Military veterans: Creative counseling with student veterans

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Military veterans: Creative counseling with student veterans

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Student veterans represent a unique population on college campuses. Not only are they transitioning back to civilian life but also into a new role as college student. This paper describes the attempts of one university to aid in that transition through the means of expressive arts. A detailed description of the Paper Peace and glass pouring workshops and accompanying pictures is provided in this paper. In addition, reflections on the workshops and plans for future workshops are described.

Keywords Student veterans; art therapy; expressive arts; creative counselling; PTSD

Introduction

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (2011), the projected veteran population is at 22,380,000, with 10% of those being female veterans. In addition, 923,836 veterans began taking advantage of educational benefits in 2011 (Veterans Benefits Administration), suggesting that in combination with those utilizing benefits prior to 2011, it is likely that there are well over one million American student veterans. Challenges faced by student veterans include transitioning from military to student life (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), adjusting to campus climates that may range from supportive to challenging for student veterans (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009), and managing emotional difficulties (Katz, Cojucar, Davenport, Pedram, & Lindl, 2010) among others.

Expressive art therapies may include the use of music, art, and poetry, among other tools. These therapies have been shown to positively impact emotions (Deshpande, 2010; Kopytin & Lebedev, 2013) and mitigate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans (Speigel, Malchiodi, Backos, & Collie, 2006). The purpose of this article is to describe an ongoing collaboration and commitment
between the art therapy program and the student veteran center of a large, public university to work with student veterans through the medium of art. We begin with providing a review of research on the experiences and needs of student veterans and summarizing research findings on the use of expressive art therapy with veterans. We then provide a detailed description of two recent art therapy projects, including student veteran art samples. Lastly, we conclude with implications for future work and research.

Experiences and needs of student veterans

The literature described herein indicates that student veterans returning to college campuses after deployment are unique from the traditional (nonveteran) college student, even if they are still “traditional age” for college. Additionally, student veterans often differ from one another in a myriad of ways depending on the extensiveness of their exposure to combat, the number and locations of deployments, and the timing of the deployments (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011).

Thus, the student veteran population presents with multiple experiences and needs when attempting to transition back to academic and campus life, including negotiating a new “normal” by reconciling differences between military versus academic life (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Initial “role incongruities” (i.e., military member versus college student) must be negotiated by the student veteran as they move from unit team member to individual goal-oriented student (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This transition process may be further complicated by the loss of those close military relationships that were formed on deployment (Bauman, 2009 as cited in Elliott et al., 2011) and the disengagement from the familiar organizing structures of the military (Elliott et al., 2011). The following describes a variety of other issues that are commonly experienced by student veterans as they transition to college and campus life.

Experiences

Many more veterans are surviving and returning from deployment due to improved medical care, but are not escaping physical and mental disabilities acquired during combat (Elliott et al., 2011). Physical disabilities often include traumatic brain injuries, traumatic amputations of extremities, hearing difficulties, and shrapnel-induced injuries. Mental health concerns and disabilities commonly reported by veterans include PTSD, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and substance abuse (especially prevalent among veterans with PTSD; Elliott et al., 2011). Results of a national survey of 628 student veterans indicated that the typical student veteran endorsed clinically elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptomology (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). Furthermore, 34.6% respondents’ scores in that study fell within the severely anxious range, 23.7% within the severely depressed range, 45.6% met the minimum cut-off for PTSD, and 46% reported suicidal thoughts—20% of whom reported that they have a suicide plan and 3.8% stated that they are either likely or very likely to commit suicide (Rudd et al., 2011). Clearly,
post-deployment physical and mental disabilities can complicate attending and successfully learning within the college academic environment.

Difficulty in relationships with others, including campus peers as well as friends and family, is another commonly reported complaint among student veterans (e.g., DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Specifically, student veterans may have to deal with the ambivalent or hostile attitudes of others (Elliott et al., 2011), others’ presumptions about the student veteran’s military experiences or mental health (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), and awkward or uncomfortable questions about their experiences in combat conditions (DiRamio et al., 2008). Some student veterans report experiencing feelings of isolation or alienation on campus, more prominently so by those with increased combat exposure and PTSD (Elliott et al., 2011). Others have reflected on the dissolving or drifting of prior friendships and difficulty initiating new friendships (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010)—forms of social support that could potentially mitigate the adjustment back to civilian life and the college campus specifically. Student veterans may find that some campus groups sometimes do not seek or welcome student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In fact, differential treatment of students with combat experience appears to be not uncommon (both in good and bad ways; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Beyond the interpersonal difficulties mentioned above, many student veterans also report intrapersonal changes that impact how well they feel they are able to transition to campus. Many report that they simply have developed different perspectives than nonveteran student peers on “what should matter” after having been deployed (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 443). Others report “irritation and impatience with their less mature civilian peers” (DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 87). Whether meeting disability status or not, many student veterans comment on their own short tempers that they work to control (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) as well as general anxiety (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). While some student veterans feel that their deployment experiences have contributed to an overall increase in maturity and sense of motivation to get their college degree, others lament that deployment has set them behind their peers with regard to achieving college and life goals (e.g., diploma, meeting future spouse; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). For many, the deployment and subsequent return to campus requires a renegotiation of one’s identity (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Needs

Following many of the combat and subsequent transition-related issues described above, researchers have identified a number of needs prevalent in the student veteran population (e.g., Branker, 2009; Church, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Generally speaking, support seems to be a strong theme throughout the literature as a prominent need for student veterans. Support for physical and mental health problems (especially PTSD) as a result of combat exposure (DiRamio et al., 2008) seems particularly warranted for this population. Similarly, as noted above, the provision of social support appears to
have a strong impact on the success of the transitioning student veteran as it appears to be inversely related to PTSD symptomology (Elliott et al., 2011). In particular, the social interaction and connection with other student veterans appears to be critical (Church, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston, 2009). On the other hand, student veterans also report the desire to be allowed to “blend in” if desired (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009). In fact, it is suggested that campus faculty can be more supportive of student veterans by being more conscientious of the veteran status among students, avoiding disparaging or slanderous remarks, not requiring student veterans to publicly describe their experiences, and by providing some appreciation of the challenges faced by student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011).

Lastly, research consistently points to a need for well-staffed veterans’ services on campus (Elliott et al., 2011). Coordinated intra-university office efforts to assist student veterans are recommended and should include access to support for financial aid, counseling, student organization, disability support, academic advising, faculty, and institutional research (DiRamio et al., 2008). It is not suggested that student veterans be required to access all of these services, but that universities should make a concerted effort to identify student veterans to orient them to the availability of these services in a coordinated rather than disjointed campus initiative (DiRamio et al., 2008). Additional researchers have highlighted the distinct importance of financial support to student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston, 2009) and suggests potential utility in providing student veterans with transition coaches or mentors (Branker, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008).

Research on art therapy or creative arts with veterans

While general support of student veterans involves a coordinated effort on the part of several entities at an educational institution, there may also be instances in which a more focused intervention may be useful to assist student veterans in processing military experiences and re-acclimating to civilian life. Creative therapies offer the potential for student veterans to communicate both to themselves and others the meaning they have derived from their experiences in the military. Various events associated with time in the military can present a student veteran with an unintended reorganization of their previous held beliefs around topics, such as morality (Drescher & Foy, 2012). This reorganization of deeply held perspectives presents as an opportunity to foster a new reality for those affected by these challenging events. Creative interventions designed to examine meaning associated with these experiences may be useful in assisting this population.

In addition to the previously mentioned physical and psychological aspects related to military experiences, student veterans transitioning back to civilian life and to college campuses also often face interpersonal and intrapersonal dissonance regarding moral elements of combat. Often in war, those who engage in combat are confronted with issues of morality in executing their duties. In the midst of battle, one may need to put aside previously held beliefs around morality to ensure the safety of self and others. The risk for moral injuries associated with combat
experience, especially within the recent conflicts in which enemy combatants are often embedded among civilians, is significant (Drescher & Foy, 2012). Given the depth of meaning military service members and veterans may attribute to their experiences in combat, it is important to consider modes of intervention that offer methods of expression to account for the deeply personal impact of combat.

The infusion of creative arts within therapy has previously been utilized in addressing the needs of military service members and veterans. For example, Deshpande (2010) discussed a framework in which poetry therapy was applied to assist veterans with understanding the emotional landscape of their experience in hopes of developing new meaning as they transition out of their military experience. Malchiodi (2012) explored various approaches in utilizing art therapy with combat veterans and military personnel outlining specific applications to concerns such as PTSD. In addition, Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel (2006) examined the application of art therapy to specific symptomatology of PTSD among student veterans—to reduce arousal, increase reactive positive emotion, enhance emotional self-efficacy, and improve self-esteem. Additionally, they suggest art therapy as useful in the containment of traumatic material within an object or image and offer that the pleasure of creation is an added justification for this approach.

Given the apparent benefit of creative approaches within therapy to address the needs of military personnel and veterans, the application of artistic elements continues to develop as a means of intervention. The consideration of “meaning making” associated with military experiences and the involvement in creating artifacts representative of past, present, and future offer a useful framework in which to intervene. As such, professionals who support student veterans at Florida State University (FSU) developed a novel art therapy experience for student veterans to explore their perspectives through artistic mediums. The details of two projects are provided as examples.

**FSU Student Veteran Center initiatives**

To date, there are approximately 400 students identified as student veterans at FSU. The FSU Student Veteran Center (SVC) was established in 2011 with the following vision:

To be the most veteran friendly and empowering university in the nation is the guiding principle of the Unconquered Veterans Campaign, which encompasses Florida State University initiatives that ease the transition from military service to campus life, foster a community of past, present and future veterans, raise awareness of veterans issues among campus and local communities, and support student veterans through graduation and into rewarding careers and graduate-education programs. (Florida State University Student Veterans Center, 2014, Vision)

In addition to this vision, the SVC outlines 17 mission objectives, which include initiatives to provide support, assist with the transition to campus life, facilitate a
sense of community, and provide workshops to assist student veterans with veteran-related issues. One of these initiatives was the creation of the FSU Student Veterans’ Creative Arts Workshops series.

The overarching goal of the Creative Arts Workshop series is to help veterans feel appreciated and welcomed into the FSU community as they transition from military life into civilian and academic cultures. Additional therapeutic goals are to use the creative arts to (1) help student veterans bond as a group, as they did in their previous military communities, (2) provide an opportunity for creative self-expression, and (3) allow student veterans to share their military or life experiences with each other and the larger FSU community. Thus, workshop developers strive to help student veterans integrate more easily into life at a large university, and to avoid feeling sidelined and/or isolated. In addition, these workshops allow FSU to express a heartfelt “thank you” to its student veterans for their service. Participants in these workshops create tangible objects or other products that they can share, even though they may also choose to not talk about them. The first two of these workshops were the Peace Paper Project (PPP) and a glass pouring workshop, offered in 2012 and 2013, respectively. The next sections detail these two workshops.

**Peace Paper Project**

The FSU Student Veterans’ Creative Arts Workshop series began in October 2012 in collaboration with the PPP (http://www.peacepaperproject.org/veteranpaperworkshop.html). PPP is an internationally recognized effort to “empower healing arts communities by introducing collaborative art processes that foster positive forward thinking … and peaceful reconciliation” (http://www.peacepaperproject.org/index.html). In an intensive workshop lasting two full days, 10 FSU student veterans, assisted by art faculty, staff and undergraduate art and graduate art therapy students from the FSU Art Department and Art Therapy/Education Departments, created handmade paper from remnants of their military uniforms and other emotionally significant fabrics. Specifically, eight male undergraduate students, one female graduate student, and one female undergraduate student participated. Specific demographic information on age and ethnicity were not documented.

The student veterans applied meaningful words and images to their paper, such as silkscreened photographs from their military experience. These activities were designed to help student veterans process the memories, reflections, and feelings associated with their fabrics and images (see Figures 1–4). Throughout the workshop, the students worked together closely, sharing their stories and forming friendships. The student veterans also interacted with the FSU faculty, staff, and art and art therapy students assisting in the studio. Approximately 25 people in total, including the student veteran participants (university faculty, staff, and graduate students) were involved in the workshop.

To begin, the student veterans were invited to a get-acquainted dinner with all participating student veterans, staff, and faculty. Here the peace paper artists introduced the process and history of hand papermaking. The first morning, the PPP artists demonstrated the papermaking technique and assisted participants
individually throughout the day. The veterans brought pieces of their uniforms to be broken down into pulp for their special paper. Sitting together around a table, they cut their cloth into postage stamp-sized squares while sharing stories, jokes, and memories. They then watched a demonstration of the pulping machine used to grind the fabric into fiber within a water-filled channel. Each person’s pulp was labeled and treated with respect, acknowledging the emotional connection that the fibers held. The fabric created enough pulp for at least 20 pieces of handmade paper. Veterans were each given a plastic tub and bucket to contain their pulped uniform and a table space to work on in a large studio space.

The final demonstration focused on the pulp printing technique using silk-screened images created from photographs that the veteran brought. The peace paper artists demonstrated different techniques in papermaking, including splashing water over the paper as it was pulled from the tub, creating a pattern called “papermaker’s tears”. Other techniques involved combining colored pulps and incorporating objects with words, images, and even parts of uniforms like name tags. The photographs were adjusted and the images exposed onto the silkscreen using computers and printers in additional rooms within the printmaking lab. It was a very experimental and forgiving process. If an image did not print well, or if the paper
contained unwanted thin spots or holes, the pulp could simply be put back into the water-filled pulp bucket and used again. However, the participating student veterans offered that sometimes such imperfections could be beautiful and add expression.
The environment was supportive and relatively unstructured. Student veterans worked for as long as they wanted, taking breaks to rest or go to class, and also to reflect on the feelings generated by the process.

The workshop was recorded and presented to FSU and the Tallahassee community through several channels. A documentary filmmaker contracted by the FSU Film School filmed and interviewed the student veterans. In addition, in conjunction with the FSU Art Department’s Artist Lecture series, the PPP founders presented a lecture on the history of the project and the various groups they had worked with to FSU and the Tallahassee community. Their audience included several residents of Veteran’s Village, a facility for formerly homeless veterans. Thanks to a donation from the FSU President’s Office, one print from each workshop participant was framed and displayed at the FSU Student Veteran’s Film Festival and in FSUs Strozier Library. Some pictures from the PPP, reprinted by permission of the artists and the FSU Veterans Center are included above.

Pictures from the PPP

Figures 1 through 4 are from the PPP. In Figure 1, the FSU Collegiate Veterans Association (CVA) logo printed on paper made from a student veteran’s uniform is
presented. This silkscreen stencil was created for any of the student veterans to use, and many did. The image printed on their military uniform provided a visual connection between their past and present, illustrating their personal journey and transformation. In Figure 2, the workspace where the students cut pieces of uniforms and other clothing of significance into postage stamp-sized squares is depicted. Next, in Figure 3, a stenciled image taken from a photograph of a student veteran participant’s deployment to Israel in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (the war in Afghanistan) is provided. The image shows the student veteran holding up the American flag while standing on top of a PATRIOT Missile Launcher. This image has been printed directly onto freshly pressed, wet paper using finely ground and dyed pulp from different pieces of clothing. Lastly, a stenciled image from another student veteran’s deployment that triggered memories of this student’s military service is depicted in Figure 4.

Glass-pouring workshop

The PPP was deemed so successful by participants that the Veterans Center agreed to launch additional annual, cross-departmental arts projects for student veterans. The following year, the Veterans Center and FSU’s Master Craftsman’s Studio, a university arts production facility within the College of Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance collaborated on a project in which student veterans used cast glass, kiln-fired glass, and wood to create plaques. As with the PPP workshop, the goal for this workshop was to provide a creative, hands-on experience, giving new and returning student veterans an opportunity to bond as a group and with the FSU community. An additional goal was for student veterans to help create an FSU plaque that symbolized their new identity as FSU students. These basic goals were communicated as part of student veteran participant recruitment, along with showing a mock-up of the plaques during the opening reception for new and returning veterans at the beginning of the new academic year in late summer. Student veterans began signing up for the workshop during the reception, doubling participation from the PPP project. In total, 17 students, including one nonveteran student who founded a veteran support organization at FSU and two female student veteran supporters, participated in the glass-pouring workshop. Specifically, student veteran participants included one male graduate student, eight male undergraduate students, three female graduate students, and two female undergraduate students. Specific demographic information on age and ethnicity were not documented.

The workshop began with the students first touring the Master Craftsman’s Studio, meeting the staff, and learning about glass-making processes and equipment. Participants then created photo-transfers of personal photographs related to their military service and/or their veteran community at FSU, and applied these transfers to glass plates. They learned the process involved in casting the FSU seal in glass for later incorporation into their plaques. The students also sanded and spray-painted pre-cut wooden foundations for mounting their plaques. Finally, after their glass had been kiln-fired, the students met for a second session to assemble their plaques. As with the PPP, this project was designed to provide participants with the opportunity
to learn more about each other while also becoming acquainted with other
departments at FSU and staff and students outside of the Veterans Center and their
individual programs of study. Some pictures from the glass-pouring workshop,
reprinted by permission of the FSU Student Veterans Center are included below (see
Figures 5–7).

Pictures from the glass-pouring workshop

In Figure 5, a display of steps involved in casting glass molds of FSU seals for
student veteran’s plaques is shown. This demonstration was arranged by the Master
Craftsman staff, who explained the process and the multiple steps involved in the
mold-making and casting process. Participants were then encouraged to mix and
pour plaster into the wooden frames, which created the mold for the molten glass to
form the school seal. In Figure 6, a student veteran pouring plaster into a frame is
depicted and in Figure 7 a student veteran spray-painting a pre-cut wooden plaque is
shown. Student veterans were given color choices of black, garnet, and gold, the
school colors, for painting the wooden portion of their plaques. Participants
personalized their plaques by choosing a color or by using creative spray applications
to apply multiple colors. Students then applied their personal photographs, which the
studio staff had copied onto sepia-toned decals, onto glass plates that were later fired
and attached to the plaques in areas that had been carved by the staff with a
computer-controlled router.

Reflections on the PPP and glass-pouring projects

Creative arts workshops can provide empowering opportunities for student veterans
to express themselves and tell the stories of their military experience. In reflecting on
these initial workshops of the FSU Student Veterans’ Creative Arts Workshop series,
and in planning for future programs, it is useful to consider the strengths and
weaknesses of the first two workshops. Collective thoughts about the strengths of these workshops include timing, interdisciplinary collaborations, and learning new information that was personally meaningful. In general, holding the workshops in early fall helped incoming student veterans feel immediately welcomed by the FSU Student Veterans Center, the FSU CVA, and the university community as a whole. In addition, these workshops introduced student veterans to departments and programs they may not have encountered otherwise.

Both workshops involved learning new techniques and working with unfamiliar materials. In the 2012 PPP workshop, the simplicity of the paper-making techniques allowed participants to experiment freely with variety and individual creativity. The use of the students’ own uniforms made these workshops very personal, sometimes triggering emotional memories. However, the facilitators also created an atmosphere of fun and playful exploration designed to help participants feel at ease. This allowed the student veterans to share in the joy of creating something new from material laden with memories, even when some of the memories were negative.

The workshops also presented some challenges for the organizers. For the PPP workshop in 2012, it was a challenge to recruit student veterans as this was a new concept for veterans at FSU and the idea of using their military uniforms to create paper may have been off-putting for some potential participants. It was also
less than a year since the Veterans Center had been established, and not all of the media channels, such as links to the center’s website and other forms of advertising had been developed, thus potentially hindering advertisement to the intended audience. Luckily, there was an active member of the veteran’s student organization that was a graduate art therapy student. She encouraged her fellow veterans to participate and shared what she knew about the workshop. Although there were more staff and assistants than veteran participants, it did not seem imbalanced as everyone had a part to play in the creation of the work, whether assisting with clean-up, pulping uniforms or printing photographic images. Offering student veterans the choice of using a donated uniform or their own took the pressure off of any hesitancy they might have felt in cutting up one of their uniforms. They all ended up using their own uniforms and shared stories with the other veterans and assistants about when and where they wore them and the memories they had associated with the uniforms. In the end, the transformation of their own uniform appeared to be a powerful metaphor for their own transformation.

A further possible drawback was identified during the 2013 glass-pouring workshop. Although this workshop exposed students to sophisticated techniques and equipment such as computer-assisted drafting and large glass kilns, it also limited the amount of participant involvement in the creative process. Because of the advanced

**Figure 7.** Spray-painting pre-cut wooden plaque.
skills required, it was not possible for students to participate directly in the firing of the glass or the cutting of the wood plaques. The metaphor of the transformative quality of molten glass being molded into the school seal was not observable and therefore may have lost impact. However, all participants seemed to express interest in the process and appreciation for the thoughtful preparation and presentation created by the Master Craftsman staff. Participants learned about the multiple steps involved in casting glass, including making plaster molds. Similarly, many expressed sincere appreciation for the effort involved in this project, which was developed just for them.

In terms of future planning, it is important to note that these workshops were not necessarily designed to be art therapy groups, a form of mental health intervention. The PPP workshop became quite personal, but the PPP staff had extensive background working with veterans and was aware of the need for a supportive, accepting environment. PPP staff also brought an art therapist with them who had assisted them on several previous veteran workshops. The art therapist was present to assist and provide backup support for any participant for whom the workshop process might trigger powerful emotional reactions. Thus, it is recommended that care should be given to create an atmosphere of trust, sensitivity to personal disclosure, and sensitivity to subject matter. If the need and desire exists for continued inner exploration through art, these workshops could be used as a starting point for ongoing art therapy groups or individual art therapy.

By focusing on inclusion, relationship- and community-building, and creative expression, these two workshops seem to have helped participating student veterans in their transition from the military to civilian academic culture. Several student veteran participants stated that these workshops have helped them to feel appreciated and welcomed in their new home. Additionally, several participants admitted that although they were initially skeptical of the PPP, they ultimately found the project both fun and deeply meaningful in that it gave them an opportunity to be creative in a playful, experimental manner.

One veteran participant expressed our goal beautifully when describing how he felt about one of the pieces he had printed from his pulped uniform he wore in Iraq. He had printed the iconic image of a helmet and dog tags hanging from a rifle, mounted vertically from within a combat boot, with the names of his fellow Marines who had died during his deployment. The student veteran said that before the workshop, he had carried his feelings and memories inside of him, but that now he was able to show this image to people and talk about it.

A large university such as FSU offers the potential for an even greater variety of arts workshops, including creative writing, poetry, dance, music, and theater as well as the visual arts. The involvement of graduate art therapy students has been limited thus far, but as the events continue, more art therapy student involvement is expected to increase. These workshops give art therapy students an opportunity to interact with veterans in the familiarity of their school environment and as fellow students. Through their interactions, art therapy students can increase their awareness and understanding of common issues and challenges for the student veteran population. It also gives art therapy students the opportunity to see the
process involved in creative arts group projects, which can provide inspiration and stimulation of ideas for projects in their future as a therapist. Faculty, staff, and visiting artists can also be recruited to increase the number of those impacted by the project.

To summarize, although these workshops were very different, they both focused on process and transformation, thus offering student veterans a direct, tangible experience of the creativity involved in transitioning from the old to something new. In addition, the workshops provided different levels of emotional intensity and technical focus, which have helped to accommodate the broad range of preferences and needs among student veterans.

Conclusion

Emerging research supports the use of expressive arts to help veterans understand and manage post-traumatic stress, as well as the emotions that often accompany transitioning back into civilian life (e.g., Collie et al., 2006; Malchiodi, 2012). Student veterans are unique in that they face transition to civilian life as well as college roles, often simultaneously. This paper details the efforts to use expressive arts events targeted to the student veterans on this campus—a form of creative counseling to help them document and process their veteran experiences. Using expressive arts to complement traditional individual and group counseling via campus counseling centers may be particularly effective in allowing student veterans to process traumatic material as well as process role identity changes that result from transition to college. While initial anecdotal information suggests that the workshops were overwhelmingly positive for the participants, future research may provide empirical evidence of the positive impact of such interventions.

Initially, the use of qualitative methods to explore the effect of expressive arts therapy approaches is perhaps particularly relevant. In this approach, small sample sizes are a benefit rather than a hindrance. Qualitative methods also have the advantage of acquiring rich descriptions of participants’ experiences. These descriptions then allow researchers to find those common elements across unique experiences. For example, it would also be interesting to explore using expressive arts and creative counseling with minority student veterans such as women and individuals who identify themselves as nonheterosexual. Perhaps the events could be used to reflect and perhaps gain a greater understanding of participants’ experiences such as disparities or discrimination in the military in light of their sexual and gender identities.

With regard to effectiveness as a mental health intervention, several quantitative methods also seem relevant given access to larger samples. For example, one could implement pre and post-test research designs to examine the impact of the expressive arts mediums on specific outcome variables expected to be targets of the intervention (possibly as informed by the qualitative analysis as well as general measures of well-being). While it is not assumed that participation in any singular event described herein would globally impact these issues, small gains in these areas may be detectable, if present, with formal research efforts carefully designed to detect
differences in these areas. Perhaps a longitudinal examination of participant data would also be useful in this regard.

Overall, the success of the workshops can be attributed to the welcoming climate and mission of the university to serve student veterans. For other universities to initiate similar projects, it is recommended that the climate of the university be addressed within the university’s administration and among its art therapy departments. Administrative support is needed for the required resources and public support of the projects. Likewise, the art therapy (or allied expressive therapy) departments need one or more individuals that are devoted to the mission of working with student veterans using various expressive media. If available, an on campus student veterans’ center and the campus counseling center can be most useful in publicizing and promoting the projects to its constituency—without whom the projects will not launch. Meeting individually or in groups with campus student veterans to determine local needs and desires is useful in program planning and securing buy-in. Lastly, administrative support again becomes critical as the projects are then publicized in a supportive manner, which invites additional resources and participants in subsequent project years.

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