Library Outreach to Veterans: Opportunities, Challenges, Examples

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Abstract
With more than 22 million veterans aged 18-90+ in the United States, there is tremendous need and opportunity for librarians to enhance outreach services to active and former servicemen and women and their dependents. This essay presents one library’s efforts to increase outreach to student veterans and their dependents between spring 2013 and spring 2016. The following is a detailed explanation of the process from inception to finish so that other librarians might repeat or adapt the experiences presented within.

Keywords: outreach; veterans; collection; repository

Introduction
Roughly 22 million veterans live in the United States. Many of those veterans served in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or the First Gulf War. Many millions more served in the United States or on bases around the world, even if they did not experience combat. And some 2 million served more than 3 million tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Committee, 2013, p. 17). There are significant numbers of veterans from every age group, and their information needs are just as varied as their life experiences. We might live and work with these veterans or their immediate kin. Maybe we witness barriers to service or other difficulties firsthand or hear about them around the water cooler. Before long, we notice inefficient services for veterans everywhere we look.

As a response to this, libraries provide great and much-needed service for veterans. This paper demonstrates the need for library outreach to veterans, identifies challenges and opportunities with this outreach, and provides an example of how one library has sought to better serve its veteran population. The following is the story of just one academic library, but the strategies and efforts presented can easily be adapted and successfully implemented by public libraries.

Demographics
Governors State University (GSU) is a public, four-year, comprehensive university with approximately 5,500 FTE students taking undergraduate and graduate courses on campus, online, and in hybrid settings. The physical campus is 35 miles due south of Chicago, Illinois; it serves a diverse student population and is a catalyst for growth and opportunity throughout the Chicago southland. The university
was founded in 1969 and until 2014 served as an upper-division and graduate-only school. When I joined the library faculty in 2011, the average student was 35 years old. The most recent data shows that during fall 2015 the university enrolled approximately 400 student veterans while as many as 42,000 veterans live in surrounding areas.

Community accessibility has long been central to GSU’s mission and nearby residents face few barriers to access the university. This is reflected in the University Library as well where we have a liberal and welcoming guest use policy. For many of our community users we closely resemble a public library. We are also a Federal and State Depository Library and we are required by law to provide the public with access to government information.

In 2008, the Post 9/11 GI Bill passed and significantly increased educational assistance for veterans. Recently, like many other universities, GSU has increased its efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate student veterans. These efforts require significant cross-campus participation, but the effort is worthwhile. In fall 2015 the Dean of Students proudly reported that *U.S. Veterans Magazine* had recognized GSU as a “Top Veteran-Friendly” school for student veterans. This is the backdrop against which our University Library has worked to enhance services to veterans.

**Beginnings**

I have an interest in veterans’ affairs. I have family that served, but I myself am not a veteran. I have found that this has not prohibited me, in anyway, from providing the best service I can to the most veterans possible. If you are a veteran, you certainly have valuable insight into veterans’ affairs that non-veterans do not. But I want emphasize that you do not need to be a veteran of the armed services to advocate for veterans.

I discovered my interest in outreach to veterans shortly after becoming a government documents librarian at a public library near Chicago. A woman I knew from a previous workplace had a college-aged son who returned from Iraq with considerable difficulty readjusting to civilian life. Tragically, he was found dead from exposure to the elements very early one morning. I decided I wanted to help and began investigating the most immediate ways I could contribute. My initial idea was to create some sort of resource for community veterans who might be experiencing the same difficulties as my colleague’s son.

I was new to the profession and the library’s constituency was large and tremendously diverse. Also, I was not working in any official outreach capacity. That library, at that time, was emphasizing outreach to children and young adults. I spent two years at the public library before I left for GSU in 2011. The move helped me focus my efforts and led to what I would now consider a blossoming relationship between our library and the veterans on campus and living nearby. While there is still work to do, and much of it is ongoing, the move to GSU afforded me the opportunity to progress toward my goal of establishing a veteran-specific resource in the library.
By fall 2012, I was looking to do something splashy in GSU’s library. I had a target population: student veterans. I had a defined outcome: increased library services to student veterans. I introduced myself to the campus Veterans Affairs Coordinator to gauge his interest and was pleased to find him eager to assist. Having a specific population and, even more, a defined outcome was invaluable as I sought opportunities to enhance services for student veterans.

I recommend identifying the specific needs of your veteran community by hosting an open house in the library, by soliciting individual responses from veterans, or by collaborating with veteran specific agencies (such as your local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter) where you can make introductions and/or encourage veteran participation. I would also stress being aware of what you and your colleagues do best so that you can identify which veterans you can best serve and how. Be bold, but respectful. Be responsive and unafraid to listen. Let the constituents you want to serve take the lead and follow as necessary.

**Veterans Resource Collection (VRC)**

Early in this process I was able to secure an invitation to a campus-wide “Veterans for Success” event. I knew I wanted to reach student veterans and encourage them to speak to me or visit the library. At the meeting I had 15 minutes to give a short presentation on library services and introduce myself to student veterans. The veterans were polite but had little to say to me. Before leaving, I placed fliers and a stack of business cards on the resources table and encouraged veterans to reach out to me should they need anything from the library. The follow-up messages I received helped focus my efforts into collection development. I was surprised the veterans who responded seemed so much more interested in materials rather than services, but their responses indicated what they wanted from the library and I
used that as my starting point. In response, I started investigating funding sources for a stand-alone “Veterans Resource Collection,” what we in the library now call the “VRC.” Ultimately I received a small ($5,000) “Back to Books” grant from the Illinois State Library in the spring of 2013 to start the collection.

Grant writing can be difficult, and the time and effort spent on researching and writing declined grant applications cannot be recouped. The hard truth is you might do a lot of work and not get the grant after all. To reduce the chances of this happening, be as prepared as possible before you start the grant application process. This means you must:

- Know your audience;
- Write clearly and without overusing jargon;
- Present defined goals/learning outcomes;
- Understand what will be required of you (reports, deadlines, etc.) and demonstrate awareness, and above all else;
- Address and prioritize anything the funding agency asks for specifically.

When it comes time to write, lean on colleagues with grant-writing experience for support or seek out webinars and other training on how to write successful grant applications. Your library likely has some resources in place already.

Keep in mind that if you write a successful grant application you will be required to meet spending deadlines and often you will need to provide mandated progress reports for the duration of the grant. Failing to meet deadlines could result in forfeiture of funds. Also, failing to spend funds in the allotted timeframe may require you to reimburse the funding agency. You might need to undergo training to ensure you are aware of potential conflicts of interest and certain reporting mandates. Be sure to speak to someone in administration before undertaking a grant-writing project.

Before the Back to Books Grant, I encountered some obstacles to funding. First, I approached library administration to see if I could direct some of my materials budget for the social sciences toward seeding the VRC. I was told no. Our Friends of the Library group had previously been generous enough to provide some money to sponsor the purchase of two streaming video databases in the social sciences, so I inquired there, but learned they would not be able to provide quite as much money as I would need to seed any kind of impactful collection.

This is to say that you might encounter some funding challenges, but take heart. There are several foundations and organizations providing grant money, and while grant writing can be difficult, take comfort in the knowledge that your cause is worthy. You might already have a grant officer at your institution who can help identify opportunities or direct your efforts. If not, it could be worthwhile to investigate subscription-based services like GrantForward.com that allow you to receive notifications when grants are available based on your specific criteria.

I was fortunate enough to get money to start the collection and get approval
from library administration to make it a standalone with its own Voyager location, “VRC.” But even this small grant required five different reports at specified intervals—grants are hard work, but often they are our only source of funding.

**Selecting Materials**

In order to start the collection, I needed to develop criteria for materials. The grant I applied for specified the money could only be used for monographs or documentary films—you might not face these same limitations, so feel encouraged to investigate ebooks or other electronic resources. I then set out to define the collection and its purpose. I settled on a collection for student veterans and their dependents (primarily) with a secondary audience of veterans from the community. With the scope of materials and my target audiences in mind, I determined the purpose of the collection would be to provide materials to assist with the following veteran interests: navigating the benefits process, relationship issues specific to veterans, pre- and post-deployment issues, family support, financial counseling for veterans, and strategies for coping with traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat-related PTSD, and military sexual trauma (MST).

I determined that the VRC would be comprised of items that could pragmatically assist veterans or their families in their pre- or post-deployment daily lives. I did not want this collection to become a shrine to military service, and our library already maintains separate ongoing collections of military history (Library of Congress Classification D-E) and military science (Library of Congress Classification U) monographs. As such, the VRC is different than the existing collections in that every item has direct and practical applications for pre- or post-deployment members of the armed services and their families.

With scope, audience, and purpose decided, I began to purchase items. In conjunction with the university’s Office of Sponsored Research and Programs and the library’s purchasing department, the account was created and I started placing orders. It is a good idea to start fostering relationships with acquisitions and cataloging early in the process; bring them on board or up to speed before you inundate them with item orders and cataloging requests.

The original $5,000 grant allowed me to purchase 75 monographs and an additional 30 documentary films. The VRC now resides in a high-traffic area between the library’s technical help desk and a very popular bank of 12 computers. You might even look into placing in the collection a binder and/or “rolodex” filled with fliers and contact information of local services for interested veterans.

**Advertising the Collection**

The next challenge was advertising the VRC to constituents. Again, I had to rely on campus and regional partners. I cannot stress just how important these relationships are and I encourage you to approach these folks as early in the process as appropriate and possible. The Veterans Affairs Coordinator at the university was excited about the VRC, and he and I discussed using it as a launching point
for even more robust University Library/Student Veteran cooperation. He agreed to forward an email I composed to the entire student veteran population. That email (re)introduced me, explained the VRC, and served as a call for requests (see Appendix A for details). The email also reemphasized my desire to bring student veterans into the library for research help.

I was fortunate early on to receive library and campus support. On May 31, 2013 The University Library’s social media pages featured the VRC. The student newspaper at GSU, The Phoenix, ran an editorial on the VRC in April 2014. That same semester, the library’s part-time marketing consultant wrote copy for the VRC that featured on the monitors located across the campus. Your library could also utilize its own newsletters, social media, or local news outlets to reach constituents.

On November 11, 2015 I had the opportunity to present a large percentage of the VRC at GSU’s Veterans Day Fair. After getting permission from the dean of the library, I had the pleasure of coordinating efforts with technical service and circulation colleagues to take the collection “on the go.” The result was a first-of-its-kind (for our library) traveling collection. We outfitted a laptop with the Voyager circulation module and circulation spared a fulltime employee for a few hours. Circulation provided a scanner for barcodes and IDs, a desensitizer, cards, and stampers for marking due dates. I manned the table for a few hours as well. Marketing loaned us their popup banner, bookmarks, and buttons.

The Veterans Day Fair was well-attended and a truly fun and worthwhile experience. Already the Veterans Coordinator on campus here has suggested an even
more prominent role for the library and the VRC at next year’s Veterans Day Fair.

Figure 3: The Author with the VRC, November 15, 2015

Opportunities

I can link every opportunity I have had to improve veteran services to the establishment of the Veterans Resource Collection, and, more specifically, to the relationship-building efforts it required. I cannot overstate how important it is to see the same folks in different settings and to consistently demonstrate your willingness to assist them. Before long I found myself invited to join the Veterans Affairs Council at the university. I was able to serve on a search committee for a new Veterans Affairs Coordinator. Faculty members put me in touch with student veterans for library research projects and much more. So far what the library has done alongside Veterans Affairs has been successful. More exciting, however, are opportunities looming on the horizon.

For instance, in January 2016 I won the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) Douglas A. Noverr Grant for Collection Development ($5,000) for my proposed “American Military in Popular Film” collection. That collection was conceived with the VRC in mind and will broaden its scope to include anyone who might be researching the American military and media. I am currently researching titles and plan to spend the money before the completion of the current semester.

Our library is also partnering with Veterans Affairs at GSU to begin interviewing student and community veterans as part of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. Interviews began in spring 2016. Further, I envision a robust in-house collection of oral history videos featuring GSU students, faculty, and staff who have served. Ultimately, all of this, and more, will be documented through a LibGuide on the University Library’s services to veterans. In retrospect, I would liked to have developed the LibGuide earlier in the process. Doing so would have
allowed me to direct resources to both our on-campus and online student veterans sooner and with greater efficiency.

The myriad opportunities that have arisen led me to assemble a panel on outreach to veterans at the Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries (IACRL) conference in Chicago. That panel included librarians from a large community college and a major research university and followed a discussion format intended to get people thinking about ways we can all enhance services to student and community veterans and their dependents.

**Conclusion**

One aspect of this project that cannot go overlooked is that I am making personal connections with veterans all across the university. One graduate student, a veteran, is using the VRC to prepare for a course she plans to teach in fall 2016. Another student with serious combat-related difficulties is working with me and her adviser to see that she finishes the requirements for her master’s degree this semester. I am also enjoying a great relationship with our Veterans Affairs coordinator. These are meaningful professional and personal relationships, and I have no doubt that anyone else interested in service to veterans could experience similar partnerships.

If you are just starting out, you might experience setbacks or frustrations. Maybe you are uncomfortable with the idea of showing up to meetings to promote services or solicit feedback. If so, challenge yourself or, if necessary, enlist the help of a willing colleague. Maybe you are intimidated by the daunting task of creating new services for a population as large and diverse as your library’s veterans. Remember, it is up to you to decide your target audience; once you have the audience in mind, you can proceed with information gathering to determine needs and focus service efforts. Be aware that whichever path you choose you might need to:

- Recruit and train staff or volunteers;
- Collaborate with community groups, and/or local, state or federal agencies;
- Compete for grant money or other financial assistance;
- Participate in meetings, training opportunities, or functions outside of your normal work hours;
- Familiarize yourself with legislation, veterans’ benefits, and/or processes you might not otherwise be comfortable with.

Many academic and public libraries have started their own veterans’ resource centers or outreach to veterans initiatives already. This paper reflects on just one such effort, but many examples exist and the opportunities and options one might face are virtually limitless—which can be intimidating. Ultimately, however, you are in control of the process at all times. Be bold, but respectful. Be willing to listen, but remain stern enough to define parameters.

There will be ups and downs, but, as relationships form, you will see a dramatic uptick in invitations to events and number of possible service opportunities. Before long, you will be recognizing opportunities rather than inefficiencies at every turn. And by then, you will be doing good work.
Your foray into service to veterans might look like ours—or it might not resemble it all—but hopefully this paper encourages someone to reach out to veterans. It truly is worthwhile.

**Author Information**

Josh Sopiarz is assistant professor and reference librarian for the social sciences and government information at Governors State University in University Park, IL. He researches and writes about American popular culture, stringed instruments, music, and academic librarianship.

**References**

Appendix A: Email Messages

1. Email to New Veterans Coordinator at GSU

Hi —,

My dean — has frequently mentioned you in conversation and I realize that we have never met. I’m a librarian here with an interest in serving student veterans. I believe [my dean] may have spoken to you about the small veterans resource collection we started here with a grant from the Illinois State Library (it’s small, but growing!). Anyway, I’d like to get to meet you if you’re free this week or next. I could stop by sometime just to say hello. Let me know what you think or if a certain time will work for you.

Best,

Josh

Josh Sopiarz
Assistant Professor
Social Science and Reference Librarian
Government Documents Coordinator

2. Email to Student Veterans (forwarded by Veterans Coordinator)

Dear Student Veteran,

Professor Josh Sopiarz, University Library, would like to encourage you to contact him as midterms approach and as you work toward preparing your final projects for the semester. Professor Sopiarz is the Social Sciences and Government Documents Librarian here at GSU and he is willing to serve as a go-between for you and the library and its resources. At the very least, he can put you in touch with your liaison librarian.
Appendix B: Sample Web Resources

Directory of Veterans Service Organizations: http://www.va.gov/vso/
GrantForward: https://www.grantforward.com/
GrantWatch: http://www.grantwatch.com/
Library of Congress Veterans History Project: https://www.loc.gov/vets/
U.S. Census Bureau Data on Veterans: http://www.census.gov/hhes/veterans/data/
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: http://www.va.gov/
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Data: http://www.va.gov/vetdata/
U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Education and Training: http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/
Veterans of Foreign Wars Financial Assistance: https://www.vfw.org/UnmetNeeds/
Appendix C: VRC Title List

Books


DVDs


