

## **Military Veterans as Peer Leaders**

### **Statement of Need**

Since October 2001, 2.1 million U.S. troops have deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, Iraq) (American Council on Education, 2012), and more than 420,000 military personnel have deployed multiple times (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). As American troops withdraw from the conflicts in the Middle East, thousands of veterans are returning to civilian society and are initiating or resuming higher education. Attaining a degree, however, is by no means assured for veterans who enter college. National statistics reveal that college student veterans are less likely to be engaged in college, are less satisfied with their college experience and are at greater risk of drop-out than their non-military peers (Radford, 2009). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, over 830,000 veterans are currently receiving GI benefits to pursue higher education. As increasing numbers of troops return home, colleges and universities must be prepared to support their transition to non-military educational and occupational settings. Student veterans differ from traditional students in significant ways. For example, 40% of college student veterans suffer from a mental or physical disability (Grossman, 2009), greatly complicating their successful adjustment to student life in the civilian world. According to the American Council on Education (Radford, 2009), 85% of college student veterans are at least 24 years old, and over 60% have a dependent spouse or child. Despite their developmental goals related to building families and career paths following separation from the military, veterans are more likely to experience a host of psychological and relational difficulties that compromise educational and occupational achievement, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and partner violence (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Klaw, Demers, & DaSilva, 2013; Savitsky, Illingworth, & DuLaney, 2009). In addition, the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq present unique risk factors for military personnel that increase the likelihood of trauma related effects (Hoge, 2010).

### **Scope of the Project**

The proposed project builds on my ongoing work related to assessing and addressing risk factors in college student veterans that compromise achievement in both college and the workforce. For example, survey research that our team conducted with the support of Blue Shield Foundation (Klaw, Demers, & DaSilva 2012) revealed that in a sample of college student veterans across California, approximately a third struggled with symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as low social support. Qualitative findings from focused discussion groups demonstrated that student veterans on this campus felt “lonely,” “isolated,” and as if “no one cares.” (Klaw et. al., 2013). Fortunately, the preliminary results of research conducted on efforts our team implemented suggest that student veterans benefit from targeted social support as they transition to higher education. (Klaw et. al., 2013). Student veterans who participated in the innovative “Warriors at Home” discussion group series for example, reported feeling as if “the University is finally doing something” and that “they are no longer alone.” The findings from the discussion group series led to the instantiation of an academic class for veterans that shows promise in helping student veterans to learn, in their words, “how to have healthy relationships” at home and how to “get connected” to resources on campus. A second grant awarded by the Blue Shield Foundation allowed our project team to disseminate the discussion group interventions we designed through both a printed and electronic manual (Klaw & Demers, 2012), and a one-day training conference involving over 40 higher education professionals who serve veterans on campuses across California.

### **Current Project**

Building on this body of work, my current efforts focus on developing student veterans, themselves, to provide outreach, education, information and referrals to prospective, incoming, and current student veterans, as well as to individuals who want to learn how to best support veterans. As a Clinical-Community Psychologist trained at the Palo Alto Department of Veterans Affairs, and current Chair of the SJSU Presidential Veterans' Advisory Committee, I am uniquely suited to engage, train and support SJSU military veterans in addressing the needs of their community. I have extensive experience developing undergraduates as peer leaders and evaluating the effects of such programs (See Klaw & Ampuero, 2007; Klaw et al., 2005; Lonsway, et al., 1998) drawing from my decades of involvement in engaging, training and supervising students to conduct intimate partner violence prevention programming.

My recent preliminary efforts (Fall, 2014) in developing student veterans to conduct outreach to other veterans has been recognized as a promising approach by Lockheed Martin who, this past semester, awarded my team \$5000.00 to provide small honorariums to SJSU student veterans involved in service to the veteran community and to allow them an opportunity to present their experiences. On May 16th, I will be holding a campus-community forum, co-sponsored by Lockheed Martin, that will recognize student veterans who have demonstrated exceptional service to veterans. The forum will engage campus and community stakeholders in a targeted discussion in order to generate a blue print for the prevention focused peer leadership programming that I would like to undertake in the next academic year.

### **Methodology**

A RSCA grant would allow me the time needed over the course of one semester to train, supervise, and assess six student veterans who would provide educational workshops, informational tabling sessions, and panel presentations to prospective student veterans, incoming student veterans, and student veterans at Community Colleges. The six student veteran peer leaders would work closely with me in developing scripted interactive workshops and educational materials for dissemination regarding key issues related to veterans' transition to college, including managing PTSD, having healthy relationships, getting help, and attaining happiness post deployment. Each student veteran would be responsible for conducting at least one presentation and providing outreach at one or more information fairs held at SJSU or a local community college. I plan to evaluate the program qualitatively through exit interviews with each peer leader that will be analysed iteratively for themes related to student veterans' transition to leadership roles outside the military. The student veterans, themselves, would be involved in the coding and analysis process. I currently have IRB approval to conduct interviews with student veterans using a semi-structured interview that I developed. Of course, I will submit any modifications to this guide to the IRB.

### **Plans for External Funding**

Demonstrating the University's support for my time through a RSCA grant would allow me to submit a proposal for external funding of the veteran peer leadership program to Lockheed Martin, Cisco, and other corporate partners that have worked with me to support campus veterans. Demonstration of the impact of the peer leadership program on veteran peer leaders would allow me to develop a web-based manualized training program in partnership with the support of my colleagues at the Palo Alto Dept. of Veterans Affairs Telehealth Program and to submit proposals for further funding from corporations that have expressed an interest in

supporting veterans as they transition to the civilian workforce, such as Starbucks, Google, and Walmart.

Timeline:

- September-October 2014: Write proposals to Lockheed Martin and Cisco Corporations to support student veteran peer leadership program for Spring 2015.
- November-December 2014: Recruit student veteran peer leaders for Spring 2015 peer leadership program.
- February – March 2015: Train student veteran peer leaders and co-design peer led workshops.
- March – May 2015: Coordinate and implement peer leader presentations and outreach efforts.
- May 2015: Conduct and analyze peer leader exit interviews for themes.
- June 2015: Write up report for scholarly presentations and funding proposals.

### References

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