

# Articulating Veteran-Friendly:

## Preparing First-Year Writing Instructors to Work with Veterans

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*The CCCC position statement on student veterans (2015) reminds writing program administrators (WPAs) of their responsibility to prepare faculty to understand not only the challenges these returning students may face but also the assets they bring with them. This essay argues that writing programs must develop faculty education programs that go beyond solo workshops to articulate what it means to be veteran friendly. Specifically, this essay identifies and describes a special-interest-group (or SIG) model for instructor education. This SIG relies on a micro-curriculum to promote a mode of “uncoverage” in learning about student veterans (Reid, 2004). Instructor reflections from a pilot program identify and define characteristics that help to articulate what veteran friendly means in local contexts including awareness of student-veteran issues, empathy toward student veterans, and confidence in working with student veterans.*

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As veterans continue to return home from deployments around the globe and seek education, colleges and universities also seek means of acting as veteran-friendly “sponsors of literacy” in order to aid student veterans’ learning and success

(Brandt 166). While much of this veteran-friendly sponsorship takes the form of infrastructure or curriculum, writing program administrators (WPAs) and other teacher educators (TEs) need fluid, adaptable solutions for preparing teachers to work with student veterans. This essay focuses on one such effort to prepare faculty to offer veteran-friendly courses through a locally developed special-interest group (SIG) of like-minded instructors in the undergraduate writing program. This SIG is infused with a four-part micro-curriculum that promotes a mode of “uncoverage”—active inquiry rather than passive information reception—in learning about student veterans (Reid). Through their reflective writing, the participating instructors suggest that articulating what counts as veteran friendly is a far more complex endeavor than they first believed. The findings overall suggest that participating in the SIG may increase instructor awareness of student-veteran issues, increase empathy toward student veterans, foster instructor confidence in working with student veterans, and reveal additional challenges that require attention. In sum, the SIG model and curriculum enables instructors, WPAs, and other TEs to articulate what it means to be veteran friendly in their local contexts.

## THEORIZING VETERAN-FRIENDLY EDUCATION

Research on student veterans reveals an existing gap between what educators know about this group and how they can implement effective means of preparing faculty to work with them. Much of the current conversation focuses on *what* faculty need to know about student veterans including their similarities to other adult learners (Cleary; O'Herrin), red tape they encounter in the academy (Glasser, Powers, and Zywiak), their academic strengths and issues (Dalton; Ackerman et al.), and their signature wounds like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Ackerman et al.; Baechtold and De Sawal). This knowledge most often translates into veteran-friendly “administrative” solutions and campus support structures like veteran centers, admissions policies, or special courses (Mallory and Downs 53; Loring and Anderson 100). Yet even these articulations of what is veteran friendly have their limitations, especially in the classroom.

For example, two existing classroom articulations of what is veteran friendly are veteran-cohort courses and military-themed courses (Valentino; Keast). Veteran-cohort courses, analogous to learning communities, may have issues with enrollment and socialization. The writing program described in this essay implemented veteran-cohort courses many years ago. Once implemented, the courses struggled to succeed for several reasons. First, only one or two sections of the courses could be offered, and if the times were not amenable to the veteran students, then enrollment suffered and the courses were cancelled. If the courses did have enough students to proceed, then instructors reported challenges in contending with the social bonds among the students. In other words, the veteran-cohort courses could produce such a safe haven for military culture that the social bonds threatened to subsume the learning goals, and the instructors still felt ill-equipped to address the challenge. The solution eventually disappeared, but the need to support student veterans remained.

A second articulation of what counts as veteran friendly is veteran- or military-themed courses, which tie writing to readings and issues related to military life. Veteran-themed courses, too, may face enrollment challenges. Scholar and instructor Darren Keast's description of his own veteran-themed course suggests full student enrollment with only a few student veterans. While the course runs, Keast reports different tension points including civilian students' uncertainty about the curricular focus on military issues, as well as student veterans' own reluctance to dwell further on those topics. Keast's experience demonstrates that veteran friendly does not necessarily mean focusing course content on military culture, a topic that some student veterans may be all too ready to leave behind.

In the end, neither of these veteran-friendly solutions focuses on preparing the classroom teacher, leaving scholars and teachers to argue "there is an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct research" focused on what veteran friendly means in the classroom for faculty who feel poorly prepared (Ackerman et al. 13; De La Ysla 98). While each approach has potential, depending on the context in which it is implemented, WPAs and TEs also need different approaches to veteran-friendly instruction that focus specifically on developing instructor knowledge rather than

infrastructure or curriculum. Effectively implementing this focus first requires paying special attention to its underlying education theory: a learning paradigm.

Scholarship on teaching and learning contrasts an instructional paradigm and a learning paradigm as two different approaches to education. An instructional paradigm focuses on covering information and content delivery. Teacher education events that adhere to an instructional paradigm are alluring because they can be delivered simply in a finite amount of time (e.g., a brown-bag lecture or workshop) and replicated infinitely. They might even be emailed as a list of bullet points. The danger that teacher education events like these present is the promotion of a “case-closed” mentality—“I needed information. I got the information. I am now veteran friendly.” This fits the “happy slogan” form of what it means to be veteran friendly that Ackerman et al. warn against. This concern also surfaces in Keast’s writing on veteran-friendly courses:

At one meeting of faculty who wanted to work more closely with vets, it was suggested that the group make signs for professors to put up in their offices that identified them as vet-friendly, similar to ones put out by the Queer Resource Center, or place a special symbol in the class schedule. I opposed this for seeming to imply that those without the marking were by default anti-veteran, and for the way it turned a personal position into bumper-sticker politics.

In this recounting, the signs are more indicative of a desire to be veteran friendly than they are of clear outcomes or expectations. Although these visible signs can be meaningful and valuable, Keast’s concern is warranted. The research reported here suggests that adopting a learning paradigm approach to faculty development can help instructors push past the “case-closed” mentality that can accompany a workshop or visible sign. In order to accomplish this, WPAs and TEs must envision more than the standard presentation or workshop (Blalock 558). They must envision a learning paradigm. This means that instead of merely covering the relevant information, teacher education programs must press for what rhetorician and WPA Shelley Reid has identified as *uncoverage*—a key principle

of a learning paradigm. Whereas a coverage model focuses on “comprehensiveness and scope” of content—fitting the definition of an instructional paradigm—the uncoverage model relies on “exploratory, inquiry-driven, reflective study” (Reid 16). The ideal result of this uncoverage model is “a way of knowing some ideas about teaching writing while leaving them open to further inquiry” (25). A good example of an uncoverage model in action comes from Aiken, Beard, McClure, and Nickoson’s article on micro-studies. Here, Aiken et al describe low-stakes, semester-bound attempts by rhetoric and composition graduate students to conduct authentic field research as part of a course on research methods. While this “hands-on” research experience did not exactly yield high-caliber results that would pass muster in a scholarly peer review, the experiences of the students yielded rich learning about how to conduct research successfully. Instead of simply covering the information the graduate students needed to know (instructional paradigm), the students developed their knowledge by exploring, inquiring, and reflecting on their experiences (learning paradigm). The SIG model described here applies this same theory of learning to preparing instructors for work with student veterans.

## **THE VETERAN SIG: A LEARNING PARADIGM IN ACTION**

Building on this depiction of a micro-study, I sought out program instructors interested in offering veteran-friendly writing instruction at West Virginia University (WVU), an R1, land-grant institution with a student population around 31,000. WVU currently enrolls approximately 400 student veterans and another 313 student veteran dependents. The institution’s undergraduate writing program uses a two-course, portfolio-based writing sequence, offering roughly 75 sections of each course per semester. These courses are taught by the program’s graduate teaching assistants (roughly sixty) and lecturers (roughly twelve).

The anchor for the SIG was a short-form syllabus or micro-curriculum, aimed at generating exploration, inquiry, and reflection on student veterans. The SIG’s micro-curriculum asked for five hours of training focused on working with student veterans. While this number could be adjusted to suit various contexts, it worked in the current context for several reasons. First, it struck a balance

between rigor and flexibility. Five hours of professional development represented a significant investment of instructors' time, whether graduate teaching assistant (GTA) or lecturer, yet the requirement was constrained and flexible enough to be achieved in a semester or over the course of an academic year. In fact, as part of their ongoing professional development in teaching composition, all of the graduate instructors in the program were regularly required to complete five hours of professional development activities each semester. The five hours required for the SIG fit neatly into that program and aided the instructors in meeting their obligation. This approach also created space for the SIG to become a process of learning and avoid some of the drawbacks that could accompany solitary, check-the-box workshops or information-dump lectures.

The five hours themselves were designed to equip instructors with baseline knowledge, expose them to research on student veterans, and engage them in dialogue and reflection. To achieve this, the SIG began in the fall with a general information session. This session explained how the SIG worked, introduced instructors to contextual institutional policies related to student veterans, and reviewed some of what researchers already know about working with this student group (e.g., the CCCC position statement on working with Veteran Students).

In addition to explaining the SIG process to instructors, the second and third goals of this general information session were vital to its mission. The institution where the SIG took place has its own policies for student veterans (as other institutions surely do), and often, these policies can be complex and easy to misinterpret. For example, the institution maintains a policy that if active-duty service persons are deployed during or after the twelfth week of the term, then they should receive a final grade equivalent to what they had achieved up to the time of their departure *unless* there is a course-critical component that must be completed after the twelfth week. Locally, many active-duty service members and instructors missed the detail about course-critical components, and in a portfolio-based writing course, the portfolios qualified as a course-critical component. It was important for instructors to understand the complexity of policies like this one, so that they provided students with accurate interpretations

and wise counsel about proceeding. At this institution, these active-duty service persons sometimes requested and received Incomplete grades for the term so that they could fulfill their military obligations without failing the course, withdrawing, or starting the course over again. If an institution implementing this model did not have specific policies for working with student veterans and active-duty service members, the SIG could provide an opportunity to articulate and clarify appropriate course or program policies for things like activation or drills (Bauman).

Finally, this information session presented a summary of existing arguments about working with student veterans. These arguments were not framed as “answers,” *per se*, but rather as premises that instructors could practice and test. For example, the session included the idea that student veterans will be loathe to visit a writing center, because a writing tutor is outside the “chain of command” (Valentino 174). Any WPA or TE coordinating a session like this can likely anticipate a member of the group immediately offering the exception: “I had a student veteran in my class last year who always went to the writing center.” While anecdotal evidence exists to enervate almost any generalization, the important thing for the SIG was to identify the tension between formal and experiential knowledge to create a site of inquiry, analysis, and idea formation. This rhetoric permeated the micro-curriculum because these tensions played a vital role in fostering a learning paradigm within the SIG. In the previous example, the desired outcome was not a definitive answer about whether or not veterans visit writing centers. Instead, the desired outcome was instructors’ (that is, everyone in the room) heightened sensitivity to the role writing centers may or may not play in their student veterans’ education. In this way, the rhetoric of the SIG fostered a shared sense of power and need for collaboration. All participants were learners.

To build on the premises established in the initial session, the second focus in the micro-curriculum was a student-veteran roundtable, which extended power sharing to student veterans by providing them with a platform for telling their own stories. Keast describes a similar dialogue in his work on veteran-friendly writing courses; however, his takes place in the classroom between student veterans

and civilian students. The difference here was that student veterans met with instructors without the constraints of classroom dynamics. The student veterans were not enrolled in the instructors' sections or even necessarily taking the course at the time of the panel. The objective of this time was to demonstrate reciprocity—a tenet of service learning and sponsorship—through dialogue. Instructors asked student veterans questions about their college experiences and learning styles. Student veterans described their experiences in the classroom and asked questions of the instructors. There were two general things that happened during this dialogue that are worth noting. First, the student-veteran testimony corroborated many of the premises from the initial information session. Second, instructors began to grapple with questions of how to best accommodate student veterans in their classes as well as accommodate their other students. In other words, they began to encounter some perceived dissonance between the two groups. For example, instructors heard a student veteran say that PowerPoint presentations carried great currency for disseminating information in the military and that the student veteran valued them highly. For the instructors, this was also a direct nudge toward a more lecture-based (i.e., instructional paradigm) classroom as opposed to the active-learning classrooms (i.e., learning paradigm) espoused by the writing program. These instructors began to grapple with whether or not to accept student veterans' opinions whole cloth. They had to balance the "wants" of some students with a pedagogical approach that may, in the end, create some discomfort but also yield greater results. Again, the value here was not necessarily the resolution but the overt consideration of the issue and the discourse it created.

The third and fourth components of the micro-curriculum called for instructors to turn to current scholarship on student veterans and to each other. If these components are completed sequentially, this research activity moves instructors from face-to-face testimony to a literature review mode, an apt mode especially for graduate teachers.<sup>1</sup> Through the texts, instructors continued to uncover ideas about working with student veterans—how they might differ from traditional students, what they have in common with other adult learners, what activities might engage them—based on questions or incongruences generated by their learning thus far. The reviews that the instructors wrote were less a critique of the research—



though that mode of writing was near impossible to avoid—and more exploratory in which they examined their experiences in light of what the research suggested. They also brainstormed how they might apply the research to their own teaching. To foster community and dialogue within the group, the instructors shared these reviews with the WPA, as well as with each other in the fourth component of the micro-curriculum—an instructor roundtable. Therefore, the instructors were processing the information they gained, and they were sharing it through dialogue directly with other instructors. This provided a new context to analyze their formal and experiential knowledge and to connect their explorations and inquiries to those of others. As the SIG ages and grows, this component also presents an opportunity to invite back other instructors who have completed the micro-curriculum so that they can share their expertise and ongoing challenges.

The final component of the micro-curriculum is devoted to reflective writing. This portion of the curriculum is vital to the process for two specific reasons. First, by producing “reflection-on-action,” instructors create frames for the mess of information they encounter from their students, their reading, and their discussions (Schön 157). It is in this way that the writing becomes epistemic, producing knowledge about the topic that the instructor may continue to analyze and test. Second, the reflective writing provides another structure that supports a process of reflective practice that begins with the instructors’ initial training. By being prompted to write reflectively at various points in their time as instructors, faculty development programs can foster a culture of reflective practice (Bamberg 150). This culture is crucial in order to “raise the overall level of instructional effectiveness” (Bamberg 157). In other words, the learning paradigm approach espoused here has additional implications for general faculty development. It is valuable for supporting student veterans but may be adapted to address other faculty development needs.

## **EXAMINING EFFECTIVENESS: THE SIG’S OUTCOMES**

To date, there are sixteen instructors working their way through the SIG and its micro-curriculum. Five have completed the entire curriculum. While any effort to assess programs supporting student veterans will ultimately seek data on those students’ grades or

retention rates, it made sense to begin assessing the SIG model through instructor outcomes. To do so, I collected and analyzed the reflective writing of the five instructors who completed the micro-curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Through the descriptive first-cycle coding of the instructors' reflective writing, it became apparent that their reflections were not only describing their personal growth but simultaneously articulating what veteran friendly could and should mean in the context of the SIG and the writing program. As a result, second-cycle coding focused more explicitly on describing attitudes toward student veterans, pedagogy, and instructor efficacy. In other words, the instructors' reflections helped assess the SIG's application of a learning paradigm approach but also helped to further articulate what it means to provide veteran-friendly instruction.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the instructor reflections was a greater awareness of student-veteran issues. Each of the reflections recounted new instructor insights and attitudes toward student veterans. For example, one instructor reported that it was "frustrating to hear from the student veterans that the VA was so unhelpful." While abstract insights like these uncover the complexity of challenges facing student veterans, what is missing is an explicit connection to tangible outcomes like enforcement of classroom attendance policies when a student veteran must wait months on end for a specified and unchangeable appointment at a VA clinic. Nonetheless, this awareness did extend to considerations of how instructors do or do not identify student veterans in their courses. For example, another instructor recorded a need to be "mindful of and respectful toward my veteran students' desires to either keep their veteran status concealed or to share it with me or the class." This instructor attitude aligns with other research on student veterans suggesting that disclosure of status or experiences remain at the student veterans' discretion instead of being prompted by the instructor. Finally, a third instructor conveyed that "to be a successful instructor one must be compassionate. Listening to the veterans share their experiences in and out of the classroom during our roundtable discussion only reaffirmed that to be my best instructor self—often the key is just to listen." This reflection seems especially relevant to the SIG as a whole because of the ways in which it resonates with the *uncover* approach. It suggests that the listening, dialogue, and processing has itself made its way into the instructor's attitude and

pedagogy and that learning about student veterans is not complete but ongoing with each student veteran encountered.

Like the instructor who identified listening as a vital part of working with veteran students, other instructor reflections also provided insights related to pedagogy. That is, instructors reported having new ideas about effective teaching practices to use with student veterans. These practices ranged from assignment design, to responding to student veteran writing, to choosing materials for class. For example, in terms of assignment design, one instructor reports that “in future sections, I plan to offer projects with focused goals but that are broad enough for a student veteran to, if they choose, write about their experiences.” Here the identification of choice surfaces again, but this time it pertains to paper topics instead of status disclosure. The instructor refrains from requiring or removing writing about military experience and instead empowers the student to make his or her own decision. Other instructors grappling with questions of appropriate content reached conclusions or at least decisions about their goals for content. One instructor recommends “carefully choosing texts that do not entirely shut out conversations of potentially heavy topics such as war and the military but that do not endanger the mental or emotional wellbeing of my veteran students.” Likewise, another instructor sums up concerns about content by stating “course themes and assignments should be sensitive to political issues, war, and military service, never forcing students to write or share about their experiences, and avoiding polarizing or triggering discussions, visuals, or readings.” In both instances, some of the practices identified in other sources on working with student veterans are surfacing in the instructors’ attempts to make meaning of their experience. In this context, the provenance of the idea is less essential than the instructor’s ability to recognize and articulate its importance.

In addition to instructors’ increased awareness of issues student veterans face and their connections to the classroom, some instructors reported feeling greater efficacy as a result of their participation in the SIG. One instructor felt empowered to “correct any potentially detrimental situations” within the classroom, while another reconsidered “constructing syllabi and interacting with all students, not only veterans.” As much as anything, these feelings of

preparedness might be the most beneficial for instructors because they are making decisions about how to work with student veterans and students in general. Most salient was one instructor's reflection on how the pieces fit together. The instructor wrote that

in each of these experiences, from the introduction to the... veteran-student writers project, to the roundtable discussions with veteran students themselves, I feel confident in my abilities to work with and instruct veteran students in my classroom and in accessing the larger community of [my school] for assistance if needed to help me assist my students.

For this instructor, the confidence derives from the experiential and formal knowledge gained through the SIG and extends through the classroom to the community. It seems that part of the new confidence simply comes from the fact that the instructor no longer feels isolated. The instructor knows there are others working to increase their understanding of student veterans and that there are resources available to help, connecting the classroom to the larger infrastructure. The instructor is able to keep learning without the pressure of "knowing it all."

While awareness, pedagogy, and efficacy were the dominant themes in the instructor reflections, there were two others that—though not pervasive—make important contributions to articulating what "veteran friendly" can mean. One of these themes was the need for ongoing inquiry into working with student veterans. For example, the instructor that focused on listening also wrote "through my training I have learned that I need to learn more." A second instructor commented "I hope to continue attending these discussions and to further my engagement with the community of teachers of student veterans." Because the SIG model purports to emphasize *uncoverage* rather than coverage and adopts a learning paradigm approach to these conclusions, the notion that more remains to be learned is a welcome sight because it suggests that this approach can foster the desire and maybe even commitment to sustained inquiry. Nonetheless, the limited presence of this attitude in the instructor reflections, suggests only that it is possible and certainly does not happen automatically. To foster this attitude, the current articulation

of the SIG may require more explicit connections to this outcome, as well as further investigation into methods that may foster greater recognition of this need.

The final theme that emerged from the instructor reflections related to infrastructure. What is deeply impressive about this reflection is its connection back to the concept of sponsorship—particularly how sponsors have the power to aid or hinder the sponsored (Brandt 166). This instructor reported gaining significant knowledge from the SIG, but the instructor also took issue with the idea of veteran-friendly courses at all, due to the limitations of the institution's infrastructure. The instructor identified several problems that made the educational context far less than friendly for student veterans, including an inability to designate specific courses as veteran friendly in the campus registration system, the fact that student veterans often must register for courses before the veteran-friendly instructors receive their course assignments, and, as Keast also argues, the possible inference that if some sections are veteran-friendly others must be unfriendly to veterans. These are fair critiques of a system attempting to provide necessary consideration for student veterans while also grappling with the local constraints present in any context. And just as the most prevalent themes from the instructor reflections can contribute to articulations of what exactly is “veteran friendly,” this instructor's insights can help point the way as well.

This instructor's reflection provides a vital perspective on the limitations of the SIG and its potential impact within the local context. Due to constraints that seem beyond the control of an individual instructor (e.g., the student registration system and the timeliness of teaching assignments), this reflection suggests that the scope of the SIG is, simply, too small. The only solution the instructor envisions is for every course to be veteran friendly. At the same time, this instructor's sobering assessment of the SIG further underscores the inherent value of an *uncoverage* approach to teacher education. The instructor's participation in the SIG has literally uncovered challenges that the WPA and others must address in order to enhance the effort to provide veteran-friendly courses. A presentation focused only on delivering the information that instructors “need to know” about student veterans, may have completely overlooked the local,

contextual issues that undermine the goal. This approach uncovered them. Furthermore, these revelations support an understanding of providing veteran-friendly courses as an ongoing practical and rhetorical process rather than something an institution simply is or is not. As a result of these observations, the writing program can work to address these issues through action and advocacy. The program's documentation of veteran-friendly courses carefully articulates what veteran friendly means in the local context and works to disabuse students of the notion that other courses are simply unfriendly to veterans. The documentation also lists the course numbers of instructors participating in the SIG so that student veterans can make more informed choices or seek opportunities to enroll in specific courses if they choose to. The writing program shares this information with the campus veterans' office, student advising, and the student veterans' Facebook group in order to disseminate the information as widely as possible. Finally, producing and sharing these efforts has generated increased visibility for student veterans throughout the institution, which has resulted in ever-greater opportunities to move closer to the overall goal of every course being veteran friendly in tangible and observable ways.

## **CONCLUSION**

Going forward, the themes that emerged from the instructor reflections—awareness, pedagogy, and efficacy, along with the desire for ongoing inquiry and critique of infrastructure, provide a useful framework for articulating what exactly “veteran friendly” can mean in the context of a faculty development program. Ideally, these insights will help WPAs and TEs form outcomes for faculty development focused on student veterans that can then be measured and assessed. In sum, these outcomes are as follows:

By the end of the Student Veteran SIG curriculum instructors should

- Feel greater confidence working with student veterans
- Demonstrate greater awareness of issues (benefits, financial, academic, cultural, and wellness) affecting student veterans

- Describe changes or adaptations in their teaching based on their SIG work
- Understand institutional policies and resources related to working with student veterans
- Identify a need for continued inquiry on working with and understanding student veterans

This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it provides a touchstone for advancement. Future research will bring even greater clarity to this list through corroborating or refuting these outcomes and perhaps even building a more robust list as other program contexts create their own SIGs.

With this list, this writing program has a shareable sketch of where the SIG's micro-curriculum performed well (e.g., awareness and confidence) and where gains could be made (e.g., infrastructure). The program is also able to clearly and confidently articulate to multiple audiences what veteran friendly means in the context of West Virginia University. Amid the abundance of scholarly work discussing student veterans in higher education, this study helps WPAs and TEs answer the call to prepare instructors to work with student veterans. On a practical level, this model can benefit both participating instructors', as well as programs' overall efforts to define veteran friendly within specific locales, enabling both to engage more fully and purposefully in their sponsorship of student veterans.

## NOTES

1. Though ideally completed sequentially, the SIG is flexible enough that instructors could begin their work with any of the first four components. The final reflection would still need to be completed last for obvious reasons.
2. This study received an IRB exemption (#1507745004).



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