



D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families
Office of Veteran & Military Affairs
School of Education

VET-SIM: A Potential Game Changing Opportunity for Student Veterans Facing Unique Challenges in Higher Education

October 24-25, 2022

Texas A&M University System:
Military-Affiliated Student Symposium

Presented By: Benjamin Dotger, Ph.D. & Linda R. Euto, Ph.D

© 2022, IVMF at Syracuse University. This content may be distributed freely for educational and research uses as long as this copyright notice is attached. No commercial use of this material may be made without express written permission.



Agenda

- 1 The Project
- 2 The Pilot & Goals
- 3 The Need
- 4 Student Veteran Testimony
- 5 Findings
- 6 Next Steps

The VET-SIM Project

- Develop clinical simulations (SIMs) for veterans transitioning into and currently enrolled in higher education.
- A collaboration between the SU School of Education (SOE), the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), and the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs (OVMA) at Syracuse University.



What is a SIM?

A simulation (SIM) is a live, one-to-one interaction between a learner and a carefully trained actor.

This model is drawn from medical education's use of simulations with standardized patients.



What Is Vet-SIM?

- Like the medical model, a VET-SIM simulation situates a veteran in a one-to-one conversation with a standardized student, teaching assistant, faculty member, or university staff member.
- For example, in one simulation, each veteran engages with a standardized faculty member (trained actor) who learns of the veteran's past military service, presumes a link between military service and leadership ability, and immediately asks the veteran to engage in the classroom in a leadership role.
- Another simulation situates each veteran with a (standardized) college peer (trained actor) who asks too many pointed questions about military service.

How does VET-SIM work?

- Provided a Veteran Protocol (VP), which gives a *realistic* amount of information to the veteran participant
- Participating veterans are not scripted or directed on how to engage in the upcoming simulation with the standardized peer, instructor, or staff member
- “But how do I...?!”
- “What should I say if...?!”



How does VET-SIM work?

- All simulations are video-recorded; one week after the simulations, the cohort of student veterans comes together to watch the videos and debrief on that (simulated) challenge.
- The debriefing processes intentionally makes space for the group to engage as a community, as they collectively examine video of each other's approaches, practices, strengths, and struggles in the shared experience of the simulation.



▶ The Pilot & Goals

The VET-SIM Pilot

- Thanks to a grant from Syracuse University, we were able to conduct two VET-SIM pilots with student veterans from Syracuse University.
- The first pilot took place in the spring of 2018 and the second in spring of 2022.
- The gap in the pilots was due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions for in-person research.
- 14 student veterans participated in the pilots.
- Student veterans met throughout the semester to partake in a simulation and group discussions.



VET-SIM Goals

To support student veterans and strengthen their transition to collegiate study.

To help student veterans navigate and overcome challenges and barriers to collegiate success.

To give each student veteran who participates in the VET-SIM model a chance to engage and practice as individuals in their simulations.

To give each student veteran the opportunity to talk through the simulation(s) with their veteran peers.



The Need

Why SIMs For Student Veterans?

- Military veterans transitioning from service to collegiate study often face unique barriers to collegiate success.
- Feeling as though universities do not recognize the value of the skills they learned in the military and how they transfer onto a college campus, many student veterans may feel isolated, anxious and/or misunderstood (Barry, Wadsworth & Whitman, 2014; Zoli, Maury & Fay, 2015).



Why SIMs For Student Veterans?

Additional factors, including financial burdens, family obligations, expiration of GI Bill benefits, challenges to wellness and dis/ability, and conflict between employment and school, also contribute to the difficulty veterans may have entering and completing higher education.





Testimony

What Student Veterans had to say about VET-SIM

- *"Veterans often experience difficulties transitioning from military to civilian life, and those who pursue higher education are no exception. The Institute for Veterans and Military Families' initiative to ease that transition through their Vet-Sims project is a commendable example of the Syracuse community giving back to those who served. I am certain that many student veterans will benefit from it in the future."*
- *"Even if the student veteran is brand new and hasn't had any time in the classroom or on a campus, it would be very beneficial for them to be exposed to potentially uncomfortable situations and challenging experiences."*
- *"I felt that the VET-SIM was, overall, successful. It allowed a small population of veterans to voice some concerns they have had with transitioning into academic life."*
- *"It [VET-SIM] gives the University an opportunity to see, hear, and understand what is good and what needs to be improved upon so future veterans have a more pleasurable transitioning experience."*
- *"By facing these situations in simulations, they (student veterans) can be prepared, have discussions with others, and know that while it might not always be easy to face some of the situations brought about by the ignorance or disrespect of others (or simply the effects of their own experiences) they won't be alone."*

Initial Findings

Initial Findings

- Thus far, the pilot data has shown promising evidence for using simulations to support student veterans as they transition from military service to collegiate study.
- Student veteran pilot participants indicate that the VET-SIM simulations are accurate and realistic in approximating situations that student veterans experience in transition to collegiate study.
- The data also show that student veterans employ various **strategies**, when questioned by civilian peers, or faced with other such challenges on campus.
 - For example, one VET-SIM participant told us, that he simply told a civilian student peer that his probing questions about his military life were inappropriate and that he had crossed a line.
 - Another, told us that he simply "handled-it" when a professor continuously looked to him as the expert on military conflict, repeatedly asking him questions during class.
 - Others told us that they would give 'canned' responses to questions. For example, one student veteran said he simply said, " I don't really have an opinion on what's going on currently," when asked about the current President of the U.S.



Next Steps

- Future Scenarios*
- Course for Incoming student Veterans at SU*
- Replicate at other Institutions*



Q&A



D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families

Office of Veteran & Military Affairs

School of Education

For more information on the VET-SIM project please contact:

Benjamin Dotger, Ph.D. bdotger@syr.edu

Professor; Chair of Teaching & Leadership, Syracuse University

Linda R. Euto Ph.D. lmrougea@syr.edu

Associate Director, Research and Evaluation, IVMF