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From Stigma to Standing: The Effects of Peer Leadership Participation on Student Veterans' Ideas About Self and Others

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Cover Page Footnote

Mentor: Dr. Elena Klaw This study was conducted in collaboration with Jemerson Diaz.



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Major:
Psychology

Mentor:
Dr. Elena Klaw

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Biography

As a first-generation college student, Sophia knew she was going to have to work hard to achieve the kind of success that she envisioned for herself. She was born and raised in Salinas California. She is one of six children in her nuclear family. Sophia is currently in her 4th year at SJSU and will graduate in the Fall of 2017 with a BA in Psychology. Sophia is currently working as an EOP mentor assisting first-generation, low-income, and educationally disadvantaged students with academic and personal support. Throughout her years at SJSU Sophia has also worked as a research assistant for Dr. Barrera, math tutor, EOP event planner, and Summer Bridge resident assistant, as well as a dance and gymnastics instructor. After graduation Sophia plans to continue her education in social psychology. In Fall 2017, Sophia plans to apply to seven Ph.D programs nationwide with mentors that focus on stereotypes, stigma, and minority populations. Sophia's biggest inspiration and purpose has been her family. All her hard work and achievements are dedicated to them.

***From Stigma to Standing: The Effects of Peer Leadership
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Abstract

The Veterans Embracing Transition (VET) Connect Peer Leadership Program is a University-based effort to assist student veterans in transitioning to campus and civilian life. Peer Leaders receive training to provide outreach to educate the campus community about the needs and perspectives of veterans (Klaw, Li, Avalos, & Diaz, 2016). As part of a larger project exploring the effects of VET Connect, exploratory findings in qualitative research indicate that through their participation in VET Connect student veterans gained a sense that civilians do indeed care (12, 92%) about veterans. Over half of the participants (8, 61%) reported changing ideas about themselves as veterans, seeing themselves at first as “not needing anybody” and then discovering that relationships were important to their sense of self. In their services as peer educators, these students discovered that they were not significantly different from other SJSU students as diverse and varied individuals. This study was conducted in collaboration with Jemerson Diaz. We worked on independent research questions and observations using data derived from the same larger study simultaneously under the supervision of Dr. Klaw.

Introduction

Currently, over one million veterans are receiving VA education benefits, known as the GI Bill, to pursue college diplomas, advanced degrees, or vocational training (Veteran Affairs, 2016). As the number of student veterans increases, colleges need to become more equipped to provide support services for this diverse population. One of the most predominate challenges veterans face according to Rumann & Hamrick (2010) is transitioning into a college environment. The reason many struggle to integrate is due to social barriers, such as not relating to civilian college students. In a college environment, it is probable that student veterans face challenges in having to interact with civilian students (Brookover, 1945). The American Council on Education reports (Radford,

2009) that 85% of college student veterans are at least 24 years old, and over 60% have a dependent spouse or child. Student veterans and traditional college students appear to have different lifestyles, which may be a part of the reason for differences in interests, social interactions, and interest in engaging with each other (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Difference in lifestyles may also lead to civilians and student veterans holding inaccurate ideas about each other.

This study was conducted in collaboration with Jemerson Diaz. We worked on independent research questions and observations using data derived from the same larger study simultaneously under the supervision of Dr. Klaw.

Civilians' Views of Veterans

For civilian students, understanding student veterans may be a challenging experience. In a study by Hawn (2011), the “culture gap” between civilian students and student veterans was analyzed in her classroom. Hawn was interested in viewing whether classroom interactions between civilian students and veteran students encouraged a greater understanding of each other’s differences. Hawn found that there is a difference between military culture and civilian culture, which is one of the reasons why this “culture gap” exists. According to Casey (2015), civilian students may have a difficult time accepting veterans into civilian society due to oversimplified views regarding the combat experience. Other studies also mentioned that civilians may have distorted views about violence perpetrated by veterans and may see military life as demoralizing (Casey, 2015). Another study by Brookover (1945) found that civilians often assume that veterans who integrate back into society experience serious issues with adjustment and mental disabilities.

Student Veterans Disconnect From Civilian Students

Student veterans are a unique set of students who have experiences that others may find difficult to understand (Jones, 2014). Nonmilitary students have not faced the same circumstances as military students, therefore there tends to be a social disconnect (ASHE Higher Education, 2011). Student veterans may feel that not many others share common experiences with them, thus resulting in a detachment in personal

relationships (ASHE Higher Education, 2011). According to Jones (2014), veterans had a challenging time reconnecting with civilian friends. In this study, feeling alone, overwhelmed, and having difficulty relating with other college students was a theme that arose. At times, the student population appears to have difficulty accepting what student veterans have experienced, thus creating social barriers. Some may view veterans as killers and as violent, which can cause difficulty when creating connections in an integrated college campus (Pentland & Rothman, 1982). One of the probable reasons for social disconnection is due to unique issues student veterans may be facing. According to U.S. Government Accountability Office (2013) veterans transitioning back home are more likely to face challenges related to relationships, legal issues, and substance abuse compared to nonmilitary students. It is common for veterans to feel that no one understands them; feelings of social isolation may lead to an increase in self-exclusion. As noted in Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009), some veterans state that they are no longer sociable people, and in addition, some report that their experiences in the military had hardened them. Student veterans also report having issues with anger, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental disorders, which can potentially increase social barriers between veteran students and nonveteran students (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Support Services

According to Radford (2009), data available from the 2007–2008 academic year shows that military-connected students or “military undergraduates” represent approximately 4% of undergraduate students nationwide. Despite the fact that military-associated students make up a significant part of the population, they are less likely to seek support services because seeking support is most commonly associated with signs of weakness (Bonar & Domenici 2011). It is vital to create outreach programs in order to form a social connection between student veterans and the college community. As noted in Bonar and Domenici (2011), outreach programs appear to be less common than those offered to African Americans, Latinos/as, International students, LGBTQ students, or students with body image concerns. Although outreach programs are not commonly offered for student veterans to the extent they are offered to other minority

groups, it is important that outreach programs are created and offered due to the vital support and difference they can make in a student veteran's college experience. As reported by Ford, Northrup, & Wiley (2009), it is often challenging to create opportunities to increase the educational success of military student veterans, but it is imperative to continue developing outreach programs. It appears that support programs can be effective in decreasing the social barriers college veterans face while attending a university (Ford, Northrup, Wiley, 2009). In addition, support programs can also assist student veterans in adjusting and being successful in a college environment (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009).

The Larger Project Veterans Embracing Transition (VET Connect)

The Veterans Embracing Transition (VET) Connect Peer Leadership Program is a university-based effort to assist student veterans in transitioning to campus and civilian life. Peer Leaders receive training to provide outreach to educate the campus community about the needs and perspectives of veterans. A qualitative study was conducted in order to analyze the ways in which the VET Program reduced participants' sense of isolation by connecting student veterans to university faculty and staff, to other student veterans, and to the general student population. Participants expressed that the VET Connect Program promoted self-growth and integration, allowing them to transition to campus and civilian life. Participants reported developing skills such as public speaking and improved knowledge of campus resources, as well as insight into their emotions. Participants also reported experiencing a renewed sense of purpose through participation in the VET Connect Program.

Veterans Embracing Transition (VET Connect) and the Current Study

The current study focused on analyzing the qualitative data derived from interviews with participants in the larger study in order to understand the ways in which VET Connect may assist student veterans in breaking down stereotypes others may have of them and stereotypes they may have of nonmilitary students.

Methods

Participants

Thirteen of the 22 students who served as VET Connect Peer Leaders responded to email requests to participate in a brief individual interview regarding the effects of the program. All interview participants were male. All branches of services were represented, with the exception of the Coast Guard. In terms of age, 38.4% of participants (5) were between 18 and 30, 30.7% (4) ranged from 31 to 40, 15.4% (2) reported their age between 41 and 50, and 15.4% (2) stated they were older than 50.

Procedures

VET Connect Peer Leaders conducted interviews. Six were conducted by phone and the rest in person. A semi-structured interview guide was used. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and identifying information was removed. Interview responses and data from the larger study were gathered to show broad benefits of the VET Connect program. The research team employed Grounded Theory, an iterative approach to analyzing qualitative data in order to identify primary themes.

Current Study

The current study explored the transcripts from the larger study to assess the extent to which participation in VET Connect challenged participants' ideas about themselves as veterans and their ideas about civilians.

Analysis

A research team consisting of three student veterans and the primary investigator analyzed transcript data iteratively through a Grounded Theory Approach to qualitative analyses (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Recurring themes and subthemes in the transcripts were identified by each of the researchers. Two of the student assistants counted the occurrence of each theme and subtheme in each transcript. Prototypical quotes were identified for each theme and subtheme.

Findings From Current Study

Quotes on Feeling “Heard” (P6, P8, P12, P15)

During the interview process, all 13 participants (100%) noted feeling “heard” as a result of conducting presentations as Peer Leaders. The participants expressed their sense of being heard in several forms by stating they enjoyed vocalizing their feelings: “It made me feel better about myself,” “It’s self-satisfying. Self-Pride,” “It made me feel seen.” Examples of interview responses are listed below:

“It... It made me a bit happier, because I was uh... ..I felt being part of a community besides being in my own head. I guess... seen ... it made me feel seen.”
(P15—Question 7)

“Um, I kind of feel like I was being heard, like they were acknowledging me.”
(P11—Question 12)

Quotes About Changed Ideas About Self As a Veteran (P1, P6, P8, P12)

Over half of the participants (61%) reported changed ideas about themselves as veterans, seeing themselves at first as “not needing anybody,” and then discovering that relationships were important to their sense of self. Participants (54%) noted that military values to “suck it up and drive on” were no longer adaptive. The participants vocalized their changed ideas in numerous ways: “It makes me feel that I am needed,” “It was actually therapeutic.” Examples of interview responses are listed below:

Not needing anybody

“At first I guess I was pretty dismissive about it; I didn’t know how I was going to feel at first talking about the issue, but at the end it was actually good.” (P6—Question 7)

“At first it made me feel pretty bad, because I mean the things and the emotions that I’ve repressed for a long time—they had to be talked about and when I do talk about it I would be drinking and that would make it worse. When I initially started talking about these things and vocalizing my feelings it made me feel pretty bad, but after a time it got easier and in the end it really helped me.” (P6—Question 7)

“Most veterans and guys in general don’t want to be put out there, you know, in a vulnerable position, especially if you got hurt in the past whatever kind of trauma that you’ve been through. But you got to be able to show them that you can break down some walls, you can show some personal things because if you cannot show this vulnerable side of you, it’s hard to experience the important things in life later on such as trust, love, care for another person. Otherwise you’re always in this protection mode where you want to keep people at bay, you always want to watch what people are doing, you’re always in this vigilance type of mode. And it’s kind of, we honestly don’t like that kind of mode all the time. Because it’s not always necessary; it might be necessary in some cases but it’s not always necessary in real life situations. Always be on guard ready to fight.” (P1—Question 9)

Suck it up and drive on

“I think that in the military in particular we’re taught that that’s not supposed to matter and you’re supposed to just brush it off and when you’re out and you’re not in the military anymore that doesn’t really apply, and I think it just shows that other people are going through it too and it’s ok to talk about stuff.” (P6—Question 7)

“Most veterans I’ve noticed are a bit shy to talk about certain things like that because it’s, um, because if they experience trauma in a battle or in a combat zone it’s more, it’s a lot of stuff most people wouldn’t want to talk about.” (P1—Question 7 and 8)

Quotes About Changed Ideas of Civilians (P1, P4, P5, P6, P12)

Thirteen of the participants (100%) reported changed ideas of civilian students. Participants (92%) reported gaining a sense that civilians do indeed care about veterans. Participants also indicated that veterans were not that different from civilian students. The participants vocalized their changed ideas in numerous forms such as, “I think it helped to broaden their perspective,” “I think it provoked interest,” “I think it really affected them.” Examples of interview responses are listed below:

Do indeed care

“My aha moments came when I connected with non-veterans through my artwork, where I was able to engage them where they were really touched and they were really moved by that.” (P4—Question 15)

“When I’m talking to these students it’s a totally unbiased opinion about it; they didn’t have anything to say, they didn’t have any bad opinion about it; they treated me like a family” (P6—Question 7)

More similarities than differences

“I think a lot more [students] were able to see that they also had certain similar experiences.” (P18—Question 11)

“I was speaking to the classes—I think it was a senior seminar psychology class—and there were no veterans in that class; well actually there was, I was a veteran in that class. But I was able to speak to the students and it really ... I feel like it gave them a different perspective, a new perspective on veteran problems because I wasn’t just a number or just case study; I was actually a student and for all intents and purposes could have been sitting next to them in class.” (P6—Question 11)

Implications

The current study demonstrated the positive effects VET Connect has on altering perceptions veterans might have of civilians and of other veterans. Participants expressed that the VET Connect program advocated stepping out of their comfort zone and getting to know others at the university. Participants reported that they gained others’ perspectives. Participants also reported having a renewed sense of understanding toward civilian students. Overall, the findings suggest that VET Connect may serve

as an impactful resource to student veterans in higher education as it contributes to an understanding of other students' perspectives. Increasing the understanding between student veterans and civilian students is vital because it may lead to meaningful relationships that will allow veterans to successfully integrate.

Limitations

Although the current study focused on the ways in which the Veterans Embracing Transition Program assists student veterans in breaking down stereotypes others may have of them and stereotypes they have of nonmilitary students, the information found in the current study was conducted from a larger qualitative study. The sub-data in the current study were collected from a broad set of data regarding the overall benefits student veterans gained from participating in VET Connect. The small sample size precludes generalization, but current findings suggest that research on the VET Connect Program provides insightful exploration of the true experiences of the student veterans interviewed.

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