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## Serving Our Student Veterans in Louisiana

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# LOUISIANA LIBRARIES

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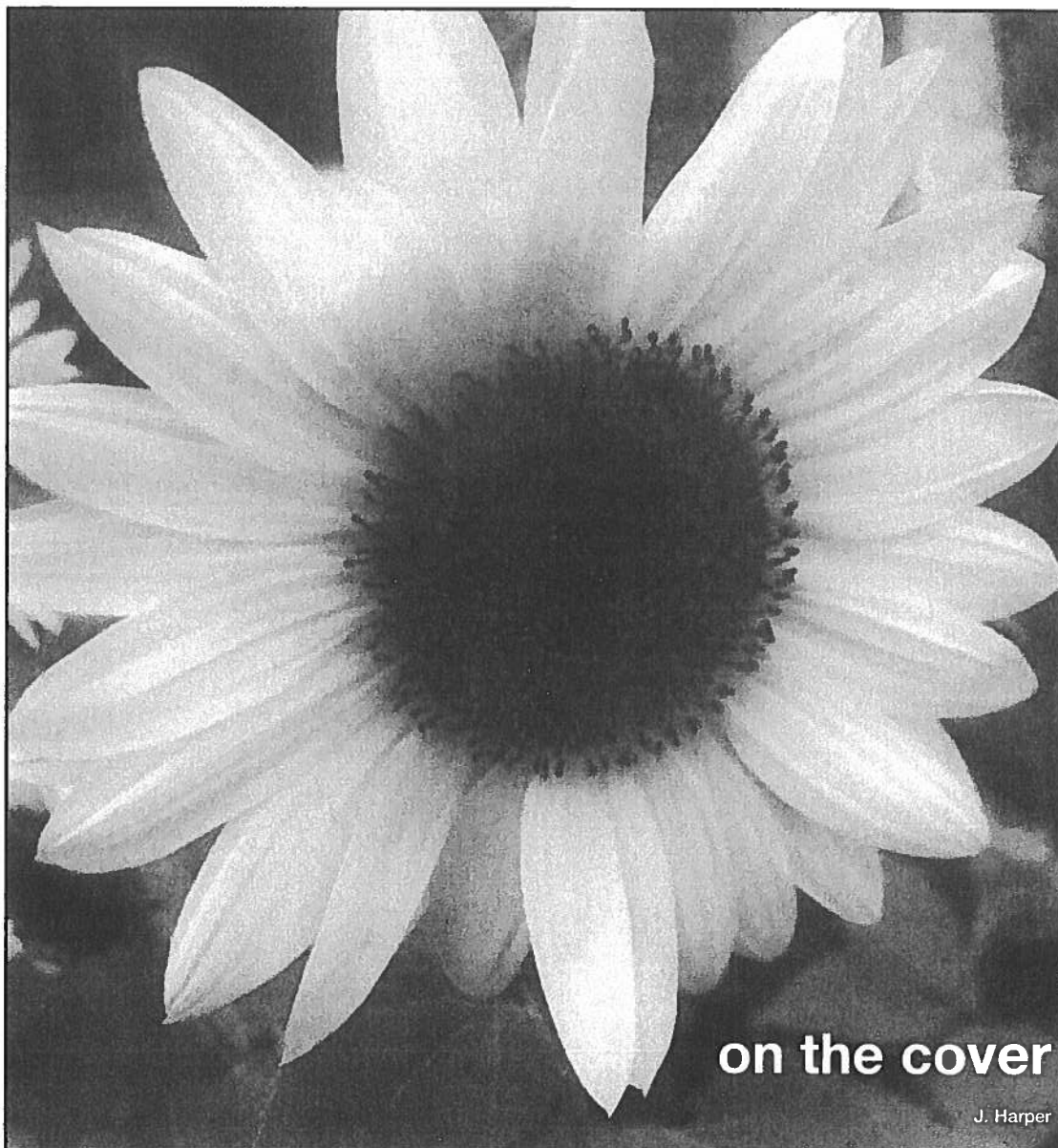
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# LOUISIANA LIBRARIES

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# Serving our Student Veterans in Louisiana

by Rebecca Kelley & Mitch Fontenot

There has been a surge in veterans on college campuses across the country since the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect in 2009 (U.S. House, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 2642). However, the recent passage of the Forever GI Bill in 2017, which removed the 15-year cap to use benefits, means college and universities could see even more veterans return to campus (U.S. House, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 3218). As a result, state veteran agencies and higher education institutions have responded with increased funding and the opening of campus veteran resource centers. Student veterans can differ from traditional students in age, maturity, life experiences, and may also face physical and mental health challenges. As a result, the transition back to civilian life and to a college campus can sometimes prove challenging (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, p. 21).

The first state-led program for student veterans, Vet Corps, was launched in 2009 by the Washington State Department of Veteran Affairs (2018). The State of Louisiana has recently shown its commitment to helping its veterans transition to college life and reach their educational and career attainment goals (Louisiana Department of Veteran Affairs (LDVA), 2019). The statewide initiative LaVetCorps Program pledged to open thirty veteran resource centers on campuses across Louisiana. (LDVA, 2019). These resource centers help veterans returning from service to “successfully transition” to both their college and their community by providing mentorship and assistance in accessing their federal and state benefits (LDVA, 2019). The staff at these resource centers also help increase “awareness of student veterans’ needs and veteran culture” by providing training and support to college faculty, staff, and administration (LDVA, 2019). This initiative was the result of a February 2019 memorandum

of understanding between Governor John Bel Edwards, the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs, and higher education leaders from all four Louisiana public college systems and Xavier University of Louisiana (LDVA, 2019). While some public universities had existing student veteran centers on their campuses when the additional LaVetCorps veteran resource centers opened in 2019, Louisiana became the second state in the United States to have student veteran resource centers on every public college campus (Sentell, 2019).

## Introduction to the Study

Since Louisiana opened veteran centers at each public college and university in the state, the authors set out to explore the range of outreach efforts to student veterans by academic libraries at colleges and universities across Louisiana. The goal of the study was to determine if libraries in Louisiana targeted their outreach efforts to student veterans on their college campuses.

A review of the literature reveals the characteristics of the typical student veteran. Several academic librarians have targeted student veterans in their outreach efforts and their research provides the foundation for best practices. The authors provide details of their early outreach to student veterans at Louisiana State University. An overview of their survey results provide a snapshot of library outreach to student veterans at Louisiana’s colleges and universities. Finally, the authors propose some best practices for academic libraries interested in serving student veterans on their campus.

## Profile of Student Veterans

Student veterans are quite different from the typical

student on college campuses. To best promote library services and resources to this underserved student population, librarians should be aware of these differences and the challenges they can bring to outreach efforts. The average student veteran is twenty-five years old at the start of their postsecondary education [American Council on Education (ACE), 2014]. As a result, student veterans are more likely to have a spouse (44%) and children (52%) and work full-time while in college (42%) (ACE, 2014). Student veterans are also more racially diverse than the civilian student population (17% black, 14% Hispanic, 6% other) (ACE, 2014) and more likely to be first generation students (LeMire and Mulvihill 2017, 98). Additionally, enlisted members of the military tend to be “disproportionately from low-income or working class backgrounds” (Phelps, 237). Student veterans often believe that their military experience makes them more mature than traditional students, even if they are the same age as those students (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 270).

Most student veterans tend to feel “distinctly different and isolated from nonveteran students,” see themselves “as other,” (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 270) and do not always feel comfortable on campus (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 98). Due to the aforementioned issues, student veterans face more responsibilities and stresses than most traditional college students. Additionally, many student veterans perceive that most student services target traditional students and are of “no use” to them (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 271). Due to these factors, libraries may find it more difficult to reach student veterans using the same outreach methods they use with nonveteran students.

Student veterans are different from their civilian peers in age, maturity, and extracurricular responsibilities. These differences and “competing demands for attention” result in the desire to

maximize their time spent on campus, studying, and conducting research (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 273). Therefore, librarians may need to use different outreach methods to promote library resources and services to student veterans than those used to reach the average student. A study by Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin (2015) reflects that student veterans are “particularly apt to respond to library outreach in their classes or at a dedicated student veterans’ center” and that this outreach is “likely to be well-received.”

Additionally, the ACE’s “Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions” (2018) points out that when student veterans “feel supported on campus,” they usually have higher grade point averages, retention, and graduation rates. Recent research by Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin (2015) concludes there is a “clear need for academic libraries to make a particular and specific effort to reach” student veterans.

### **Outreach to Student Veterans in the Literature**

Rutledge and LeMire (2016) make a distinction between active and passive outreach strategies when targeting outreach efforts to underserved populations on campus. Passive outreach efforts rely on the patron to initiate contact but “scale well to large student populations” and to libraries with limited staff. Examples of passive outreach include LibGuides, library displays, promotional materials and office hours. In contrast, active outreach efforts are more time-consuming but are a “crucial element toward building strong relationships with underserved groups” (Rutledge and LeMire, 119). Examples of active outreach include building personal relationships with students and partnering with veteran organizations. Libraries should consider a combination of both strategies to allow these

efforts to be both “scalable and sustainable over time” Rutledge and LeMire (2016, 118).

Academic libraries across the country have begun to target outreach to veterans on their campuses. Outreach efforts at University of Montana Mansfield Library included a librarian liaison to student veterans, a partnership with the student veteran center, presentations and workshops, space provided in the library for student veteran meetings, reference services at the student veteran center and information packets distributed at orientation sessions (Samson, 83). Librarians representing several academic libraries in Ohio detailed the diverse ways that they are making strides in implementing outreach programs to student veterans on their respective campuses (Atwood et al., 2016). In addition to the previously stated outreach efforts, Ohio academic librarians also conducted a needs assessment and survey of student veterans, collected oral histories, designed veterans online resource guides, and hosted a veteran-specific speaker series (Atwood, et al., 174-8).

LeMire (2017) conducted a survey of academic, public, and special libraries to determine how these libraries supported their veteran patrons. Those most common strategies reported by academic libraries to serve student veterans include collaboration and partnerships with veteran organizations, veteran-oriented programs/events, such as panels, luncheons, and Veterans Day events. Additionally, outreach efforts were extended such as presentations, flyers, resource fairs, spaces for veterans, and dedicated website or LibGuide (LeMire, 158-9).

### **First Steps at Louisiana State University (LSU)**

Louisiana State University opened the William A. Brookshire Military and Veterans Student Center (VSC) in January 2018. This facility includes a meeting room, study lounge, and a computer lab.

Services and programs specifically for student veterans include free tutoring, resume writing assistance, lunch and learn workshops, career counseling, and advising services on veteran benefits. LSU’s VSC currently serves more than 2,800 students (veterans, active service members, and dependents), of which approximately 400 students are veterans and active service members (reservists), according to Program Director Sachiko Cleveland.

In September 2018, the authors were invited to discuss the services and resources available at LSU Libraries as part of the lunch and learn workshop series hosted by the VSC. At this inaugural session, the variety of services and resources that LSU Libraries makes available to students were emphasized. The services included subject librarians and research guides for every major, free e-textbooks for certain courses, group and individual study rooms, quiet vs. collaborative floors of the library for study, and the Gear2Geaux program. The Gear2Geaux program provides equipment such as laptops, video cameras, and phone chargers to current students. Research tools highlighted the depth of the library’s online catalog beyond books. This included the approximately three hundred databases, the institutional repository, and the Discovery search which allows novice researchers to search the majority of library resources via the home page. After the presentations, the authors were invited to stay for lunch and continue the conversation with student veterans. This was an opportunity to answer questions, clarify how librarians can support academic success, as well as getting to know the student veterans on a personal level. The program director received positive feedback from the participants and has continued to include the library each semester. This information is usually included in the first presentation of the semester as part of their lunch and learn series. On Veteran’s Day, the authors brought cookies

and fruit to the VSC. This served as a small token of gratitude for their military service and as a reminder that the library's resources and services are available to them as end-of-the-semester projects and finals approach.

Before the first VSC lunch and learn workshop, the authors used the Springshare LibGuides platform to create "Veterans Resources," a guide dedicated to resources for student veterans at LSU (<https://guides.lib.lsu.edu/veterans>). The guide includes information about finding subject librarians, helpful databases for research, and veteran specific information from local and national organizations, including employment resources.

### **Study of Outreach to Student Veterans in Louisiana**

The authors' experiences with student veterans, along with the statewide LaVetCorps Program, led them to investigate whether academic libraries in Louisiana targeted outreach efforts to student veterans. The authors conducted a statewide survey using the Qualtrics software program (See Appendix 1). Academic libraries at SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges)-accredited institutions were included in the study. If libraries conducted targeted outreach, the authors sought to find out what methods of outreach were used. The authors excluded their institution from the survey. In all, 40 libraries were identified for inclusion in the study. Email addresses of outreach librarians were obtained from websites and web directories of academic libraries in Louisiana. If an outreach librarian was not identified, the email address of the instruction librarian or library dean/director was collected. The survey was distributed by email in May 2019 and was active for one month. Ultimately, twenty respondents completed the

survey, resulting in a response rate of 51%.

### **Survey Results**

According to the survey respondents, all libraries (100%) provide outreach to the general student body on their campuses. When asked whether their library provided outreach to specific student populations on their campus, eight respondents (40%) said they conducted targeted outreach, while ten (50%) did not, with the remaining two respondents (10%) unsure.

The respondents who worked in libraries with targeted outreach (and those unsure whether they did) were asked if their library directed outreach efforts to student veterans. Of these ten respondents, four reported outreach efforts aimed specifically to student veterans with five respondents stating they did not provide outreach to student veterans with one respondent who was unsure if their library targeted outreach to student veterans on their campus.

The five respondents who either provided outreach to student veterans or were unsure if they did were asked to indicate the types of outreach used at their library. Respondents could select multiple answers from a list of outreach methods (See Appendix 1).

Outreach methods most used by Louisiana academic libraries to reach student veterans included participation in student veteran orientations (25%), a student veteran research guide or webpage (17%), and dedicated space in the library (17%). Other responses included speaking at a student veteran center workshop or event (8%), signage, exhibits, or displays in the library (8%). Three participants selected "other". While two of those responses were not specific to library outreach; one respondent noted their library appointed a librarian liaison to student

veterans and provided library instruction in a veteran seminar course.

## **Discussion**

As our survey results demonstrate, several academic libraries in Louisiana have already implemented some form of outreach effort specifically directed at student veterans. As previously mentioned, the state of Louisiana has invested in its veterans' educational and career attainment goals through veteran resource centers across the state. Due to this, the authors believe that academic libraries should also seek to invest in these students as well.

Considering the survey results and literature, the authors suggest the following recommendations as best practices when pursuing library outreach efforts to student veterans in higher education institutions.

### **Gather Data**

Before considering outreach efforts at your college or university, you will want to find out how many student veterans are enrolled in your institution. Getting an accurate count of student veterans on your campus can sometimes be a challenge. Many schools rely on getting this data from education benefit certification or Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) information, while some schools ask veterans to self-identify on their admission applications (ACE, 2018). These methods of data collection may be incomplete, as some women, National Guard/Reserve members, and those without combat experience may not always identify as "veterans" (ACE, 2018). The best method to collect this information is by contacting the director at your institution's student veteran center

or the school certifying official (the designated person for processing veterans' education benefits at your institution). This will assist in getting the most accurate and current information about veteran and service member enrollment at your college or university.

### **Designate Liaison to Student Veterans**

A first step in building outreach efforts to student veterans at your institution is to designate a liaison (or a team of librarians and library staff) to student veterans (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 274; LeMire, 163; LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 113; Natal and Atwood, 345). While it can be helpful for the liaison to be a veteran or a close relative of a veteran, it is more important for this individual to appreciate military service and have a "sincere desire to support military veterans and service members" (LeMire, 163-4). The liaison should seek to develop relationships with student veterans with the intention of identifying their research needs or struggles and sharing ways that the library can help meet their challenges (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 113). This assists liaisons in identifying areas where the library can help. To accomplish this relationship building, the liaison can partner with the student veteran center, speak at orientations and student organization meetings, provide instruction and consultations either through workshops or office hours, and build the library's collection of military-related materials (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 117).

### **Partner with the Student Veteran Center**

Make an appointment with the director of the student veteran center at your college or university to introduce yourself and express an interest in learning more about student veterans and service members at your college or university. Building



a partnership with this individual is crucial, as they will be your main contact point for outreach efforts to student veterans on your campus. Librarians should consider the student veteran center as the “communication vehicle” (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 273-4) in which to reach student veterans. Outreach efforts at the student veteran center can include giving presentations on library resources, staffing a resource table or speaking at orientations, and holding reference hours (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 274; LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 110, 113, 120). If your library cannot do this type of outreach due to staff limitations, consider providing the student veteran center with a library information sheet or other promotional materials about the library’s services and resources. Veterans may be particularly receptive to this type of outreach, as they are “familiar with this method of information dissemination” because as service members they were often given information packets and directed to learn the content (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 121). Additionally, the library’s liaison to student veterans may want to seek training opportunities for library employees so they can be prepared to effectively serve student veterans and service members (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 111; Sampson, 86). Student veteran center staff can be invited to speak at library meetings where they can provide a snapshot of student veterans on campus and to explain how student veterans differ from traditional students. Library staff may need to be reminded of the importance of being respectful and unbiased towards individual student veterans or risk alienating these students (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 111).

### **Emphasis Your Expertise**

Due to their military training, student veterans are “more inclined to seek out specialists” and

are not afraid to ask for help (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 271). Their backgrounds, combined with their personal responsibilities (full-time jobs, families, etc.) reflect a motivation to seek out experts as a time-saving strategy. Therefore, librarians may want to emphasize their expertise as research specialists and the varying subject specialists when conducting outreach efforts to this group. This will ensure that student veterans know who to contact when they need research assistance. However, while student veterans may seek out experts or specialists when they need assistance, they may not have a full understanding of “what librarians do and how they can help” (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 103). Therefore, librarians should aim to familiarize student veterans with all the resources and services offered by the library so they will take advantage of the expertise offered.

### **Online Resource Guides**

Academic libraries with limited staffing should consider creating a LibGuide or webpage specifically for student veterans. This is one way to indicate that your library is “student veterans friendly” (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 274). When creating an online resource guide or webpage for this group, consider the varied needs of this population. As with other resource guides, library databases and search tips should be included. In addition to traditional library research tools, resource guides or webpages dedicated to student veterans could also include community, employment, and crisis resources. Veterans may be facing financial, health, or relationship difficulties so they may find it helpful to have links to organizations (campus, local, state or national) that provide this type of assistance. Some veterans may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or military

sexual trauma (Phelps, 237), therefore crisis organizations that emphasize confidentiality could also be included in the resource guide. Finally, future employment may also be a consideration, so databases such as PrepSTEP, O\*Net, and the Occupational Outlook Handbook could also be considered for inclusion in your online resource guide.

### **Library Space for Student Veterans**

If your campus does not have a student veteran center or has limited study space, consider whether your library could set aside space specifically for student veterans. Spaces that are particularly useful are “military student friendly.” Areas such as these would have low traffic to allow student veterans to “easily monitor their surroundings” and to “position themselves so people can’t walk up behind them and inadvertently surprise them” (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 114-15). Another benefit of a dedicated library space for student veterans is providing a place for them to meet with and connect with their peers (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 115). If you are contemplating a dedicated area in the library for student veterans, consider several factors such as layout, noise level, etc. Also, consider getting feedback from student veterans in the planning process, so that the space meets their actual needs (Natal and Atwood, 345).

If dedicated library space is not feasible, another option is for the library to offer group study rooms or meeting space for the student veteran center or student veterans organizations (such as Student Veterans of America) to reserve for their meetings and events (Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin, 274; LeMire & Mulvihill, 2017, 115, Samson, 84-5). Providing this library space to student veterans helps demonstrate that student veterans are welcome in the library.

### **Library Displays, Exhibits, & Programs**

Another way that academic librarians can help student veterans feel welcome in the library is to incorporate military-related topics in library displays, exhibits, or programs. One recommendation is to find ways to connect the “library’s collections to veteran-related holidays and events” such as military-themed book displays or through military related archival material, such as photographs and letters in exhibits (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 121). These exhibits or programs could also be used to highlight student veterans on your campus, in a way that “accurately and sensitively” (Rutledge and LeMire, 118) represents student veterans’ experiences and sacrifices (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 121). Seek input from student veterans or the student veteran center in the early stages of planning this type of program in order to make sure it would be of interest to them and to allow them to participate (Helton, 14). This type of exhibit or program serves two purposes. First, it is an opportunity for student veterans to share their military service with the rest of campus. Secondly, faculty, staff, and other students may learn more about the military experiences of these students and appreciate the value and diversity they add to the campus (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017, 121; Rutledge and LeMire, 118-9).

### **Conclusion**

Student veterans and service members on our college campuses are a diverse group and have varied research and information needs. As this study has demonstrated, some academic libraries in Louisiana have responded by offering specific services to student veterans. One limitation of this study is that respondents were not asked to

provide library staff size nor were they asked for reasons why they did not target their outreach efforts to student veterans. Nonetheless, academic librarians in Louisiana should seek to engage with student veterans through targeted outreach efforts. Some of these efforts could include designating a student veteran liaison, partnering with the student veteran center, emphasizing our expertise as research specialists, and making the library a welcoming place for veterans by highlighting the library's services and resources. While not all suggested practices are advisable or feasible for every institution, libraries should seek to implement at least one of these outreach methods so that student veterans know the library is there to help them succeed in their academic and career goals.

### **Appendix 1: Outreach to Student Veterans Survey Instrument**

Q. What is your institution?

1. select institution from list of Louisiana universities and colleges (both public and private)

Q. Does your library provide outreach to students on your campus?

1. Yes
2. No (ended survey)
3. Unsure

Q. Does your library provide outreach to specific types of students on your campus?

1. Yes
2. No (ended survey)
3. Unsure

Q. Does your library provide outreach to student veterans on your campus?

1. Yes
2. No (ended survey)
3. Unsure

Q. What forms of outreach does your library use to reach student veterans on your campus? Select all that apply.

1. Research guide or webpage dedicated to student veterans
2. Participate at orientations for student veterans
3. Guest speaker at student veteran center workshop or event
4. Guest speaker at Student Veterans of American chapter meeting
5. Signage, exhibits, or displays in library for student veterans
6. Dedicated space in library for student veterans
7. Other

Q. Please provide any additional information regarding outreach to student veterans on your campus.

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