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Campus Collaboration at the University of San Diego for Student Veterans

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Abstract

The purpose of my research was to help provide better resources for student veterans during their experience in higher education at the University of San Diego (USD). My research question was: how can I collaborate with campus partners in creating a central hub for the Military and Veterans Program at the University of San Diego. This was important because as a student veteran there are multiple obstacles to overcome while learning how to be integrated back into civilian life. I looked specifically at student veterans as they have particular characteristics that may differ from other military-connected students on campus, such as dependents. Through focus groups and interviews, I found that student veterans are asking for more shared knowledge across campus and resources to support them holistically. I have learned by creating the Military Connected Hub, this has allowed for more folks on campus to better serve student veterans.

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Introduction

Teamwork, collaboration, leadership, open-mindedness, and resilience are the values that I wish to operate with, as they have been salient to my identity as a student veteran, mother and woman. I have had to be adaptable given my many identities which I hold. I struggled when I first got to USD, academically, socially, and mentally. I failed to find a sense of belonging and as a result, I learned that I needed to be more open-minded, in order to be successful, I needed to let others in if I wanted to learn. This has added to my research in seeking collaborations for student veterans across campus, as there has been a steady increase in the veteran population over the past three years. My intention going into this research was to see how campus partners can help to contribute to the sense of belonging at USD by creating a central hub for student veterans.

I have experienced the culture at USD and see the benefits of having a supportive network in a holistic manner. I have also seen that through my experience I have had to reach out to campus partners for support and although they have been of help, I feel that veterans are hesitant to reach out and ask for help. Support is happening for veterans across campus, but they are often operating in silos and not being more collaborative.

I have seen how there are multiple areas on campus to help student veterans, yet there is not currently a central area in which the student veteran can access it. I also am aware of our location in reference to having an influx of veterans being in San Diego. Over the past five years the veteran population has increased enormously, therefore additional support is needed.

A one-stop shop where veterans can have access to resources on campus from Career Development, financial aid, veteran benefits, and alumni opportunities. The purpose of my study was to engage with student veterans, especially learn about their leadership

involvement on campus, and then develop additional resources to support them in a one-stop shop type of delivery.

Literature Review

There is no secret that veterans are a population of students that are non-traditional and require additional support that is not offered across all universities. As many students are finding themselves during this period in their lives, a student veteran has identities that have been shaped as a result of their military experience. Stratford (2012) touches on the importance of programming around veteran events and how there needs to be support from the institution. At the University of San Diego, the veteran population has grown, and there has been a great reorganization of student affairs to include the Military and Veterans Program.

Research by Zepke and Leach (2010) highlights ways to keep students engaged during their time in higher education. Both authors research is focused on adult learners, which is consistent for student veterans. The research indicates four main themes that must be maintained for students to be actively engaged. The first method was for the student to feel self-motivated, and in order for the process to happen, students need to feel as if they have personal resources to support them in their endeavors. The second method was creating meaningful relationships between students and professors. Third, was assuring that students felt supported on a larger scale, such as institutional support. Lastly, engagements were due to the demographics of the students and how the institution made them feel included. When students knew that they have support and resources, it was shown that their self-efficacy increased. Self-confidence in students is correlated to the support they have surrounding them while in higher education. By working in the community, students found a greater sense of belonging. Institutions need to have the ability to adapt to all types of students, including student veterans. As student veterans have a higher chance of having

employment off campus, the literature suggests that institutions be more proactive in adjusting their expectations to the student's needs and not the other way around. Efforts in the classroom and outside all contribute to how student veterans view themselves within higher education. Further literature speaks about the importance of programming and involvement for student veterans.

Dame's (2018) research speaks on her efforts to create accommodations for student veterans to study abroad, because under the GI Bill if the courses are not in their academic plan it cannot be funded under any veteran educational benefit. This is consistent with prior literature on making students feel that they are supported by the institution and have the same opportunities as any other student on campus.

There are multiple layers when it comes to student veterans and how they feel a sense of belonging at USD. Further literature by Summerlot et al. (2009) speaks on the topic of Student Veterans Organizations which stemmed from the increase of student veterans in higher education post World War II. The challenge as student veterans were seeking higher education, was how to have resources that were focused on their specific needs. Even as far back as World War II, there has been a need for veterans returning to school, to want to have others with relatable experiences around them. Student Veteran Organizations would emerge as veterans felt a closeness to those who could relate to their transition back into civilian and student life. The research speaks to how a campus can support veterans, and what that looks like. It was reported by Summerlot et al.(2009), that strong military supported schools were those that have policies in place specific to veterans.

Smock's (2017) notes that the University of San Diego is located in one of the poorest cities in San Diego and how the university has made an effort to create collaboration. The Linda

Vista community is vastly different from USD, from the physical appearance to the lack of fresh foods in the area. There are unavoidable socioeconomic polarities of Linda Vista and USD. In 2015 there was a group of students in Integral Leadership Theory course at USD (LEAD 550), that began community outreach to Bayside Community Center, up the street from USD. What came from this outreach was USD establishing themselves as an anchor institution in 2015. Being an anchor institution, a partnership is developed between the Linda Vista community and USD in creating accessibility through on campus tours and partnering events. The objective was to utilize the Changemaker Hub as a means for outreach opportunities to the local community. The current president of USD played a huge part in implementing *Envisioning 2024* a strategic plan that is in alignment with six pathways outlined on the USD website (2016). As a result, there has been a strive for more diversity at USD, which includes more veterans (Appendix A). This concept is grounded in USD being an anchor institution and utilizing access, support, and connection in an effort to have more military/veteran presence on campus.

Greenberg's (2004) research speaks on the history of the GI Bill and its impact on higher education. Before WWII, colleges in the United States had an elitist group of students which were predominately white and there were restrictions on the acceptance of married students. Veterans during this period were thought of as uneducated and lacked job experience. Post-WWII, veterans were returning home and in search of higher education, and now the access component was provided. The majority of veterans who benefited were lower/ middle class and older. This was a great opportunity to add more diversity into higher education as well as giving those marginalized groups more holistic support. The number of veterans who were enrolled in higher education after the war made up almost 50% who were enrolled during 1947.

Veterans within higher education have been increasing across the country. Vacchi's (2012) research looks at the reasons why there has been such an influx of student veterans in higher education post-2012. The improved veteran's benefit (VA) known as the Post 9/11 GI Bill was first utilized in 2012, therefore universities are having to learn the new processes and procedures. In addition to learning about their VA benefits, there are also the obstacles of helping the student veterans adapt to student life and civilian life as it relates to higher education.

Herrmann et. al. (2008) speaks about the changes that were made to improve the veteran educational benefits and how the American culture of higher education looks a lot different in comparison to the Vietnam War Era. The student veterans have very different lives of the "traditional student," which as expressed, are not always addressed effectively by the university. Components such as financial aid awards and the process of how their tuition is paid for is not consistent across institutions of higher education. Student veterans are also faced with challenges when they enter the classroom as a professor's lecture on the military that can sometimes create an unwelcoming environment for the student veteran.

Hawn's (2011) research, like many who study post-2008, placed emphasis on student veterans and military spouses/dependents, because of the increase of those student groups in higher education. Hawn's research is focused on how those students interact in the classroom, and what qualities are brought to it, such as how they take up leadership. The research has shown that when student veterans are able to speak on their experiences and stories, this decreases the feeling of isolation that many student veterans report. The isolation may be a cause of feeling disconnected which has shown to be present amongst civilians and veterans. The authors discuss assumptions made about veterans and the stereotypes which follow. Hawn (2014) notes that institutions of higher education are doing a disservice to veterans if they are not addressing

challenges that arise. A large challenge outside of the classroom that is often of concern for

student veterans are their Veteran Affairs Educational Benefits.

　　　　Stratford's (2005) research focuses on the policies that the Obama administration put into

place as additional checks and balances for institutions of higher education. The "Principles of

Excellence" was the name of policies that were sent out to institutions across the United States to

keep them accountable. The institutions serving veterans were required to confirm and sign off

that they would be abiding by those rules and standards. Because there was no clear explanation

on the policies, many institutions did not sign the bill and were at risk of being non-compliant.

There were schools that made good arguments for reasons why they could not sign the bill as

they did not address all veterans coming in, and there was a sense that the educational benefits

were one size fits all. Many did not want to sign the bill because it was not applicable to their

institution even if they were operating ethically and with integrity. The list that included all

schools who signed the policies was an attempt to preserve integrity across institutions, but fell

short because of the opportunity for predatory institutions to go unnoticed.

　　　　This article is important and applicable to my research as it highlights all the small and

hidden details that go into play when a veteran enters higher education. The importance of a

central hub at institutions is crucial when it comes to student veterans as they learn how to

navigate through higher education. Another area that can be difficult when learning about student

veterans is conducting research from a place of empathy and not from a deficit model. There

have been some predatory practices from external organizations to paint stereotypes of veterans

that are not reflective of individuals but instead generalizations.

　　　　I have learned that it's difficult to find much literature that supports veterans in a positive

light. I found that the lack of scholarship related to veterans in higher education is data within

itself and only highlights my objective to continue to study the veteran population. Throughout

my research, I made adjustments to identify the topics that are in alignment with the qualities

that veterans hold. Some of these topics I explored were: older students in higher education, first

generation, commuter students, and aspects of identity development within student veterans.

Some of these topics may or may not be addressed through the lens of higher education. I wanted

to find out if there is a better way to approach having the Military and Veterans Center as a

central hub where information across campus can funnel through. In addition, I wanted to see

what the University of San Diego could do about reaching out to the San Diego Community to

better recruit student veterans for USD.

Gosen (2018) research speaks on the importance of *Envisioning 2024* in relationship to

creating connections with students and the community. Gosen (2018) mentions experiential

learning and the learning that happens outside the classroom. Intentionality in the way subjects

are taught and to adapting to the student by not having a cookie cutter approach. I have seen the

same support happen as an undergraduate student at USD and felt that my needs were being met.

My partnership with the Military and Veterans Program has allowed me to connect with their

Director, and hear how she has approached programming with few resources and large

outcomes. Intentionality has been the main focus, and research by Wlodkowski (2003) touches

on the methods of keeping students motivated, such as, creating an inclusive environment for the

students, developing positive attitudes, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. For

me intentionality has more focus on the content and who the target audience is and having clear

outcomes to meet. When I was tasked with coordinating a graduation celebration in May 2018,

all four of these pillars happened organically for me, and I later found out this was the focus of

the MVP all along.

I find the research conducted around a sense of belonging and adult learners applicable to the Military and Veterans program because there is a need for better access to USD from veterans who are transitioning out of the military. In addition, the close proximity of USD in regards to many military bases in the area, made this a feasible goal.

Research Question

How can I work in collaboration with campus partners at the University of San Diego in creating a military connected hub?

Context

My personal experience as a student veteran at the University of San Diego has allowed me to reflect on my experiences. I have experienced the transition from being in the military to being a civilian within higher education. As an undergraduate, I worked in the Military and Veterans Center where I was able to refer student veterans to the resources that they needed. My current role as a graduate assistant working in Student Activities and Involvement at the University of San Diego has allowed me to see the importance of campus involvement. Kreig (2018) speaks on how the physical makeup of a space can then transcend into how a student feels a sense of belonging. This is important because through the lens of the student veteran, having the Military and Veterans Center can help fulfill that sense of belonging at the University of San Diego. I have experienced having to reshape my identity as it shows up in higher education on top of navigating being a student veteran. This is very unique to the student veteran experience which is why it's critical that student veterans have the correct resources available to them.

The Veterans Center at the University of San Diego opened up in 2014 where it consisted of two staff members, a program coordinator and a Veteran Affairs Certifying Official. Knelman's (2010) research speaks about a similar challenge that her program experienced as the

opening of the new commuter space at USD. The biggest challenge was that the center failed to

define the intentionality of the space. Many resources and staff were put into the center, but it

was not operating effectively as expressed in the literature. Examples of this were student

workers not having clear guidance on their role, or the objective of their position to be able to

assist the needs of the students within the space. Once students finally saw this space as a place

of comfort, there was now the obstacle of how they would find a sense of belonging on campus

being a commuter student. The biggest takeaway was how the student coordinators can build up

their leadership skills to be able to help commuter students more effectively. I find the research

applicable to my own because the Veterans Centers went through similar changes when they

opened up in 2014, as they had to adapt to the increasing number of student veterans attending

USD.

In 2014, the Veterans Center opened, I was discharged from the United States Navy and

transferred to USD. I had the opportunity to utilize the space and make connections, that for me

made all the difference in my experience at USD. I was able to see the Veterans Center transform

into what is now the Military and Veterans Program. The name change is reflective of the

inclusivity and impact that language has on a space. The renaming is not only inclusive to

student veterans but military-affiliated students as well. My research includes the Military and

Veterans Program, but my focus will be in reference to veterans, as they vary from all military-

connected students such as dependents, spouses, and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

Many of the critical points such as Veterans Benefits, Financial Aid, and education will be vastly

different from these groups as many of these students are considered traditional. As this program

has grown in the past years, the focus for the program has shifted. The once Veterans Center sat

under enrollment services and last year the Military and Veterans Program got shifted under

Student Affairs. This shift from enrollment services to Student Affairs has meant a shift of outcomes and expectations.

Currently, the Veterans Center is located in the Hahn University Center which is central to USD and includes the Director of the Military and Veterans Program and the Assistant Director for Military and Veteran Services and Compliance. The Institutional Research and Planning reported from 2019-2020 that the military and veteran population makes up 9% of the USD population (Appendix B). The Military and Veterans Program supports this growing population through various professional development programming, educational benefit support, and through their transition into USD. In 2019-2020, the Military and Veterans Program served 409 graduate students and 410 undergraduate students. Out of these students, there are 69% men and 31% women.

For my research, I looked at campus partners which consisted of administrators, faculty members, staff, and students at USD. The University of San Diego is unique to student veterans as it's a private Catholic institution that is predominately white, and has more traditional students than transfers. As a student who attended a junior college, many academic counselors tried connecting me to other institutions in San Diego, such as San Diego State University and University of California, but never USD. I feel that there is a lack of knowledge that USD is a possibility for student veterans. I am a student veteran who has faced the difficulties of transitioning from the military to higher education. In addition to the transition, I've had to relearn a lot of identity development because mine was shaped by the military. I have also had the opportunity to attend classes at USD and have experiences to draw on when it comes to the veteran experience at the University of San Diego. My positive experiences at USD have been influential in my interest on the topic of veteran involvement. I have experienced first-hand the

importance of a liberal institution and its inclusivity towards student veterans. Ultimately, this topic is important to me because I have seen the potential that student veterans hold. Challenges that I have encountered through my experience during action research are my own personal biases, as I am a veteran. I have continued to engage with the student veterans that I am associated with because we share the commonality of being student veterans and having similar stories. I want to keep the dialogue organic to ensure proper representation of this population.

Needs Assessment

I established that a need was present because I felt the difficulties of being a student veteran who also identifies as a first-generation college student. I was unable to find support for financial aid because every time I would explain my situation they would process it as a traditional student and I had to return to campus on many occasions to provide additional documentation and proof. I was contacted by account services at USD informing me that if my tuition was not paid I would be charged a late fee. This was very confusing as I was utilizing my educational benefits and was unaware there would be a delay. In addition to other areas when I transferred to the University of San Diego. I also faced difficulties in misinformation of staff members as I had to go from building to building in search for a clear answer. A big area that I wished I had more support in was when I was registering for classes. I am a first generation student who at the time had not been in school for 5 years, so I was unaware of how many credits I should be taking. The academic advising support was not what I was expecting. I ended up taking on too many classes and later had to drop some because I was unable to take the workload. I would later find through my research that veterans transitioning to USD were still experiencing the same concerns and difficulties.

Under the supervision of the Director for MVP, I was able to work through the summer to help establish a military connected hub in the city of San Diego where there is such a high concentration of veterans because of the many military installations. I reviewed preexisting data that was collected through surveys, during the time the Veterans Center was under Enrollment Services. For the pre-existing data, the permission was granted to create an assessment for Student Affairs and the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES). Funding was later distributed through a grant from SOLES for the military connected hub and was passed onto the Military and Veterans Center to put into action. What this meant for the Military and Veterans Program was they were able to employ a graduate assistant to take on the new project. I was then offered the position to work with the Military and Veterans Program to aid in the military connected hub.

Anticipated outcomes that I had initially going into the research were to find more effective ways that student veterans can have access to information that was applicable to them across campus. There has been great programming happening across campus, but finding a direct way to funnel the information was what I hoped to create. I anticipated that students wanted more streamlined access to financial aid, academic advising, and career opportunities.

Methodology

The method that I chose was O'Leary (2007). The model focuses on observing and collecting data, reflecting on the data found, planning, and then implementing a strategic plan from the data collected (Appendix C). I really align my values with this model and how it is set up because it has allowed me to work collaboratively with campus partners. I have also found through my experience in higher education that reflection has been a crucial turning point in my learning and understanding. Action research is relevant for this topic because of the many pieces

that make up how student veterans are integrated into higher education. This is important because it provides an improvement on different levels, one helping the student veteran through their experience and two, to improve how campus partners can support student veterans holistically.

The strengths of this research are that I have made connections through my time at USD, and I am familiar with the culture. Culture of care is what USD calls it, and that means the university is committed to inclusion of all students and the backgrounds they come from. Challenges that I had with the research was that it's not my full-time position at USD. I was initially granted specific hours with the military and veterans program, but was only able to continue with the hours through the summer in 2019. Because of this limited time that I had in the official role, I was very limited when it came to my cycles and had to complete a lot of my research outside of my main assistantship.

Overview of Cycles

I began with a pre-cycle that included an analysis of previously collected surveys and I had three additional cycles, which consisted of cycle I being the observations, cycle II was individual interviews, and cycle III was a focus group. In the first cycle, I observed a holiday celebration for the Military and Veterans Center. The participants of this were staff, administrators, students, and their families. The goal was to observe how the veteran community interacted with one another and to find participants that would be interested in participating in my second cycle. I conducted the second cycle which consisted of having a focus group where student veterans could speak about their experiences with the resources at the University of San Diego. All data collected and reported for the second cycle have pseudonyms to protect the identities of student veterans.

During the final cycle I conducted interviews with campus partners. The interview was to hear about their involvement with student veterans. I initially had the goal of interviewing five different campus partners from prominent areas on campus and ended up with four. The participants were Cynthia Avery, Assistant Vice President of Student Life, Tom Herrinton, Vice Provost, Kacy Hayes, Assistant Dean of Graduate Programs, and Nelson Chase, Assistant Director for Military and Veterans Services and Compliance.

Pre-Cycle

The military and veterans program has not always been under Student Affairs, previously it was under Enrollment Services. Through this transition, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning administered surveys to military connected students. The survey was completed by 327 of the invited 784 students, of whom 156 are undergraduate students. The overall survey response rate is 41.7%. Of the 156 undergraduate student respondents, 15 respondents were women veterans, 28 were combat veterans, and seven were retirees. Six survey respondents identify as LGBTQ+ and 53 survey respondents are first-generation college students. The undergraduate student respondents are representative of the military-connected undergraduate student population in terms of race/ethnicity. However, women are somewhat overrepresented in the survey respondent group.

Big takeaways from the surveys that reinforced the support needed for veterans, were veterans not finding a sense of belonging, highly utilizing the Veterans Center/VA representative in the space, and not feeling as prepared for their transition into USD in comparison to their non-veteran counterparts. Respondents who serve/have served in the military have a higher level of agreement that they are more comfortable being around military-connected students than those who have no military connection (University of San Diego Institutional Research and Planning,

2019). Some of my initial reactions to the data was how many student veterans were first

generation college students. Another area I found interesting was the number of students that

identified as LGBTQ+ . Since working in student affairs I find this interesting in the connection

of intersectionality and how the veteran identity and queer identity cross. Lastly, because most

student veterans are transfer students, I am interested to see how the Military Connected Hub

will be in support of the transfer process at USD.

Cycle I

I attended a holiday party hosted by the Military and Veterans Center and collaborated

with the Student Veterans Organization. I choose to make observations of veterans celebrating a

holiday party. Through my interactions, I was able to see more families and students who are

non-traditional. I remember my personal reactions about having my own family there. So often at

other events on campus, I felt a sense of anxiety, but I didn't feel that in this space and around

these particular groups of students. I observed organic connections and student veterans sharing

jokes and laughing with one another. I also observed the Director of MVP volunteering to hold a

baby so another student could eat. There was a feeling of home and trust as I saw the woman

make no hesitation to take the helping hand that was given. Through those connections of

families, my daughter made three new friends and as they started to run around I found myself

wanting to tell her to stop, as I might amongst other companies, but held off. I wondered if other

veterans who also share the role of being a parent in that space felt similar feelings as I did. What

I also observed from the holiday party was sharing small achievements amongst others and

reciprocating with such excitement.

In summary what I learned from the cycle I ,was how student veterans were their

authentic selves in a space that allowed them to do so. This cycle informed my next one because

it gave me further insight into the veteran identity and I realized that being a student veteran is only one of their many other identities they hold.

Cycle II

The second cycle was a formal focus group made up of student veterans who frequent the space of the military and veterans center. There were four veterans, whose names have been changed for anonymity, in the focus group. Their pseudonyms are Daniel Brown, James Smith, Matthew Jones, and William Garcia. The objective was to create dialogue around the eight questions that I was asking (Appendix D), that covered areas such as their transition into USD, their higher education experience, and branch of service. All four students who participated were undergraduate students who were either in the engineering program or the business program. This was a random sample, and I had not intended to select these two areas of study only, but the group had a great deal of conversation with the questions I asked and I later addressed the areas of study. My role during the focus group was to be the moderator and to ask the questions. I was aware of my own identities as a woman veteran and also knowing that I may have seen me as a person with authority in my role as a graduate student. I began this cycle by having veterans explain their higher education experience if any, and then moved onto how their transition into USD went. I intentionally left these questions vague and didn't attach "veterans" into the questions, however being a veteran came up in their responses.

Two themes emerged from the focus group: veterans not having an adequate educational plan, and the way student veterans learned about USD. Several of the participants spoke about not having an adequate educational plan that reflected their identity of being a veteran. Many student veterans need additional support when it comes to academic advising because there are time limits on the duration of their educational benefits. " You only have so much time", was the

response by Smith. A student veterans has only 36 months of educational benefits that are

allotted to them , so it's a very strategic process to ensure the graduate on time. One of the

campus partners I spoke with later confirmed this as being one of the most difficult challenges

for the student veteran.

The second finding from the focus group was how student veterans found out about USD.

It's important to first recognize that almost all veterans who attend USD have transferred from a

community college prior to attending USD. That being said, Jones mentioned that he had heard

about USD, while attending Mesa College, by word of mouth from another veteran. This

statement is important to note in this research for a couple of reasons. One, how is the University

of San Diego creating outreach opportunities for veterans in the city of San Diego where there is

such a high concentration of veterans, and two, is a private university such as USD actually

financially feasible for veterans in San Diego.

Jones transferred into USD in 2015 and graduated this past year. He significantly

mentioned the difficulty of being a first generation college student and how there was not a lot of

guidance coming into USD when it came to planning out his academic schedule. He said, "to

navigate the system should have not been the difficult part." I sensed a lot of frustration from

Jones and know that I shared similar feelings during my time as an undergraduate student.

Brown, who is a more recent student veteran who came to USD in 2017, shared a

different transfer experience. Brown transferred from Georgia with his family to attend USD. He

mentioned the difficulty of being a college student while serving in multiple roles, like being a

husband and father, however he also shared that the "staff has a lot to do with the experience."

What he meant by this was it's crucial for staff/administrator engagement for him to be

successful as a student. Two of the students spoke to how they found out about USD through word of mouth while they were attending a community college in San Diego.

Being an alumna from USD and student veteran I resonate with this statement. Veteran Educational Benefits such as the Post G.I Bill have a cap on the amount that's paid out to a university. The Department of Veteran Affairs has a program called the Yellow Ribbon Program which then covers the difference of tuition, provided that the university meets certain standards. Up until the beginning of this year (January 2020), USD placed a cap on the amount of yellow ribbon money, therefore having USD pick up the cost through need-based scholarships. I had to endure a lot of navigating to ensure that my benefits were coming in and my tuition was being paid and it became very complex. The takeaway that I think is important to acknowledge from all of this is how even when all educational benefits are maxed out, there is still a difference in the amount paid out and what's paid out of pocket. The idea to have to pay out of pocket can deter any veteran who recently transferred out of the military and cannot afford any additional costs. Through all these difficult times, USD has lifted the cap, meaning USD is now accessible for more student veterans. In addition to the educational cap being lifted, priority registration for student veterans got passed. What this does is allow student veterans to prioritize classes that are in alignment with their academic plan that's constricted to their 36 months of educational benefits.

In summary what I learned from cycle II was the needs for student veterans are complex and the need for specific areas such as academic planning and educational benefits, can be a deciding factor for the retention for student veterans at the University of San Diego. This led me to cycle III where I had the opportunity to ask campus partners the support their departments have for student veterans.

Cycle III

For the third cycle I interviewed four campus partners, Cynthia Avery, Assistant Vice President of Student Life, Tom Herrinton, Vice Provost, Kacy Hayes, Assistant Dean of Graduate Programs, and Nelson Chase, Assistant Director for Military and Veterans Services and Compliance. I selected these specific campus partners, because they were working in areas that I felt have been important to the student veteran experience. I had planned to interview additional administrators, but there were schedule conflicts. Yet, there are campus partners that I feel should still be acknowledged, such as: Vice President of Student Affairs, Director of Onestop Services Center, and the Senior Director of Career Development, but I was unable to capture an interview with them. I was glad to capture the four interviews and for each of them I went through a series of 12 questions about their interactions with student veterans on campus (Appendix E). The major findings that emerged from this cycle were how the student veterans the campus partners had come across held a level of leadership in their role as a student, financial resources, and improvement in academic planning.

My first interview was with the Assistant Dean of the Graduate Program and what makes this campus partner unique, is that she was the one who originally aided in the write up of the grant for the military connected. Hayes has had a lot of knowledge on the timeline of the Military and Veterans Center. The main themes that she spoke on was accessibility into USD and the financial implications. " How we could start blowing up the myths that USD is expensive, and therefore not attainable for the military". It's important to highlight this theme because it's one of the main pillars of the military connected hub that I helped to establish. The pillars are Access, Support, and Connect. The interview also highlighted how student veterans take up informal leadership throughout their roles while at USD. My main focus was the undergraduate

population and the Assistant Dean was from the graduate school, but much of the programming

that goes through her office is in alignment with the mission of the Military Connected Hub.

I later spoke to the Vice Provost, Tom Herrinton for undergraduate students and he was

able to share his experience with student veterans and the growth over the past ten years with this

particular population. He shared how in 2009 USD accepted the yellow ribbon program which as

a result brought in an influx of veterans. " I think it's important to recognize their unique

situation and the time pressures of how long the funding lasts". This piece is critical for student

veterans and is a huge component to making USD accessible while using veteran educational

benefits.

I was able to interview Cynthia Avery, Assistant Vice President of Student Life. This was

a great opportunity to hear her response from the lens of student affairs, since the Military and

Veterans Center had recently shifted from enrollment services to student affairs. She shared her

experience with the Military and Ally Program and how she has learned "not to paint them with

a broad brush". She expressed how the Military and Veterans Program falling under student

affairs has allowed her to learn more about the student veteran experience and apply it to

programming. "Heightened complexity of the nature of engagement when it comes to student

veterans" , was what she left me with. This helped to paint a clearer picture of how student

affairs goes about student engagement.

I interviewed the VA certifying official at USD , who is also an alumni from USD and an

Army veteran. Like the previous campus partner, he has had a variety of experience at USD

under different roles. He was able to speak on his involvement on campus when he was an

undergraduate student and how it was not veteran related. There was no center for veterans and

there was not a big population of student veterans on campus. As an administrator currently at

USD he mentions " There are a lot of areas on campus that are doing the same work for student veterans…we have been trying to make everything under one central area". This was a great interview and a campus partner that I know is working directly with student veterans.

In summary, themes that I pulled from the interviews with campus partners was leadership that seemed innate to the student veteran, student veteran experience is unique, USD is affordable for veterans, and the veteran population would benefit by having a Military Connected Hub at USD.

Limitations

I took on the role as a graduate assistant of Military Connected Hub during the summer of 2019, and I worked closely with the Director of the Military and Veterans Center. This was the biggest limitation that I had for doing this research, because this was not my main area of work, despite my interest in the topic. My main and formal role on campus was as a Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement which falls under the department of Student Affairs. I mentored student leaders and supervised six student employees all with the objective of getting involved on campus and finding a sense of belonging. For my position as Graduate Assistant for Student Activities and Involvement, there is a lot of preparation and planning that takes place prior to the fall semester, so I had a very strict timeline with both positions. Nevertheless, I had the opportunity to work formally in the position for the summer 2019 and informally during the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 academic year.

Laura Folsom took on the role or the Graduate Assistant for the Military Connected Hub and I was fortunate to have been a part of the hiring process. Laura Folsom is a student veteran and served four years in the United States Navy. Through discussion, we began to talk about our transition out of the military and how it was such a difficult time. Specifically, there is a period

of trying to figure out who you are. Folsom says "Some people can really struggle and some can thrive". I feel that during my experience, I faced both. Conversations such as these opened my eyes on information that I was missing for research. I realized that my lack of an informal role as the Graduate Assistant for Military Connected Hub limited my access to participants and information.

In addition to the limitations of transition out of the military, we are now faced with Covid-19 and having to press pause on this military connected hub to place the need for connection in the forefront. Where does the Military Connected Hub lie now and is there an even bigger need for connection with student veterans? I have had the opportunity to connect with the Director of Military and Veterans Center and the two biggest concerns that she has expressed as being priority are, student veterans finding employment and maintaining connections. For student veterans who have separated from the military, finding community at the University of San Diego has come with challenges, so not having that support system during Covid-19 can be detrimental for mental health in students.

Recommendations

As I reflect on the year I did this research, my main learning was to not be afraid to advocate for myself. Examples of this are speaking up if resources were not available and ensuring that I feel a sense of belonging on campus just as anyone else. The work that I do within higher education has allowed me to take all that I have learned and apply it to how I reach out to students and advise them. Redefining what it means to be a student veteran in higher education has been the foundation of my research, and this has helped me in my work as a soon to be practitioner within higher education. I am graduating and have had such a positive experience at

USD I feel it's only right to give back to USD. For me, this includes staying active with the

Alumni Veteran Network and always serving as a resource for students.

For the Military and Veterans Center, my recommendation would be to update the

Military and Ally training. This training has historically been offered for campus partners to

educate them on the student veteran experience. The Military and Veterans Program has recently

shifted their priorities as they have gone from enrollment services to student affairs. I think the

Military and Ally training should be reflective of the shift and including identity development.

My findings reflect this recommendation from the campus partners and what the student veterans

have expressed. There is so much potential that can be implemented. Based on the percentage of

LGBTQ+ identifying student veterans, there could be a lot to unpack in regards to their

positionality within higher education.

I was invited to attend the regional ten community college veterans meeting in February

that was located at San Diego Mesa College. This was a great opportunity to hear what other

community colleges were doing to support student veterans and I got to see the new

improvements that Mesa College has implemented. For example, they recently hired a wellness

person to work with veteran students. It's important that a wellness person, working specifically

with veterans so that there is an acknowledgment about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),

yet not assume that all veterans have PTSD. The director from Mesa College made sure to

highlight that there is a holistic approach and I think this would be a great thing to implement

into USD.

Lastly, there needs to be better communication/ academic transition from community

college to USD. USD is fairly young, but they are at a competitive advantage to recruit more

veterans considering the geographical location. The four students who participated in the focus

group, did not even know about USD and did not see it as being accessible to them. This is

important because USD is missing out on such a diverse population which is in line with the

mission of USD. In addition, the mission of being an anchor institution. The anchor institution is

what has shaped the one of the main pillars of the Military Connected Hub.

Conclusion

I began this research helping organize and solidify the objective for the Military

Connected Hub after being approved for a grant by the School of Leadership Education and

Sciences (SOLES). The Military Connected Hub is designed to serve as an external force and

catalyst for change (Appendix F). The model was later designed after I was out of the formal role

as the Graduate Assistant for Military Connected Hub by the Director of MVP and current

graduate assistant. The model explains the role MVP serves in the creation of the Military

connected Hub, because there was some uncertainty when I took on the project of the Military

Connected Hub the summer of 2019. As I came full circle, I was able to see how the support

given to the Military Connected Hub through the grant was written preemptively, without having

a clear objective. It was a great move in the right direction, but because there was not a clear

objective that reflected military connected folks, it delayed the application of the Military

Connected Hub.

As I reflect on the cycles of my research, I feel stuck with the dilemma of how to share

this knowledge with many administrators, staff, and faculty who are not aware that these needs

exist. USD has a great Military Advisory Board made up of various areas on campus such as,

financial aid, career development, and student affairs. Ultimately it seems like the information

being passed across campus is not consistent. When it comes to communication across veterans

there seems to be gaps of communication and are actually of a disservice to the students at the

University of San Diego. I have seen great strides at USD and how they stand by their mission statement of being a changemaker campus, but with areas that need to be adjusted with the growing population of student veterans.

I feel very strongly when it comes to the support that student veterans receive and I realize this is a bias that I hold, as I had to navigate through higher education as a student veteran. I often reflect on the adaptability that the military engrains into us and see how it has been a strength in my success. I have recently taken on a volunteer role as a director for the Alumni Veteran Network at USD and adaptability , collaboration, and teamwork is always the foundation that I operate from when working with current students.

This research has given me the opportunity to see how student veterans have different stories but shared experiences and simply need the space and support to share those stories. I have learned that my passions in exploring the veteran identity have been heightened. I cannot wait to see how this passion will shape my career focus in higher education.

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Appendix A
Envisioning 2024 Anchor Institution/Military Connected Hub

University of San Diego

Our Mission

The University of San Diego is a Roman Catholic institution committed to advancing academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse and inclusive community and preparing leaders who are dedicated to ethical conduct and compassionate service.

https://www.sandiego.edu/envisioning-2024/

MILITARY-CONNECTED HUB

Access
Support
Connect

Anchor Institution

Open the door for stronger military outreach and community partnerships through the development of united campus efforts: utilizing an interdisciplinary approach and maximizing on the expertise of the different schools, college, and departments, to educate the military population on higher education opportunities.

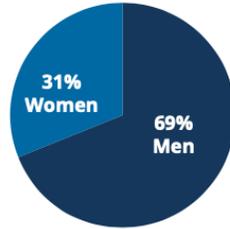Stay Connected with us @
military@sandiego.edu
https://www.sandiego.edu/military/

Appendix B
2019-2020 USD Military Student Statistics

2019-20 USD MILITARY STUDENT STATISTICS

MILITARY AFFILIATED STUDENTS BY GENDER

31% Women
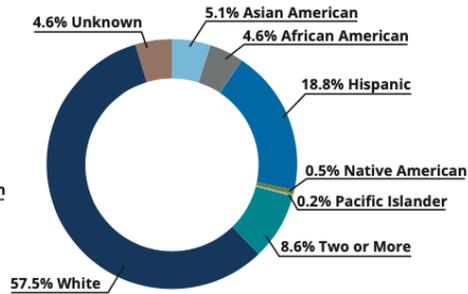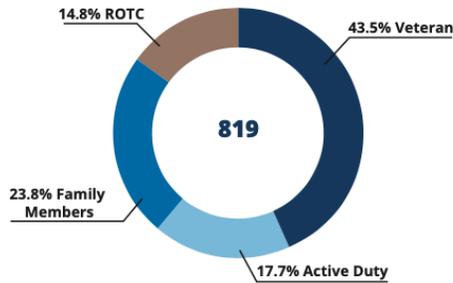69% Men

MILITARY AFFILIATED STUDENT POPULATION 9% (819)

Graduate and Law Students: **410**
Undergraduate Students: **409**

MILITARY AFFILITATED STUDENTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY

4.6% Unknown
5.1% Asian American
4.6% African American
18.8% Hispanic
0.5% Native American
0.2% Pacific Islander
8.6% Two or More
57.5% White

MILITARY AFFILIATED STUDENT POPULATION BY CATEGORY

14.8% ROTC
43.5% Veteran
819
23.8% Family Members
17.7% Active Duty

SUCCESS STATISTICS

Average USD GPA: **3.20**
Average Military Affiliated GPA: **3.03**

STATES AND US TERRITORIES OF ORIGIN

California	63%
Mid-Atlantic	8%
Southwest	7%
Midwest	7%
Northwest	6%
Southeast	4%
Northeast	2%
Non-Contiguous	1%
US Territories & Citizens Abroad	1%

Updated May 2020

Appendix C
O'Leary's Cycle of Research
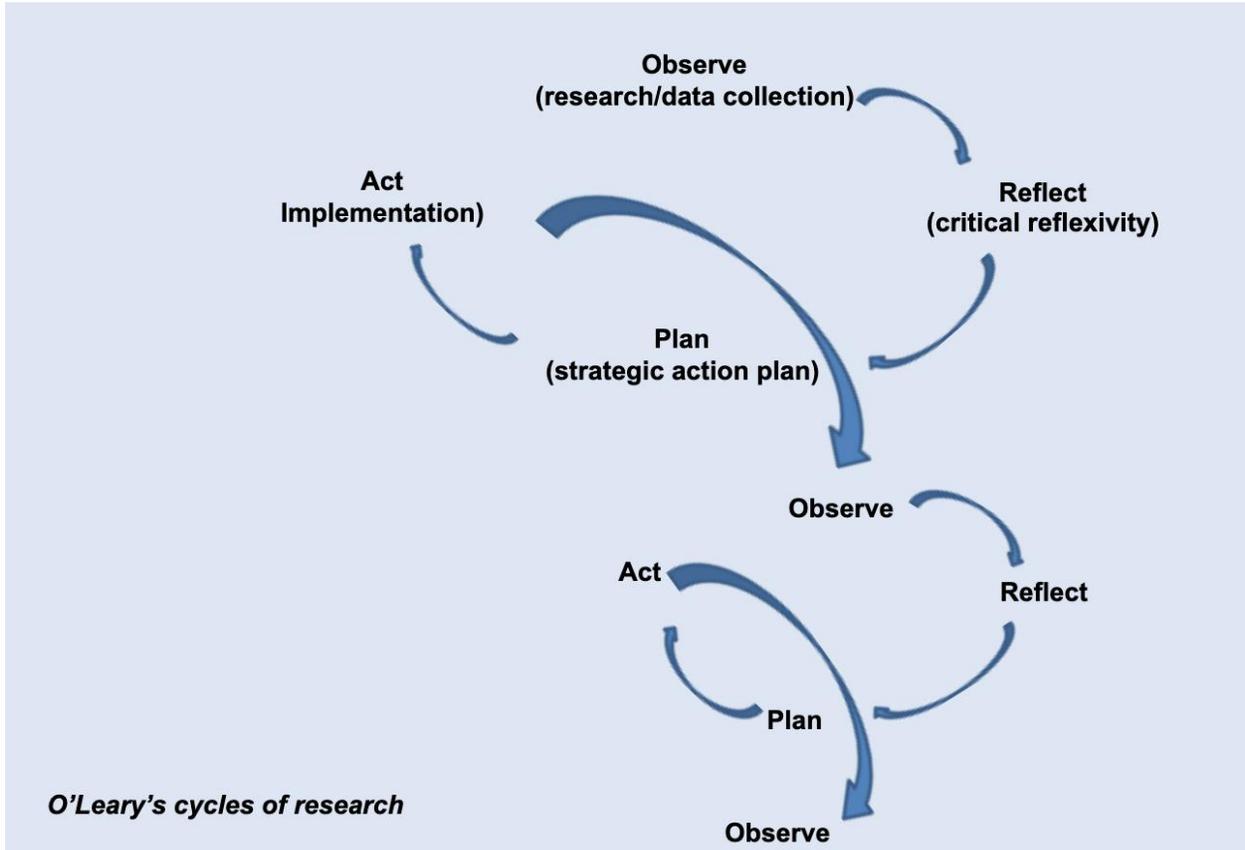
Appendix D
Focus Group Questions

1. Please give me your branch of service.
2. Tell me about your experience in higher education if any.
3. How did you come to decide to attend USD?
4. What about the university did you base your decision on?
5. How did you hear about USD?
6. What have been the biggest challenges for you at USD?
7. If you could give any advice to incoming student veterans, what would it be?
8. How would you describe your transition to USD?

Appendix E
Interview Questions

1. Can you give some background on your experience at USD?
2. How long have you worked at USD?
3. What programming do you have around student veterans?
Have you completed the military ally program, if so, what have you learned through your experience?
4. How do you see yourself applying what you learned in the workshop to how you interact with students?
5. Can you describe some of your interactions with student veterans?
6. What have been the biggest challenges in working with student veterans?
7. What has been the most rewarding part of your position while working at USD?
8. What are some of the perceived challenges of coming into higher ed?
9. What are the marketing strategies that you have used if any?
10. What are some key organizations/ areas that you have used to support student veterans?
11. When dealing with the veteran population, what have been challenges with working with this diverse community?

Appendix F
University of San Diego's Military-Connected Hub: A Catalyst for Change