entitled “System of Care” rests on two guiding principles: the importance of listening to the soldiers themselves, and for all student services units to be actively engaged with their student veterans’ educational and personal needs.⁴ Outlined in my poster were similar guiding principles that are specific to Indiana University-Bloomington. In addition to the libraries, they represent a growing network of providers who collaborate and assist student veterans. These include, but are not limited to, the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Counseling and Psychological Services, Disability Services for Students, First-Year Veteran’s Experience, Student Academic Center, and Writing Tutorial Services. A number of staff from these campus departments met in early 2013 and discussed services relative to student veterans.

For academic librarians, there are many ways to engage student veterans and foster a supportive environment. Listed below are just a few examples:

1. Faculty and staff education:

- Attend the university’s educational programs related to student veterans.
- Organize library staff development programs that describe and celebrate student veteran diversity.

2. Social media and Web sites:

- Promote the library’s services through social media and campus Web sites visited by student veterans, including: veteran support services and student veteran organizations.
- Promote the library’s Web site, and perhaps add a special welcome statement for student veterans.

3. Outreach and engagement:

- Identify student veteran-specific courses or workshops and offer to speak about the library’s services.

- Visit the campus student veteran office and offer specially designed library services, onsite and/or at the library.

- Establish a network among other campus academic and student services departments, and form a discussion or interest group.

- Circulate mobile devices that are programmed with apps specific to the academic and personal needs of student veterans.

- Create displays that commemorate national holidays, such as Veteran’s Day.

- Schedule a library open house or reception for student veterans.

I have used several of these outreach and engagement examples and received very positive feedback. For instance, last spring students enrolled in the First-Year Veteran’s Experience course met in the library for a specially scheduled evening class session that included a librarian’s introduction to the library Web site, followed by a library tour. The student veterans were visibly impressed by the extensive library services available to them. Whereas just months before, they were outfitted in military uniforms, that evening in the library, they looked like any other students with a backpack full of books. We are certain that as these student veterans make their way along the next pivotal journey, they realize that they are not alone in their quest for knowledge.

Notes

1. Clayton G. McConnell interview with author in Bloomington, Indiana, November 17, 2012.

2. “Veterans Benefits Administration Annual Benefits Report, 2011,” www.vba.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/2011_abr.pdf (accessed October 9, 2013).

3. Elizabeth O’Herrin, “Enhancing Veteran Success in Higher Education,” *Peer Review*, no. 1 (2011): 15–18.

4. Tracey L. Moon and Geraldine A. Schma, “A Proactive Approach to Serving Military and Veteran Students,” *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 153 (2011): 53–60. *✍*