

Writing Faculty on the Marine Corps Base: Building Strong Classroom Communities Through Engagement and Advocacy

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In this paper, the authors introduce the voluntary education center (VEC), which is a multi-school campus located on military bases in the United States and worldwide that offers accredited undergraduate and graduate degrees to service members and their families. The VEC combines military and higher education elements, offering a productive site of study for the complex interactions between writing instructors and student-veterans in this community of practice. Findings from interviews with five VEC writing instructors offer perspectives on teaching student-veterans in a non-traditional academic environment and illustrate the strategies faculty deploy as they engage with student-veterans, as well as the resources and support they seek. Implications for faculty in traditional higher education settings who work with increasing numbers of veterans are explored.

When I'm [teaching Marine college writing students] on base I say, 'Listen, I'm a hippie. My family said I was so crazy for teaching here. But I love our soldiers and I think the best thing we can do for them is not send them to war... but whatever, that's a different [conversation].' And so I say, 'You guys should teach me about military life.' So

from then on, every class it's, 'Let's teach [the instructor] about the military. Who has something you want me to learn?' And then they all tell me . . . one person will tell me one thing before we start class.

—College composition instructor, Marine Base Quantico Voluntary Education Center

INTRODUCTION

As the 9-11 GI Bill is increasingly used, and as wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have slowed down, and the military has reduced its force, service members are leaving the military and going or returning to school to finish their degrees. Increasing attention is being paid to the unique experiences of this population (Morrow & Hart; Hinton, “Front and Center”) and to the ways in which they are similar and different from non-traditional, adult learner populations (Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang; Doe and Langstraat; Hinton, “Front and Center”). Attention has also been given to the need for training writing center tutors who work with veterans and to the cultural shock some veterans experience when entering traditional colleges and universities (Hinton, “Front and Center”). Even as researchers are paying increased attention to the challenges veterans face as they transition from the military into universities, the voluntary education center (VEC), where many service members first access higher education while still serving, remains an understudied site¹.

VECs, located on military bases worldwide, offer a physical site for service members to enroll in accredited undergraduate and graduate degree programs and attend classes. While aspects of writing instruction in VECs have been described (Hinton, “Front and Center”; Shivers-McNair), and while the military community's sense of collaboration and teamwork operates in the writing classroom has been explored (Hinton, “Front and Center”), there is an incomplete picture of the ways in which universities and colleges operate within these military environments. More specifically, the participation of writing instructors in VECs sheds light on the ways that faculty

1 The military and the university already have an enduring historical-cultural relationship, dating back to the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which led to the formation of colleges that provided education and training in military studies (Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang, 2015).

engage with the military students on their own turf and how faculty deploy resources, make-do, and integrate into these communities as they teach.

In this article, we focus on the VEC civilian faculty experience to illustrate the resources and support instructors perceive as important, available, or in need of improvement as they transition from the college campus to the military base VEC campus to work almost exclusively with student veterans. In doing so, we hope to “flip the script” on *transition*, a term commonly used to describe veteran students leaving the military and entering the university, and instead offer a different perspective by investigating the experiences of VEC faculty who *transition* from the traditional university campus to a hybrid military-university environment.

Like the self-described “hippie” who asks her students to teach her something about the Marine Corps at the start of each class meeting, these contingent instructors, as they engage in their teaching, often have no previous experience working within military environments. The interviews we conducted with writing faculty illustrate their motivation and the strategies they deploy to support and advocate for veteran students as faculty work through the limitations and constraints of their own knowledge and experience and the VEC campus. In doing so, we show that while these writing faculty experience limited membership in professional communities of practice, they endeavor to seek professional support outside of the VEC and work towards creating supportive communities of practice within the classroom. Although the experiences of writing instructors in the Quantico VEC echo and magnify the experiences written by and about instructors working with military students on traditional college campuses, the VEC faculty show us student-centered strategies and behaviors developed to address the specific needs of the military student, which can inform our teaching and community building in our own, more traditional classrooms.

The VEC, given its hybrid configuration as an educational site that straddles both the military and academic communities, represents a unique ecological framework for teaching and learning communities, and it provides an ideal opportunity to observe the needs of writing

instructors and the ways that they engage in new communities and develop mechanisms to succeed. A communities of practice approach (Wenger; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder) offers the opportunity to explore how writing instructors operate in the periphery as they learn how to navigate that new environment. Wenger, in his seminal work *Communities of Practice*, conceives of situated learning “as a historical-cultural theory of learning” (32) and consider learning “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (31). Writing instructors, as they become part of the community of the VEC, engage in the socially situated learning of the center, where their learning of Marine culture is “an integral part of the generative social practice in the lived world” (Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning* 35). As outsiders to the military, but insiders within higher education communities, writing instructors have opportunities to deploy tools and resources that might help them integrate as new members to the community of the VEC. They also face unique challenges and opportunities to solve problems as they encounter unfamiliar rules and environments. We were particularly interested in the ways that the civilian writing instructors, as they transition from the university campus to the military base VEC campus, identify and disidentify with military students in this community of practice. The instructor’s narratives of practice both highlight the successes and challenges of teaching in a new community of practice and reaffirm their commitment to serving this community of students.

OVERVIEW OF QUANTICO VOLUNTARY EDUCATION CENTER

Marine Corps Base Quantico is located in Virginia, 40 miles south of Washington, DC along the Interstate 95 commuting corridor. The Marine Corps refers to this base as “The Crossroads of the Marine Corps” because it “is perhaps the only command whose mission touches the farthest reaches of the Corps; decisions made here impact Marines aboard ship, fighting in the Global War on Terrorism, on guard duty at embassies across the globe and reserve duty throughout the United States” (“History”). Quantico VEC contracts with seven universities and community colleges: Averett University, Central Texas College, Northern Virginia Community College, Park University, University of Maryland University College, Florida Institute of Technology, and Old Dominion University. The VEC provides these schools with administrative and teaching space within

the center. Two of these schools offer face to face college writing courses in the VEC. In addition to face to face and online classes through seven contracted schools, Quantico provides free services and support for Marines, their families, civilian employees, and reservists in the VEC: educational and tuition assistance information and counseling, transcripts review for military-related education and training, and testing to include GED and college entrance exams. Because of their accessibility and convenience, VECs on military bases worldwide serve as points of entry to higher education for many service members who will later transfer to traditional college and university campuses. Armino, Grabosky, and Lang report that “SVSM [student veterans and service members] often have taken college courses either before entering the military or during their military experience. In fact, very few SVSM had not taken a college course before arriving at their current institution” (97).

The VEC facilities consists of two repurposed buildings that split into several wings, and schools occupy designated wings. Located within each wing are classrooms and office space for schools’ on-site satellite coordinators, and at least one classroom per wing is designated as a computer lab, which consists of 28 student desks outfitted with desktop computers with retractable monitors. In addition to their use for evening class instruction, these computer lab classrooms also function as testing centers during daytime operations. Notably absent from the VEC, however, are offices and communal working spaces for instructors, and a writing center or communal working space for students. Centralized departmental programs and their operations are also absent from the VEC and are usually located at the main campus of each institution represented at the VEC.

There are three primary groups at the VEC: administrative staff, students, and writing instructors. While students have access to the VEC during both daytime and evening operations, daytime service and support offered by counselors, education technicians, and on-site satellite coordinators concludes at 5 PM, and evening instruction in the VEC begins after 5 PM, which results in little overlap between support staff and instructors.

Administrative staff includes a combination of government-employed civilian staff and contractors who function as site manager and school coordinators. The government-employed civilian staff ensure the efficient operation of the center, including managing and adjudicating issues with university contracts, and coordinating operation of the facility. School coordinators are employed by the schools that offer courses in the VEC. The on-site coordinators provide support to the adjuncts, ensure the adjuncts have access to the classrooms and technology available, and work to enroll students in the courses. The on-site coordinators also promote the courses and solve issues for students as those issues arise.

Although the VEC students include military family members, contractors, and civilians at the base, the vast majority are active-duty Marines and veterans. One of the schools allows civilians from the nearby community college campus to take coursework at the VEC if desired, and the base allows for this arrangement. Students range in age, ethnicity, and other demographic factors. There are five writing instructors currently teaching at the Quantico VEC. Two employed by a university whose main campus is located in Missouri, and three employed by a community college whose main campus is located near Quantico. These instructors are adjuncts in the VEC. All have prior teaching experience, but four had never worked with a military student body before teaching at the VEC.

FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

In its most elemental state, a writing community has at a minimum writing instructors, courses, and students. What has the potential to emerge from this basic framework is a sense of identity formed through further development of an internal, cohesive community and external, networked relationships. The value of community in the formation of a collective program identity, vision, and mission, which points to teaching and learning as part of a social process with shared responsibilities has been studied (Lerner; Townsend). Nearly a half-century of scholarship in writing program research has firmly evidenced the inherently dynamic nature of writing communities, which arise from ecological frameworks situated within fluctuating institutional landscapes (Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser). To be successful, a writing community must be fundamentally protean

in nature (Taylor), able to transform and adapt in response to the context of the local environment (Gunner; McLeod; O'Neill; White). In addition, there are ethical implications inherent to a program beholden to multiple constituencies with conflicting interests and agendas (Leverenz). At the Quantico VEC, the multiple constituencies that are present include the military community of Marine Base Quantico; the VEC and its staff; civilian college and university writing instructors; and the community of students, mostly active-duty Marines with some retirees and civilians. As our interview findings will show, an external networked relationship among faculty fails to emerge. While the ecological design and operation of the VEC places some limitations on opportunities for this faculty cohesion to materialize, we argue that faculty still actively engage in building community within their classrooms, in order to better support their VEC students.

We decided on two methods to begin the research of the site: a site visit to observe the space and the basic features of the facility, and a 30-minute interview with each of the five writing instructors working at the VEC. Having taught or worked in military base education centers ourselves, we relied on grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, and Strutzel; Strauss and Corbin) as a research methodology to prevent or reduce bias in our own findings by allowing patterns or themes to emerge naturally from broadly constructed interview questions. We chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with five open ended question designed to elicit responses that would yield information on how the instructors view themselves as members of the education center communities, with respect to the staff, the students, and each other, and to help us determine what resources faculty expressed needing (directly or indirectly). Once interviews were completed, we independently read the interview transcripts and identified emerging themes, and then we met to discuss and code for those themes. Below are the emerging themes we agreed were present and a brief discussion of each through communities of practice, a social theory of learning theory (Wenger).

FACULTY VOICES: VEC WRITING INSTRUCTORS STORIES AND EXPERIENCES

In the sections that follow, we organize the stories and experiences of civilian VEC writing faculty into the following general categories: how the instructors perceive veteran students; the concerns instructors have about how to best support veteran students and the strategies they deploy; and the challenges the teachers face professionally in the VEC and how they cope. These categories also highlight the way instructors identify and participate in communities of practice within the military education center. Similar to the methods of Estrem and Reid, who in their essay “What New Writing Teachers Talk About When They Talk About Teaching,” investigate how teaching assistants professionally develop, in this study we also “turn to the words . . . themselves, exploring what they say about teaching and what that might reveal about their [VEC writing faculty] learning processes” (451).

Instructor perception of veteran students

A teaching environment composed mostly of military students provides focused insights into the veteran student population in new ways that, while surprising to the VEC faculty, is likely obvious to service members themselves. For example, from the outset of our interviews with writing instructors, they consistently described discovering these students as more focused and mature than their civilian counterparts. Instructors discussed their new perception of this population by contrasting it with previous experiences in civilian learning communities. One participant described the population as follows: “They are older, a lot more mature, typically than my experiences teaching on campus. A lot of them write about joining the military when they were young, at 18 years-old, and it changes their lives, so I definitely see that the change in the behavior and how seriously they take their work.” Another participant explained, “They are so mature, the Marines have such a mature, motivated demeanor that it kind of rubs off on the students, and I don’t really have to deal with behavioral issues, I really don’t.” As instructors reflect on the student’s level of maturity, they also express surprise and challenge their assumptions as they learn more about how veteran students interact in the classroom. Previous research illustrates the importance of acknowledging the individual experiences of veterans and their

relative willingness to share those experiences in the traditional college classroom (Morrow and Hart). In the VEC, veterans seem to be more willing to openly discuss both their experiences and viewpoints, perhaps because they already identify with the student community. One instructor describes this built-in student community as diverse and advantageous in several respects:

And then they are, you know, very good at working together, and they have some of the most well-articulated and diverse opinions about life and the government that I was not anticipating, and a lot of them are from other countries and were serving to get citizenship and I was like, oh, I didn't know that happened. . . . and they are very comfortable being critical about any, you know, not critical negative, they're just very comfortable being, I don't understand this thing or that this action makes sense so they have this maturity that was very, very nice, and they had a sense of community.

In the VEC classroom, instructors adjust their perceptions and are able to leverage the strengths of the military students, who within his or her own community shows focus, maturity, and a sense of belonging that in turn shapes the instructor's teaching experience and the classroom community. As one instructor describes it, Marines are intentional in their classroom participation, a focus and determination that seems to stem from their identification with one another as service members:

I've taught on traditional campuses and I've taught on military bases and I find that there is an intentionality in the students on the military base and a focus in the students that kind of creates a positive energy. So I would contrast it that way, that the traditional campus students are involved in all sorts of fun activities -- that's a good thing (laughs) but sometimes it's harder to build a community because they have so much going on already. Whereas students at the military base seem to almost be expecting a community or engaged and waiting for the community to happen.

As writing faculty recognize the community that Marines are already engaged in, they begin to move towards engaging the VEC classroom community in its own terms on its students' home turf. Being aware of the "broad range of veteran's experiences is a vital first step toward engaging productively with them as students" (Morrow and Hart, 35), and instructors seem compelled to know the students better and to acknowledge their experiences more fully, and most significantly, to acknowledge how the military student contributes to the community of practice within the classroom. This deeply rooted ethos for the military student emerges through the explanation given by one participant:

I think too, you know, just being with this special group of people like that, say just in writing assignments or things that you give them that they need like a narrative or something, you find out a lot more things about people that you had no experience with before you know. Like saying, hey, what did you do on your summer vacation, like no one cares what you did on your summer vacation, okay? When someone's writing me a paper about I saw five of my friends getting blown to shreds, you're kind of like sitting, you're there, reading all the 50 essays, and you're crying and you're like, why are they asked this question? So that part of their lives is not just about here's your essay number three, it's looking at you saying oh my god, you're like 25 years old and you've seen this and you've done that and taken this personal, like, look at these — you guys are kids to me, okay? And just thinking it's so way past did you hand in your essay number three and take into account that this is part of what you're doing. You're trying to make your life better, you're getting an education, but still we have that bagged on your shoulders.

As they get to know these students, instructors begin to adjust their assumptions and attitudes towards student veterans and find such engagement influences their teaching practice. One writing instructor drew motivation, support, and energy from participation in the teaching of military students. She describes it this way: "I'd had a really intense and negative spring semester, and I was exhausted and burned out. And then I went and taught at Quantico, and they just brought me back to life . . . because they were so willing to engage

with the ideas and to wrestle with different points of view and to be critical thinkers and do the writing. . . .” Instructors who teach at the VEC have the advantage of engaging with military veterans in a site where the student-veteran connection is always present; unlike more traditional classrooms, where research indicates the student might choose not to identify as a veteran (Morrow and Hart), the VEC provides a unique opportunity to meet military students in their own environment, and instructors find the value in adapting their own pedagogy as they learn the community. As the following section shows, learning how teachers adjust some of their teaching practices as they learn the community, offers valuable insight into more thoughtful approaches to teaching veteran-students that more fully acknowledge their contributions to the writing classroom.

Supporting veteran students in the VEC

As instructors continue to engage with students through writing and pedagogy, they begin to express concerns specific to the population. While some of the concerns are related to the limitations of the VEC environment, other concerns are specific to the military students’ needs. The presence of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veteran students in particular seems to mediate the need for instructors to build community with students and to overcome challenges in access to information and resources for both instructors and students. There is a growing body of research involving veteran students in higher education and PTSD (Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang; Church; DiRamio and Jarvis; Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen), which includes recent attention to these students in the composition classroom (Thompson; Selting; Wood), where writing assignments often challenge them to surface major life experiences. In the introduction to *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, Doe and Langstraat point out that “many composition curricula foster or even require personal writing, and student-veterans may find themselves writing about traumatic experiences that may, in turn, pose ethical and pedagogical challenges for writing instructors” (3). One writing instructor in the VEC described it this way: “You know we have students in there that have been deployed like two or three times. We have people coming in with their [service] dogs, and we have traumatic brain injuries, and we have things that you can’t really push aside and pretend like it’s not there . . .” A similar concern is expressed in “Faculty as First

Responders: Willing but Unprepared,” where author De La Ysla worries that many writing teachers -- herself included -- “lack a clear sense of what to do or what to say when meeting wounded warriors in person or on the page” (97). As De La Ysla’s narrative of her own troubling experience with a veteran student in her composition course shows, it’s important to have a better understanding of how to handle PTSD when it emerges in the composition classroom. The writing instructor in the VEC, teaching a classroom full of veteran students, is likely to continuously meet the wounded warrior in person or on the page. And how that meeting plays out depends largely on the knowledge, tools, and resources at the instructor’s disposal, with potentially profound impact to the student.

The role of writing in helping students surface difficult experiences including the topic of PTSD is described as a frequent occurrence in the VEC classroom: “I get a lot of writing about their situations,” explained one instructor. “A lot of them write about PTSD -- they will tell me that. One student had to check in to an institution because his PTSD was so severe, and [he] was going to be missing class.” Another instructor reported similar sentiments of both concern about issues of PTSD and the frequent presence of it in the classroom; to address these concerns, she encouraged dialogue, building rapport and trust with the students and a discourse community that neither glorified or villainized war, but instead viewed it from less emotionally entrenched perspectives of history and military science. She explains:

I had two Marines that came back with PTSD ... so they joined my writing class and they were very open to sharing what they could with me, and so I learned about PTSD, and I learned about some historical events. They would talk to me about battles and they would talk to me about major engagements. It gave me a depth of understanding [about] a lot of the modern military situation -- modern historical situation -- that I would never have had elsewhere. And I’ve had a lot of students like that. But I just feel like sometimes they want to know it’s okay to express themselves. We all do, you know?

A third instructor expressed a need for support in working with students suffering from PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI):

“I think it would be a great idea to have some kind of training for teachers that addresses those issues and how to deal with that.” To illustrate her concerns, she shared a story about a student she’d taught two semesters prior: “I had a student . . . who had a traumatic brain injury . . . who kept swearing, like every time he would respond, and [I] found out that was part of his brain injury. So it’s like, to a traditional classroom teacher that would be totally unacceptable, but what do you do in situations like that where maybe somebody can’t really help themselves?”

Although counseling, support systems, and resources are in place for service members and their families on the military base, there is a disconnect between VEC writing faculty and these resources. This same instructor felt deeply motivated to better understand and support these students. She explained,

I didn’t go to Afghanistan, and I wasn’t in a war, so I don’t [say], ‘oh yeah I know how you feel,’ because I don’t. But I have to take into account when this kid says, ‘I really can’t do this because when I sit down for a long time like I just -- I can’t. My brain just stops,’ because [he has] traumatic brain injuries. So all those things I’m learning now affect everything I can do in that classroom. You know what I’m saying?

In addition to a perceived lack of information and resources, instructors’ efforts to support the needs of these students are also stymied by the physical constraints of the VEC. Several logistical issues emerged, and the lack of offices or work space for instructors outside of the classroom was of particular concern. One instructor explained:

I had a student two semesters ago literally came up to me and said he told me things about being deployed and in war that he’s never ever spoken to anybody else since he’s been back. So those kind of things like we need to learn how to deal with that and to stand there at the front of the classroom with nowhere to go is really hard to do. You know, number one I didn’t just deal with it because I have to deal with it, you know. It’s difficult but to say,

"I can't take you anywhere right now to talk to you about this because there's nowhere to go."

Because this instructor was cognizant of the impact of her limited knowledge of the community, she diligently sought out support and resources in service to students' performance and learning and mental health:

What I started doing on the Blackboard pages was anything to do with veterans -- military life -- I have it built on my Blackboard page where to get help for this. And nobody told me to do it, but I'm like maybe you need someone to help you with this. Here's our counselors at [school's main campus] here's the people at the [Department of Veterans Affairs], so if you need it, there it is. All you have to do is click-click, and it's done for you; you don't even have to go look for it. So that's something new I took upon myself to try to learn how to be a part of their world because I'm not military.

In the process of providing students information and resources on "anything to do with veterans," the instructor's own knowledge and understanding of this unique community of learners began to grow as well, and she became more fully integrated into the community of practice of the classroom. Like Shivers-McNair describes in her own experience of teaching in education centers, "we [faculty] created our own space" (232), the ways VEC writing instructors traverse lesser known teaching environments and engage in communities as they learn about these communities can offer insight to all writing instructors who work with veteran students and find themselves in foreign territory.

VEC writing instruction in the absence of professional and peer communities
VEC writing faculty interviews underscore the value of teacher engagement in any college campus classroom where non-traditional students are present, and they also present concerns that are specific to the military and the material limitations of the non-traditional educational space of the military VEC. In our research, this non-traditional space seems to have one more significant impact: faculty discussed at length the challenges of not having a community

of peers to discuss their day-to-day activities with, and they all described at length how they experience and overcome this lack of professional community of practice, often in stark ways. As one participant states “I am often the only person, and so . . . you just feel like you’re forgotten. There is no sense of community and it doesn’t seem relevant or purposeful, so it’s odd. . . . And I think if something were to happen to me no one would know about it until they found my body [laughs].” This statement, though given partly in jest, illustrates the extent of isolation experienced by writing faculty in the VEC. Wenger’s social theory of learning, especially the concept of *identity* as being “concerned with the social formation of the person” (13) suggest that individuals who lack professional peer engagement and support are likely to struggle due to the lack of “social systems of shared resources by which groups organized and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships, and interpretations of the world” (13). Because the writing faculty share a social system through the experience of teaching classes at the VEC populated mostly by veteran students, they are positioned to become ideal peer support networks for one another, yet these networks remain untapped due to limited access to office and communal space within the VEC and contractual obligations to home institutions. We argue that this fragmented professional community, despite instructors’ best efforts to make do with less, impacts the teaching of the students, and it shows the extraordinary resilience and versatility of faculty engaged in fragmented communities that are less than optimal for professional development.

While one instructor enjoyed the independence this environment imposes, most indicated at minimum a curiosity about who their colleagues are and what kind of pedagogical work they do, and some recognized a value in having the opportunity to elect to develop such connections. One instructor described it this way: “I don’t think I’ve met the writing instructors from the other universities. . . . But that would be interesting to have a meeting with all the writing instructors, you know, how we [teach writing]. . . . I would be interested in how other professors approach it.” Klausman defines participation as a critical factor in creating “a shared sense of purpose and community that crosses ranks and gives rise to communities of practice” (264), something that instructors desire, but are not able to achieve fully, given the organizational constraints of the VEC.

Three instructors expressed deep value in peer-to-peer community building. One instructor described the sense of community as essentially disparate: "It's like my family at [college's main campus] and it's not at all like that on base." Another instructor situated her concerns more generally in the contingent nature of on-base instruction: "I think also a lot of our faculty that teach [at Quantico] are adjuncts, and that's probably true of the others, and so adjuncts need a lot of support, and they need a lot of support emotionally, pedagogically. They need someone they can talk to." Another instructor supported this supposition by reflecting on her own needs as contingent faculty at Quantico. She illustrated her concerns this way:

I don't know anybody. Which is kind of sad in a way. . . . I mean I think it's nice if you have that community of people who do the same thing that you do because . . . You can share ideas, what's working for you, what's not working for you, and you know, just learning from each other. . . . you're physically isolated, and then you feel you know... I know most adjuncts don't have an office because we kind fly by the seat of our pants. We go here, you know you, gotta go teach there at 8 and there at 12, so that's the dynamics of this kind of profession for adjuncts, but sometimes it's -- maybe someone wants to talk.

Due to the lack of a cohesive professional community of practice, four out of five instructors described how they rely on their prior experience and prior connections and relationships for academic-related support. They all discussed reaching out off-site to their school's main campus and asking for pedagogical feedback from others when needed. Instructors mentioned support staff, former colleagues, former professors, and other instructors from their organizations not employed at the education center as sources of support. However, they do this at the expense of peer community building on the VEC campus, which is a missed opportunity to engage with other instructors working with this same population of veteran students within the same constraints of the VEC and military communities of practice. The value of these absent community interactions amongst peers are expressed by one participant who stated:

To me I guess the only limitation is a lot is done in between the halls in a regular academic community. You know, whether it is high school or junior high or college, you have some of those feedback that you give back and forth. But being one of the only English instructors [in the VEC], you don't get as much of that back and forth. Most [VEC faculty] are science and math and computer instructors, and that's a completely different approach to teaching in education and thinking, so I miss that periodically.

This instructor's statement echoes Klausman's argument of community serving one of the three pillars of a successful writing teaching and learning community to "bolster" the work done by writing faculty.

CONCLUSION

Our findings represent a point of entry for research into this community of practice and do not yet paint a complete picture, but the consistent patterns that emerged in writing faculty interviews indicate the civilian instructors' commitment to military students and the strategies and advocacy they use to support the needs of veterans in the diverse community setting of the VEC classroom. In the case of Quantico, the challenges in forming and maintaining professional and peer communities of practice for writing faculty within the VEC campus served as the impetus for creating robust communities of practice within the writing classroom for veteran students, as faculty learned how -- primarily through their own initiative -- to provide pedagogical support and advocacy for veteran students. In doing so, they learn to challenge their preconceived assumptions and attitudes about veterans as they engage in the teaching experience at the VEC.

While VEC staff and on-site school coordinators must continue to improve support for faculty who lack cohesive communities of practice at VECs, and while faculty must continue to advocate for better support and professional development when working with the military community, we must also recognize that the experiences of writing instructors at the VEC provide substantial insight into the veteran-student community of practice. Faculty at VECs continuously work towards understanding and including the voices of veterans in the classroom and acquire a unique perspective on the needs of

the veteran student, which is critical to developing a productive community of practice. These lessons are also critical to changing our own assumptions about veteran students. The VEC writing faculty possess a great deal of hard-won knowledge and experiences that should be tapped into as writing instructors continue to expand their network of resources and support in service to these students.

We also need to give greater consideration to the higher education experiences of veterans before they transition from military to traditional university settings. Understanding how veteran students operate in the non-traditional education setting of the VEC, where they transition between the military community and the academic community with every class meeting, provides us with a more complete picture of the population. The VEC offers an important site of study not only because faculty have developed a unique set of skills and tools, but also because it yields greater insight into the veterans' experiences before they transition into more traditional college settings. By better understanding this community of practice and how they transition, we can become better advocates for our veteran students and the faculty who serve them.

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