



## EDITORIAL

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# “Hurry Up and Wait:” Establishing Libraries Programming for Student Veterans

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 increased veterans on campuses in the United States by an estimated 75 percent compared to pre-9/11 enrollment (Barragan et al. 2022, 42). Transitioning from the military to an academic institution presents unique challenges. Administrative tasks related to military benefits can be difficult to navigate without guidance from someone familiar with the process of submitting proper documentation. To assist with this barrier, institutions have implemented veterans’ services units on campuses to serve this student population (Osborne 2014, 248). However, it is also vital for faculty and staff in higher education to

understand military culture, including its diversity; the variety of socioeconomic statuses represented, which impact foundational education; and the polytraumatic disabilities that military personnel cope with after enduring high-stress environments during their military careers (Osborne 2014, 248–249). As an integral part of the university experience and student success, libraries can be part of the support system for service members on campus. One way libraries can provide support is to offer focused library instruction to student veterans to promote the services, spaces, and resources that would most benefit them and the unique needs of the military community.

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As two University of Minnesota (UMN) Libraries staff members, we utilized our identity as military

spouses to make a stronger connection to the military-affiliated community on campus. After personal conversations with family and friends in the military community who spoke about their hesitations in using their GI Bill benefits, we decided to implement a veterans-only UMN Libraries orientation. Realizing there were no current opportunities for veteran-specific library programming, we felt that this workshop was needed to provide veterans on campus a space to ask questions about library resources in a room with people of similar educational and professional experiences. After we presented an overview of the UMN Libraries orientation to the Student Veterans Association of Minnesota (SVAM) members, they expressed their appreciation and enthusiasm for establishing a partnership with the libraries. The library orientation has and will continue to evolve organically to better meet research needs as networking continues with the student veterans at the University of Minnesota.

## Review of Literature

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 established postsecondary education benefits for veterans, known as the first GI Bill (Giampaolo and

Graham 2020, 2–3). Since the establishment of the GI Bill, there have been modifications to the benefits. The version known as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 has benefitted nearly 800,000 veterans (Giampaolo and Graham 2020, 3). Yet access to educational benefits does not guarantee a veteran’s successful transition into student life. Cultural differences between the military lifestyle and higher education create challenges for student veterans, including relating to peers, shifting financial stability, providing for a family, learning administrative tasks to use the GI Bill, and navigating campus with potential disabilities (Giampaolo and Graham 2020, 6). The transition from a highly structured, hierarchical environment with rigid regiments for aesthetics and behavior in the military to a higher education institution requiring inquisitiveness and individuality can be challenging for student veterans (Fawley and Kyrsak 2013, 526). To support student veterans with these challenges, universities have increasingly established veteran-specific orientation programs, which have been proven to have a positive impact on veterans’ “higher sense of mattering” at their higher education institutions (Giampaolo and Graham 2020, 13–14). A strategy for universities’ libraries to better serve their military community is to similarly develop veteran-only orientations (Persian Mills et al. 2015, 264).

Texas A&M conducted an IRB-approved survey of student veterans to understand their knowledge of library resources and services (LeMire et al. 2020, 2). Librarians discovered that library workshops designed on the presumption that veterans are unfamiliar with academic libraries will be unsuccessful (6). It is important to acknowledge and translate the experiences and skills gained when serving in the military (6). As a strategy to connect with student veterans, Texas A&M Libraries developed an online checklist for their student veteran orientation to simulate the procedure for in-processing to a new military installation (LeMire et al. 2020, 5). Topics on the checklist include skill sets such as academic success, distance education, interlibrary loan, scholarly writing support, developing search strategies, using multimedia equipment, and discovering workshops (LeMire et al. 2020, 2; LeMire 2022).

Similarly, the University of Hawaii-Manoa and Hawaii Pacific University offered a library orientation titled “Here or There” during COVID-19. The synchronous and asynchronous sessions were modeled similarly to Texas A&M University Libraries’ “Orienting Student Veterans to the Library” program (Brandes and Torres 2021, 14). A checklist of library skills was taught, including bookmarking the library’s website, checking library hours, exploring the library catalog, finding a LibGuide, finding databases, saving articles, locating study spaces, locating a book online, discovering library workshops, and finding the library chat function (Brandes and Torres 2021, 15).

Applying another strategy to developing a student veteran orientation, Western Michigan University developed a campus-wide “System of Care” to support veterans (Persian Mills et al. 2015, 265). A two-credit course was established to provide an orientation that addresses specific challenges student veterans encounter and to introduce a mentorship program (Persian Mills et al. 2015, 265). Similarly, the University of Montana Mansfield Library collaborates with the Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) office by assigning a librarian to be a liaison for student veterans (Samson 2017, 83). Liaisons in this role are responsible for outreach to the student veteran population to promote library resources and services, including two introductory library workshops and presentations at the Student Veteran Association meetings (Samson 2017, 83). Additionally, the liaison schedules visits to the VETS office for in-person research consultations with student veterans (Samson 2017, 83).

Indiana University-Bloomington Libraries contacted the Veterans Support Services on their campus to learn strategies for the libraries to engage with student veterans (Persian Mills et al. 2015, 264). One of the more successful initiatives included a library literacy session and tour for student veterans (Persian Mills et al. 2015, 264). Additional routes for academic librarians to support student veterans include but are not limited to educating faculty and staff on challenges that veterans encounter, organizing programs to celebrate veterans, promoting library services on websites for veterans' services or organizations, and identifying courses or workshops specifically for student veterans to attend as guest presenters (Sojdehei 2013, 538). Similarly, during orientation sessions, Bowling Green State University includes introductions to staff who are veterans (LeMire et al. 2020, 2). Highlighting veteran staff provides an opportunity for student veterans to find mentors who will understand both the military life experiences and the unique challenges of being a university student.

Librarians have also partnered with their institutions' veterans resource centers. For example, the University of Alabama (UA) partners with the UA's Center for Veteran and Military Affairs by assigning one librarian to act as a liaison for the Center to provide instruction to first-year, nontraditional students and to support students enrolled in the "Military to College" course (Fawley and Kyrzak 2013, 528). The Veterans Resource and Support Center at Texas A&M is part of the Division of Student Affairs; the center provides peer support to assist veterans with finding resources to support individual circumstances in addition to tailoring programming to promote academic success for every veteran the center serves (LeMire et al. 2020, 2). A variety of services are offered at veteran resource centers that are differentiated by type of library. Some services to support veterans include curated books, online research tools, and opportunities to meet with trained employees and volunteers on local, state, and federal VA benefits to assist veterans in their job application process (Witteveen 2016, 22). Additionally, staff and volunteers can connect with hotlines and support groups for veterans (Wittenveen 2016, 22). Since a student veteran may still be serving in the military while enrolled at a college or university, some libraries also perform long-distance reference services for veterans (Whited and Frederick 2015, 186).

A librarian at Governors State University, Josh Sopiartz, established a Veterans Resource Collection (VRC) after networking with the Veterans Affairs Coordinator on campus (Sopiartz 2016, 3). Materials in the collection are intended to assist military members and their families with pre- and post-deployments (Sopiartz 2016, 5). The scope of the collection was guided by feedback from the military community who attended a campus-wide "Veterans for Success" event (Sopiartz 2016, 3). Using the network established from attending military-related events, the Veterans Affairs Coordinator shared information about the VRC in 2013, which catalyzed awareness of the service. The VRC evolved to include additional opportunities to support student veteran research, such as participating in the Library of Congress Veterans History Project (Sopiartz 2016, 7-8).

Recently, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) sponsored the Libraries and Veterans National Forum with the mission of developing support for veterans in all types of libraries. Led by efforts at Texas A&M University, teams of librarians developed The Libraries and Veterans Toolkit in 2021, which established a central location for librarians to disseminate information about their programming intended to support veterans in the library (LeMire and German 2024, 73). Committees for each type of library, including academic libraries, were formed to compile a list of library programming, collections,

and services related to veterans, which became entries in the toolkit (LeMire and German 2024, 74). Amongst toolkit entries for academic libraries are information about veterans' orientations and a variety of LibGuides designated for military and veteran students (Libraries and Veterans Toolkit 2022). Each entry provides a description of the program, cost, timing, suggested duration, resources needed, tips for success, assessment ideas, partners and stakeholders, additional resources/bibliography, the name of the person who submitted the entry, and information on creative commons licenses (Libraries and Veterans Toolkit 2022). As the repository continues to publish new entries, it will become a designated location to understand the unique approaches to developing a library's programming for student veterans. By understanding the veteran community, the library may provide appropriate spaces, services, and materials.

## **University of Minnesota Student Demographics**

After surveying the literature on other institutions' approaches to developing a student veteran library orientation, it was important to understand the specific demographic of student veterans enrolled at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. It is a large public research institution with over 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with military-connected students making up approximately 900 of the population in 2021; most of these students are nontraditional, with an average age of thirty-one, and represent diverse backgrounds and a multitude of identities (Kawas and Massaglia 2021, 7-9). "Military-connected" includes currently serving military personnel on active-duty orders in one of the US Armed Forces branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps), as well as personnel in the National Guard or Reserves; veterans who have previously served and been honorably discharged; and military dependents (spouse or child) authorized to use transferred benefits (Kawas and Massaglia 2021, 5). These statistics exclude cadets in the University of Minnesota ROTC programs.

## **Workshop Overview**

The objective of our Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans workshop is to support student veterans with research, utilization of library and archives research tools and resources, and navigating additional veterans-related resources on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. We created the workshop because we are current and former military spouses who work in different departments of UMN Libraries (Research Services and Student Experience Learning and Accessibility) and are familiar with the needs of the military community. Student veterans relate less to the identity of college students and associate themselves more with their military identity (Hinton 2020, 90–91), finding increased belonging among other military-affiliated students. Military-affiliated librarians have a personal understanding of the challenges that student veterans encounter with these complex identities, particularly when transitioning back to a civilian lifestyle and pursuing higher education with the GI Bill. Knowing that the librarians are affiliated with the military can help alleviate any anxiety or intimidation participants may feel due to the cultural incongruence they experience in higher education. Additionally, the workshop is a designated space for student veterans to network with other student veterans.

Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans was offered to accommodate diverse learning styles and schedules while focusing on providing an overview of library services, effective ways to find library resources, and tips to make using the UMN Libraries easier for students who might not always be on campus. Each workshop, offered virtually and in person, is forty-five minutes

long. Participants are encouraged to introduce themselves and share any specific questions they want answered in the workshop. Encouraging questions at the beginning of the workshop allows us to feature specific information about the UMN Libraries to ensure participants receive the assistance they need while honoring their existing research knowledge. Since every workshop is tailored to focus on current participants' questions, it also provides an opportunity for participants to attend future workshops or contact library instructors to have their additional questions answered.

We begin with an overview of resources provided by the University Veterans Services at the University of Minnesota to immediately address questions or concerns about navigating the entire campus as a veteran. The scope then narrows to focus specifically on resources available at the UMN Libraries.

We demonstrate navigating the UMN Libraries' website to show where to locate the catalog, databases, and subject research guides, as well as to share search strategies for finding research materials with these various tools. Disseminating information about research tools that assist with remote access to library resources was particularly important for student veterans who, as nontraditional students, often balance a combination of family life, military requirements or post-service transitioning, and their academic coursework. Metadata in the UMN Libraries' catalog is also explained to participants, including instructions on submitting an Interlibrary Loan request. Screenshots of each component of the demonstration are included to provide visuals with easily accessible hyperlinks for participants who want to review the information after the workshop.

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An overview of archival collections directly related to veterans and military history on campus is included, in addition to instructions for scheduling an appointment to view archival materials and the archivists' contact information. The workshop concludes with presenting library events and programming used to assist students with managing their workload, conducting research, organizing information, and getting further support from the UMN Libraries.

Participants are encouraged to voluntarily complete a Google Forms survey at the end of the workshop. Objectives of the survey include understanding the demographic of participants, their preferred learning styles, and their confidence in using library resources; the survey also provides an opportunity for participants to give additional feedback. Information gleaned from the survey responses will be used to evolve the workshop and develop new library programming to better meet the needs of the University of Minnesota's specific student veteran population.

### **Initial Outreach Strategy**

Launching new library programming requires a strong outreach and marketing strategy. Our initial promotion approach was selecting Veterans Day for the debut of our workshop since Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans specifically serves the military community on campus, and we could participate in other veteran-focused events to promote our workshop. However, Veterans Day 2023 fell on a Saturday (November 11), so programming was offered the following week in person on Tuesday, November 14, and virtually on Wednesday, November 15. Offering an in-person and virtual option was intentional to accommodate veterans' preferred learning styles and to increase

accessibility to the information for veterans still serving in the Armed Forces while enrolled at the University of Minnesota. On-campus participants who felt comfortable meeting in person could attend our session in Walter Library on Tuesday, November 14, at 12:00 p.m. Otherwise, participants who preferred choosing their own location could attend our virtual option, which was held on Wednesday, November 15, at 3:00 p.m.

Promotion of Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans continued with creating an events webpage on the UMN Libraries calendar a month prior to the first workshop. The link to the webpage was shared through email correspondence with the ROTC administration, University Veterans Services, the Director of MBA Military and Veterans Programs, and contacts at a local US Air Force Reserve Station. Additionally, a social media post was published on the University Libraries Instagram (@umnlib) to promote the workshop to a wider audience.

Through correspondence with the University Veterans Services, an opportunity developed to have a promotional UMN Libraries table at the annual 2023 Veterans Appreciation event at the University of Minnesota in celebration of Veterans Day in November. Networking in person with the veterans' community increased awareness by providing an opportunity to meet students in the Student Veterans Association of Minnesota, who graciously offered to promote the workshop through their communications. The 2023 Veterans Appreciation event also provided an opportunity to discover other institutions on campus with military-related initiatives or archival collections that could be referenced in the workshop as additional support systems for student veterans.

## **Challenges with Establishing the Workshop**

Student veterans, current service members, and librarian colleagues expressed interest and support for Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans. We received positive feedback when discussing the concept of the workshop; however, there was a disconnect between verbal support and enthusiasm expressed for the workshops and the actual enrollment. After canceling both workshops due to low enrollment—despite witnessing many student veterans scanning the link to register at the 2023 Veterans Appreciation event—the librarians identified two barriers to the success of the workshop.

The first barrier was the timing of the debut of the workshop. Attempting to launch near Veterans Day was a logical marketing strategy. However, promotional materials were shared at the beginning of November 2023, potentially too close to the scheduled workshops. The workshops were in a developmental phase in October 2023, which created a limited turnaround time for promotional efforts. Initially, this rapid turnaround was not seen as problematic because we feared that promoting the workshops too early would result in the information being forgotten. We came to realize that our outreach efforts should have begun sooner, preferably closer to the start of the semester, so incoming students learned about the workshop during their orientation or onboarding experience. We could have relied on reminder emails to registrants and University military contacts to ensure they did not forget about the upcoming opportunity.

A second barrier was establishing a network with the military community at the University of Minnesota. Promotional emails were sent to contacts affiliated with the various military organizations on campus. Due to the high volume of emails that University employees receive daily, it is not a surprise that our emails did not receive any replies.

The lack of digital correspondence enforced the importance of establishing a network through in-person meetings with the military community on campus, particularly the student veterans we aimed to serve.

### **Building Outreach Strategies with Student Veterans**

After meeting at the University of Minnesota's 2023 Veterans Appreciation event, we reached out directly to the President of the Student Veterans Association of Minnesota (SVAM) to schedule a follow-up meeting. There, we discussed Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans and other potential ways that the library could collaborate and support SVAM with library programming. Additionally, we wanted to learn more about SVAM to get a better sense of their operation, as well as to better understand our student veterans community and their needs. SVAM membership comprises veterans, ROTC cadets, and currently serving members in the Armed Forces. They meet on a weekly basis in a designated room for student veterans. We were invited to visit the SVAM designated room to meet more members in person, introduce ourselves as contacts for research help, set up a pop-up library, and share promotional materials.

By collaborating specifically with SVAM, we were able to engage directly with the student veterans on campus. Together with the student veterans, we brainstormed additional collaborative programming that included being regularly available in the designated SVAM room to assist with research questions, hosting pop-up events featuring a selection of books for browsing and checkout, and promoting the Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans. Scheduling regular time frames to work with student veterans in their designated space also provides an opportunity to build positive rapport with the military community on campus, deepen connections, understand how the student veterans use library resources, and demonstrate a willingness to engage with student veterans beyond the brick-and-mortar of a library. We are optimistic that continuing to attend veterans-related events on campus and networking in person will help increase workshop attendance. Workshops will continue to be scheduled for virtual and in-person sessions for the 2024–2025 academic year.

### **Conclusion**

Universities and academic libraries have an increasing responsibility to serve those who have served our country. Developing a library orientation specifically for the military community on campus creates a space for learning and inquiry amongst similar nontraditional students who strive to find and build comradery with the military community on campus. By pioneering Libraries Mission Brief for UMN Veterans, other library programming ideation has occurred in dialogue with the Student Veterans Association of Minnesota, expanding the ability of the UMN Libraries to serve this community. We encourage other military-affiliated librarians to connect with student veterans and develop specific library programming for their military community on their campus since they understand the unique needs of individuals transitioning back to civilian life. Outreach to military members isn't limited to academic libraries! Other libraries can conduct similar outreach by connecting with local military-related organizations to network with the military community in their area.



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