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

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 Re-adjustment 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

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

VETERAN STUDENTS TODAY AT TAMU

- TAMU currently ranks #4 as one of USAA’s best places for veteran education and #23 as Military Times Best Colleges for Vets.

2014
- Veteran enrollment numbers have been continuously tracked by the Veteran Resource and Support Center since 2014.
- 45% increase in veteran enrollment from spring 2014 semester to spring 2019 semester.

2018–2019
- In the 2018–2019 academic year, TAMU had a total veteran student population of 1,103.
  - Undergraduate student veterans made up 563 of that total number.

Current Veteran Enrollment
- As of August 30, 2019, total veteran enrollment was at 1,378.

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 to 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

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, and Delta Company.

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.

FIRST-GENERATION & STUDENT VETERAN POPULATIONS

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

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
• 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

CREATION OF #FIRSTGENVETS

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
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

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

- 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

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

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

CHALLENGES

- "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."
DID #FIRSTGENVETS IMPACT THEM?

“Great way to get more connected to the university and its 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?
REFERENCES


Kirchner, M.J. (2015). Supporting student veteran transition to college and academic success. Adult Learning, 26(3), 116-123.

