

## #FirstGenVets: Outcomes of a Learning Community for First Generation College Student Veterans



I think when he said "you are a gift to this university." I often see my existence here as more of a financial gift (even though everyone pays tuition) to the university than an intellectual gift. He made me look at it in a different way.



### NEED FOR LEARNING COMMUNITY

- Institutions of higher education are faced with an increase in two pertinent student populations
  - First-generation college students
  - Military veterans returning to higher education
- There is a need for institutions to provide tailored services for these student populations to help them succeed
- Texas A&M was looking for ways to increase programming for first-generation students who were not already in one of the defined programs
- #FirstGenVets was proposed to serve two growing populations at the university

## HISTORY OF VETERAN STUDENTS AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

- TAMU was created as a result of the federal government's Morrill Land-Grant College of Act of July 2, 1862
- In 1875, the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas was founded as an all-male military institution
- During WWI, 49% of the all-time graduates of the university were in military service. More than 1200 served as a commissioned officers
- Approximately 20,000 former students served in WWII

Dethloff, H. C. (n.d.).

## HISTORY OF VETERAN STUDENTS AT TAMU



At the conclusion of WWII, A&M enrollment grew to more than 8,000 students in the fall of 1946



These were primarily returning veterans to civilian life who were utilizing the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights



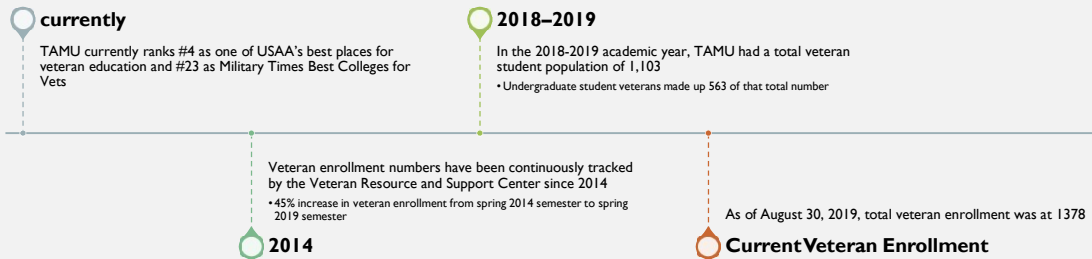
TAMU adjusted current dormitories, such as Walton Hall to accommodate the returning veterans and their wives



Corps of Cadets enrollment was made optional for the returning 2,000 WWII veterans

Heathman, C. (2013, July 2).

## VETERAN STUDENTS TODAY AT TAMU



## BARRIERS TO RETAINING STUDENT VETERANS

- Returning military veterans fall into the category of a non-traditional college student
- In the post-9/11 time frame, it is estimated that over 500,000 veterans have made the transition to pursuing higher education (Gregg, Howell, & Shordike, 2016)
- In 2014, it was reported that student veteran graduation rates were at 52% which was an increase from the 88% drop out rate in the years immediately following implementation of the post-9/11 GI Bill (Dillard & Yu, 2016).
- Student veterans are also faced with unique challenges including (Falkey, 2016):
  - Relocation to a new state
  - Loss of traditional support systems within military life
  - Reentering into a civilian lifestyle

Gregg, B.T., Howell, D.M., & Shordike, A. (2016).  
Falkey, M.E. (2016).  
Dillard, R.J., & Yu, H.H. (2016).

## TRADITIONAL VETERAN STUDENT PROGRAMMING

Traditional student programming can be seen as irrelevant to most student veterans but there is still a need to tailor programming to student veterans

It is important to have tailored services, so student veterans have an opportunity to benefit from others who have had similar experiences (Kirchner, 2015).

Traditional veteran student programming at Texas A&M has included

Student Veterans Association

Aggie Women Veterans

Delta Company

Kirchner, M.J. (2015).

## FIRST-GENERATION & STUDENT VETERAN POPULATIONS



- Similar to student veterans, first-generation college students are faced with unique challenges in their transition to higher education
  - College experiences differ in comparison to traditional college students due to extra cultural and/or academic transitions (Longwell-Grice, R. & Longwell-Grice, H., 2008).
- Student veterans also make up a large percentage of the first-generation student population at higher education institutions across the country
- In 2010, the National Survey of Student Engagement estimated that over 60% of student veterans also identified as first-generation (Williams-Klotz, 2017).
- Being both a student veteran, and a first-generation college student can create obstacles in navigating academic life

Longwell-Grice, R., & Longwell-Grice, H. (2008).  
Williams-Klotz, D.N. (2018).

## FIRST-GENERATION & STUDENT VETERAN POPULATIONS

Experiences, such as a learning community, can aid in the retention of students who participate in them (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2019).

- Universities that provide additional support services to first-generation college students are aiding in the retention and persistence of this student population (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Specialized services for student veterans can

- Create a culture they are more familiar with
- Aid in becoming more connected with their new post-military life

AAC&U. (2019, January 12).  
Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G.D. (2005).

## CREATION OF #FIRSTGENVETS

- In 2016, the Office of the Provost for Academic Affairs requested proposals for academic, high-impact initiatives to increase the retention of first-generation students
- The proposed program was to target
  - First year, first-generation college students
  - Could not be currently enrolled in another university or college level program or learning community (i.e. Regents Scholars)
- Numbers at the time of proposal
  - Total veteran population: 1,319
  - COALS veteran population: 168
    - 79 were first-generation college students
- Based on the research and data on student veterans who also identified as first-generation college students, our team saw a need to develop a learning community for this unique student population

## CREATION OF #FIRSTGENVETS



- Learning community was proposed to capitalize on the Aggie Core Values as well as focusing on the university's learning outcomes of critical thinking, communication, personal & social responsibility, social, cultural and global competence, lifelong learning, and working collaboratively
- Participants registered for a 0-1 credit directed study and would meet twice a month over the fall and spring semester
- Participants would also receive a \$500 stipend from the university each semester enrolled in the learning community

## GOALS OF #FIRSTGENVETS LEARNING COMMUNITY

To increase the knowledge and associated skills of First-Generation Veterans in the attributes necessary to be a successful college student

To increase First-Generation Veterans' support networks with campus resources, other veterans, faculty, and staff

# FALL 2017 COHORT



**Recruitment expanded to other colleges based on admission numbers**



**Eleven students from 4 different colleges**



**Team of 4 faculty, 1 staff member, and 1 graduate assistant led the twice monthly sessions**

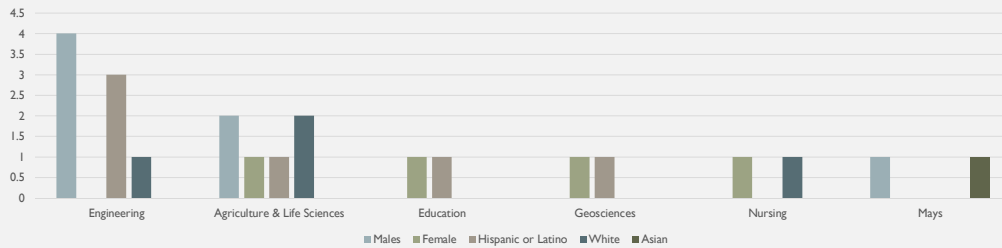


**Topics of each session included:**

- Academic Success Center
- Moneywise Aggie
- Student Counseling Center
- StrengthsFinder
- General Mark Welsh (ret), Dean of the Bush School

## FALL 2017 COHORT DATA

College, Race & Gender



**7:11 students returned for spring 2018 semester**

Remaining 4 did not participate in the spring due to class conflict

**Fall 2017 Average GPA: 3.20**

**Spring 2018 Average GPA: 2.927**

**First year retention of group was 100%**

**Two students from fall 2017 cohort have graduated**

**As of fall 2019, 8 of the remaining 9 participants are currently still enrolled at the university**

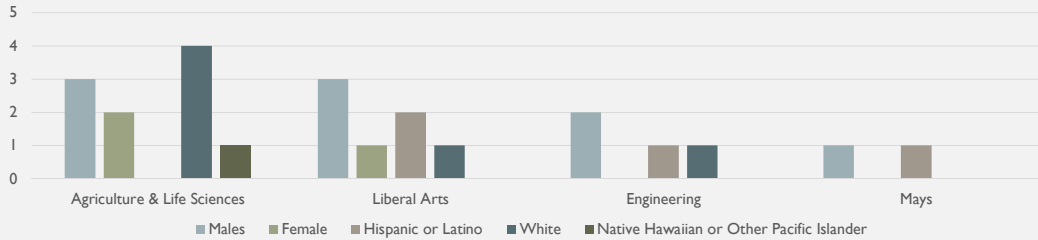
# FALL 2018 COHORT



- Recruited students utilizing listing of admitted students received from Military Admissions Office
- Attended annual Vet Camp hosted by the Student Veterans of America TAMU chapter
- Eleven students from 4 different colleges
- Five returning #FirstGenVets from fall 2017 cohort to serve as mentors
- Additional topics of each session added to the year's schedule based on feedback received from previous cohort and new fall 2018 group
- These topics included:
  - Overview of Howdy Portal & Degree Planner
  - Veteran Health Care Benefits with the VA's Vital Coordinator
  - Thriving as a Student at Texas A&M with Student Counseling Services
  - QPR Training
  - Special Muster Ceremony
  - Graduate School & Study Abroad Informational
  - Trip to Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo
  - Professional etiquette lesson at Christopher's World Grille

## FALL 2018 COHORT DATA

College, Race & Gender



Ten of the 11 students participated in the community during the spring 2019 semester

\*remaining student had course conflict with meeting time

Fall 2018 Average GPA: 3.38

Spring 2019 Average GPA: 2.93

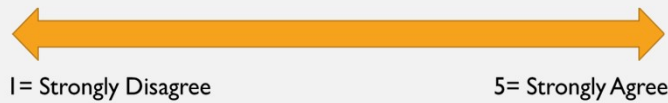
First year retention of fall 2018 cohort was 100%

All eleven students are currently enrolled in fall 2019 semester



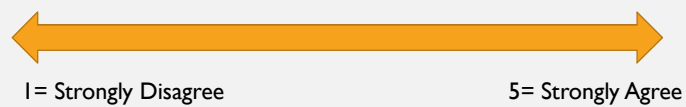
THIS TOPIC WAS RELEVANT TO ME AS A  
STUDENT VETERAN:

- General Welsh 4.9
- Strengths 4.67
- Money Management 4.53
- Veteran Medical Benefits 4.5
- Student Counseling Services 4.5



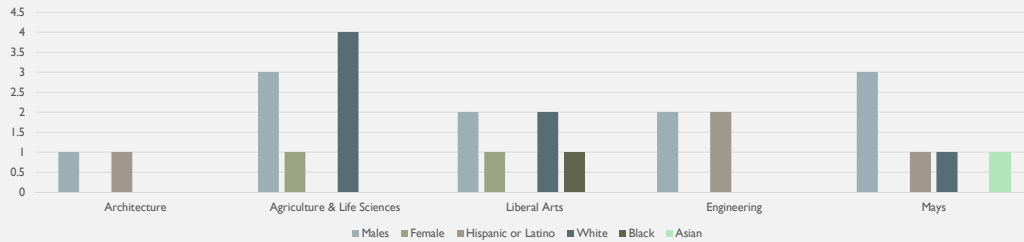
I WILL APPLY INFORMATION FROM THIS  
TOPIC:

- Academic Success Center 4.83
- General Welsh 4.7
- Strengths 4.33



## FALL 2019 COHORT DATA

College, Race & Gender



13 participants in our current cohort

10 peer mentors from previous 2 cohorts

### Fall 2019 Changes:

More advanced peer mentor program

Continued focus on academic success in the spring due to previous cohort spring GPA averages

Exploring additional funding from outside sources to continue the program

Presentations to encourage expansion to other institutions

2



## FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

- **Qualitative study on how their stories have influenced them academically/professionally**
- **Administer the Thriving Quotient (TQ) to the current cohort**
  - Instrument was developed by Dr. Laurie Schreier to measure the academic, social & psychological components of a student's experience
  - These three components fall in line with what is most predictive of academic success, satisfaction with college, institutional fit, and graduation

## VOICES OF THE STUDENT VETERANS

At the final session of each semester, reflective exercises were done to obtain feedback on the student's experiences at the university

Questions asked were:

- What challenges they faced in college and how they dealt with those challenges
- Has the learning community impacted you
- What was the most helpful or beneficial part of the structured components of the learning community
- Did they have specific successes in applying components of the learning community
- How we could improve the learning community for future students



"FINDING MY FEET & BALANCE. WORKED WITH MY FRIENDS AND MENTORS I'VE FOUND THIS YEAR"



"TIME MANAGEMENT, SEPARATING SCHOOL & PERSONAL LIFE"



"TIME MANAGEMENT AND TALKING TO OTHER STUDENTS. FIRSTGENVETS GROUP HELPED ME GET OUT OF MY SHELL"



"KNOW HOW TO BETTER COMMUNICATE WITH TEACHERS IN DEBATABLE TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM"

## CHALLENGES

## DID #FIRSTGENVETS IMPACT THEM?

“Great way to get more connected to the university and it’s communities”

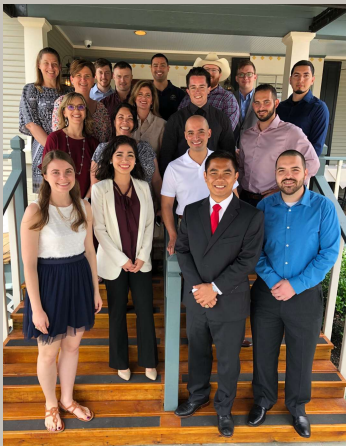
“I have learned about the different programs offered on campus and have used some. Also met some good friends through this program”

“Yes, it has taught me new and alternative ways to improve my education, studying, goal (career and self) and improve myself in general”

“Yes! Learning about all the resources that are available to us has been great. Without this group, I would not have heard about them”

“Yes, definitely. It has provided me with many resources to make college a little easier or assist me, as well as provided me with a group I can relate to and talk to with...”

## BENEFICIAL COMPONENTS OF LEARNING COMMUNITY



“The distribution of knowledge and resources, as well as the community aspect, the Houston trip was a great way to connect with other members of this learning community for an overall better experience”



“The Houston trip was the most fun and team building. I thought the speech by General Welsh was the most beneficial class.”



“Resources and knowledge about TAMU gained. This community was best, the scholarship helped a lot and the trips were all fun. I can’t say any one part was better”



“Program/topics: General Welsh, the book about PTSD/war on terror, stress topic/program, graduate information, studying tips/strategies. Stipend: helps with finances and peace of mind with the expenditures of college”




SUCCESSES FROM #FIRSTGENVETS PARTICIPATION

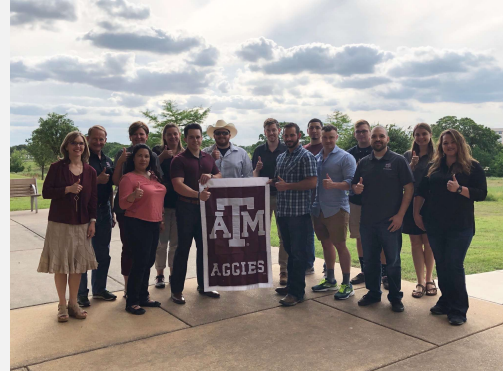
- “Was able to apply for a study abroad program fully and in a timely manner”
- “I utilized the campus one-on-one tutoring and that is the only reason I got an A in general chemistry 2”
- “Utilizing the Howdy portal after training”
- “The knowledge gained mostly put my mind at ease about being here. The strengthsfinder was fun and eye opening. I pass it on to my fellow students.”

**WHERE DO WE GO NEXT & IMPROVEMENT**

- The feedback from the students is what makes the learning community improve each year.
- Some of the feedback we received directly from them:
  - “Perhaps do more of a meet and greet introduction on a regular basis. Like a team building activity. For veterans to break out of that tough shell.”
  - “Maybe learn more of the A&M traditions. I still know very few. I think it would help veterans to feel like part of the community more so they can better participate.”
  - “It has been great! I truly do not have any recommendations. It has been great!”

## LET'S HEAR FROM SOME OF OUR FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT VETERANS!

- Can you talk about your story? What brought you to Texas A&M and your major?
- What has been your experience at Texas A&M as a Veteran? Good and bad?
- What did you gain from being in the #FirstGenVets learning community?



## QUESTIONS?



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