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"My Understanding Has … Literally Changed": Addressing the Military-Civilian Gap with an Academic-Community Engagement Project

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Abstract

The military-civilian gap, a label for the lack of civilian understanding about the military, is one of many concerns for those invested in supporting the military and the nation. While the factors contributing to the military-civilian gap are many and nuanced, academic-community engagement (or service-learning) course projects provide one strategy for improving understanding between civilians and military-affiliated individuals and thus bridging the gap. This article analyzes final reflections of forty-four upper-level business communication students who completed an academic-community engagement project for which they developed a proposal for a recreational retreat for local military personnel and veterans. Analysis of the reflections shows that such service-learning projects increase civilian students' knowledge of the military and its members as well as civilian students' commitment to future engagement with military-affiliated individuals. In addition, student-veterans' reflections reveal that working with civilian students on projects that serve military-affiliated individuals improves the student-veterans' understanding of the military-civilian gap and civilians' level of understanding.

Keywords: Military-Civilian Gap; Service-Learning; Business Communication

Introduction

In 2011, nearly three-quarters of both civilians and current and former military personnel agreed that the American public does not understand much about the experiences of military personnel and about military culture, according to a report from the Pew Research Center (Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2011). In Veteran Studies and beyond, this lack of understanding is often referred to as the military-civilian gap.

In part, the military-civilian gap stems from the comparatively small number of Americans who serve in the military. Approximately .06% of the 325 million Americans serve in the US military, based on numbers from the US Census Bureau (n.d.) and data from the Department of Defense (Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017). Even when accounting for the approximately 20 million military veterans in the United States (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016), military personnel and veterans only account for 6% of the total population.

Minimizing the disconnect between civilians and military personnel is one focus for those invested in supporting the military and the nation. Many are concerned that the increase in civilian unfamiliarity with the military and its personnel will lead to political ramifications, as civilians will be unable to make informed civic decisions about military issues, ranging from military engagements to veteran support and more (Fleming, 2010; Bacevich, 2013a; Gillibrand, 2016). In addition, the military-civilian gap can increase difficulties for personnel who are attempting to re-integrate into the civilian section (This American Life, 2016; Bogdanos, 2008; Simpson & Armstrong, 2009).

College and university courses are one site in which the military-civilian gap can be addressed, and academic-community engagement projects are one strategy for addressing the gap. Ideally, post-secondary students are at a moment in their lives when they are seeking out and exploring new perspectives and learning more about the public sphere that they are joining. Working

on academic-community engagement projects can provide an opportunity to engage students in current cultural concerns and civic engagement while also applying skills and knowledge to meet course objectives. Academic-community engagement course projects are a kind of service-learning project that require students to partner with a community organization or entity to co-develop a final product.

This article reports on the students' perceived changes in understanding after completing an academic-community engagement project for which students in a junior-level business communications course developed a proposal for a camp retreat for local military personnel and veterans. In the following sections, a brief review of factors contributing to the military-civilian gap and the established effects of academic-community engagement course projects is provided. Subsequently, an analysis of civilian students' and student-veterans' project reflections reveals that such projects can improve civilians' perceived understanding of the military and military-affiliated individuals. In addition, student-veterans involved in the project also improved their understanding of civilian knowledge of and perspectives toward the military and its personnel. The knowledge and insight gained by all students, regardless of background, shows the value in encouraging students to support those around them and to be active in both their civic and professional lives.

Factors Contributing to the Military-Civilian Gap

The military-civilian gap results not just from the fractionally small percentage of U.S. citizens who serve or have served in the military. Trends in the military population, the relatively few high-profile public figures who are veterans, and other aspects reveal factors that contribute to the military-civilian gap.

As military service increasingly becomes a "family business," most Americans are less likely to be related to someone who is serving in the military, while military are personnel are significantly more likely to have multiple relatives who have served. In 2011, the Pew Research Center found that veterans are more likely than the general public to have had an aunt or uncle, parents, sibling, niece or nephew, or child serve in the military (Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2011). The same study found that only 33% of 18-29 year-olds have an immediate family member who serves, in contrast to 57% of 30-49 year olds and 79% of 50-64 year olds (Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2011, p. 66). These numbers illustrate the existence of the "warrior caste" in contemporary U.S. culture—wherein military members are culturally and often geographically removed from the civilian population (Bacevich, 2013b; Thompson, 2011). The development of the "warrior caste" is partially the result of the functional elimination of conscription and implementation of the All-Volunteer Force, after which the military branches began emphasizing the career-oriented aspects of military service as strongly—and in some periods more strongly—than the civic duty aspects (Bailey, 2009; Griffith, 2009; Reichert, Kim, & Fosu, 2007; Rostker, 2006; Shyles & Ross, 1984). Given the declining numbers of active-duty and reserve personnel over the past six years, along with development of a separate warrior caste in American culture, the number of people closely affiliated with someone in the military has likely declined as well. Civilians' decreasing affiliations with military personnel reinforces the military-civilian gap.

Beyond personal connections to military personnel, there are relatively few high profile public figures who have served in the military. Within television, film, and sports, there have been only a few "celebrities" who have been open about their military service since the 9/11 attacks. Perhaps the most notable of these are Pat Tillman, who left the NFL to serve in Iraq; J. R. Martinez, who after serving acted on multiple television programs and won Season 13 of *Dancing with Stars*; and Adam

Driver, who after his medical discharge[1] became a television and film actor. However, of these three, only Driver seems to continue to hold the general public's attention, largely due to his role as Kylo Ren in the newest *Star Wars* trilogy. Beyond the entertainment industries, even American politics has comparatively few veterans serving in office. The most recent data on the demographics of Congress members show that only 18.8% of the total membership have military service (Manning, 2017). In comparison, over 70% of congressional representatives were military veterans in the early 1970s (Rizzo, 2011, para. 3). Complicating public understanding of the military are contentious figures like Chelsea Manning and Bowe Bergdahl, who evoke strong and sometimes negative responses from the American public. While the few entertainment celebrities who have served in the military are certainly examples to the broader civilian population, overall the number of public figures who have served in the military and the popular representations of service personnel remains fractionally small. As a result, civilians who are unlikely to personally know a military member also have few models in the public sphere from which to learn more about military experience.

There are additional cultural expectations that may also be reinforcing acceptance of the military-civilian gap. Bruce Fleming (2010) posits in his book, *Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide: What Each Side Must Know about the Other—and about Itself*, that this lack of understanding stems also in part from the cultural expectations of the military and civilians. The military, he argues, often defines itself in contrast to civilians, often encouraging within its members a sense that they are "held to a higher standard" (Fleming, 2010, p. 2). Similarly, Fleming argues, "civilians either praise or blame the military based on their political position, and in any case, without actually understanding what they're reacting to" (2010, p. 1). While Fleming's points may be generalized, they hint at common claims lobbed by both sides of the military-civilian gap. Further solidifying the military-civilian gap is the recent push-back by some military personnel against civilians approaching them just to say "Thank you for your service" (Bacevich, 2013a; Finkel, 2013). It isn't the appreciation that resistant personnel typically take issue with, but rather the sense that by thanking military members for their service, civilians are relieved of showing interest or support in other more tangible ways.

The military-civilian gap raises both political and cultural concerns for civilians and current and former military personnel. For civilians and perhaps the nation as a whole, civilians' minimal or stereotypical understanding of the military and its members may lead to less, and less effective, civilian oversight of the military. Encouraging civilian oversight of the military is partially why military officers are barred from serving as Secretary of Defense by the National Security Act of 1947 and why the president cannot be a currently serving military member (Gillibrand, 2016). In addition, civilians who are less familiar with military concerns and activities are less likely to prioritize (or accept their elected representative's prioritization of) military issues, and elected representatives may not be as effectively informed when voting on issues relating to the military (Bacevich, 2013a; Fleming, 2010; Klay, 2014). Culturally, the divide between military personnel and civilians can encourage military personnel to disengage from civilians or to hide their military affiliation, further increasing the divide (This American Life, 2016). As Marine Col. Matthew Bogdanos (2008) points out in *Thieves of Baghdad*, reinforcing strict cultural expectations on identities discourages understanding and the development of well-rounded personalities for all. Thus, a wide and persistent military-civilian gap reproduces itself and encourages a less effective political apparatus and a less united citizenry.

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[1] Driver was medically discharged after two years and without being deployed. Nevertheless, the details of Driver's service are not often discussed outside of military-focused news pieces, and he remains one of the most prominent, current military-veteran celebrities.

In sum, the military-civilian gap is a result, in large part, of the unfamiliarity between military personnel and civilians that is reinforced by a range of cultural and political factors. The lack of interaction with military personnel and an unfamiliarity with the issues faced by the military makes it difficult for civilians to understand military personnel. In turn, civilians' ignorance reinforces the resistance of some personnel to facilitate understanding. Still, bridging the military-civilian gap by improving civilian understanding of the military and its members should lead to a more informed electorate, a more nuanced cultural understanding of military personnel, and more robust personal and public conversations about and with current and former military personnel—among other benefits.

Given this, one way to address the military-civilian gap is to attempt to improve civilian understanding of and familiarity with military personnel and military issues. Although there may be some exceptions, in general, post-secondary students are seeking out new perspectives and new knowledge; they are at a stage in their lives in which they are learning about the nuances of their personal, professional, and civic lives. Thus, these students are primed to expand their understanding of the military and its members and to then use their improved understanding in their current and future lives. Although there are many approaches that may be used to improve civilian understanding of the military and its personnel, for post-secondary instructors, the implementation of academic community engagement projects that partner with or serve military personnel or veterans in the local community offers one way to enrich understanding as well as course learning.

The Effects of Academic-Community Engagement

Academic-community engagement describes course-based projects through which students, faculty, and members of the community work together to develop a useful product for the community partner while providing authentic learning experiences for the students. These types of projects are similar to other kinds of service-learning, experiential learning, and community service projects that have been shown to result in effective learning experiences for students, as well as other stakeholders. Such experiential learning is advocated by educational theorists such as Bloom and Kolb who contend that engaging students in active experimentation with learning concepts and reflection on such experimentation leads to the deepest kinds of learning (Wakefield & Sissom, 2013; Wozniak, Bellah, & Riley, 2016). Moreover, academic-community engagement projects often require students to deeply explore multiple audiences and issues so that they may develop a robust final product for their community partner.

Much of the research on service- and experiential learning demonstrates that these projects typically result in strong attainment of skills and knowledge related to the course objectives (Boss, 1994; Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Clark & Stewart, 2012; Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Marques, 2016). For example, students in Clark and Stewart's (2012) study reported greater effectiveness at adapting course concepts to practical situations, and Govekar and Rishi's (2007) participants increased their ability to find solutions and needed information beyond the course textbook. Boss (1994) found that students' scores on moral decision making improved when business ethics were discussed in conjunction with completion of a service-learning project, as compared to the decision-making scores of students who only discussed business ethics. In addition, scholarship on service-learning shows that after completing such projects students have a strengthened commitment to doing community service in the future (Boss, 1994; Bush-Bacelis, 1998; West & Simmons, 2012; Wittmer, 2004; Wozniak, Bellah, & Riley, 2016). For some students, this increased commitment to service results from becoming more aware of their community's needs as well as their own ability to make a positive effect in their community (Boss, 1994; Marques, 2016; Vega & McHugh, 2003). Overall, research

shows that service-learning projects improve students' learning of content objectives while also improving their personal commitment to civic engagement.

The scholarship addressing the outcomes of service-learning projects less often addresses the projects' effects on or value to the community partners, especially in business pedagogy scholarship. However, when surveying community partners, Vizenor and Ertmer (2017) found that most partners found the students' submitted projects to be effective and useful for the partner's organization or business. In addition, Littlefield's (2006) survey of alumni who had participated in service learning found that potential employers often asked these students to elaborate on their service-learning experiences, suggesting that employers have seen value in applicants with service-learning experience. Finally, Morgan-Consoli, Stevenson, Pigg, Morrison, Hershman, and Roman (2016) discuss a community-intervention project that paired Holocaust survivors with at-risk Latinx youth. At the end of the program, the Holocaust survivors explained that they felt that they better understood the different sub-cultures and ethnicities (p. 57). Still, the implementation of service-learning projects often assumes that the primary value to the community partner is the product produced through the project.

Some scholarship also considers the effect that service-learning projects may have on student participants' ideas of the populations with which they are working. Although students' initial resistance to service-learning projects often seems to result from a concern about the amount of additional time that may be required, some students are also anxious about the populations with whom they are working. Vega and McHugh (2003) reported on their students' nervousness about working with senior citizens, which stemmed in part from concerns about issues such as senility, physical health, and more. Vega and McHugh's (2003) students ultimately found that they became emotionally connected to and invested in the people with whom they were working as well as more concerned about senior citizens in general. Similar increases in empathy and openness to new, different populations have been seen in students participating in other service-learning and community-engagement projects (Garcia & Frank, 2017; Morgan-Consoli et al., 2016).

Although the Department of Veteran Affairs' Veteran Benefits Administration (2017) reports that just over one million beneficiaries received education benefits in 2016, students are often as unfamiliar with military personnel as the rest of the American public. In addition to the previously discussed reasons for the military-civilian gap, civilian students may be unaware of the military presence around them since some military-affiliated students choose to not expose their affiliation for a wide variety of reasons (Lighthall, 2012; National Center for PTSD, 2014). Developing academic-community engagement projects that partner with and/or serve current or veteran military personnel offers one way to inform students and bridge the military-civilian gap. Importantly, it provides an opportunity for both civilian and veteran students to participate in the bridging process.

Academic-Community Engagement Project Description
Overview, Objectives, and Participants

In Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, I implemented an academic-community engagement project in my two sections of a junior-level business communication course that focuses on business writing. The final product of the year-long project, discussed in more detail later, was a detailed proposal report for the implementation of a 3-day recreational retreat for local military veterans at the university's camp facility. The target audience for the recreational retreat was local military veterans, while the primary audience for the proposal report was the university leadership and organizations that might fund and/or maintain the retreat over time. To effectively consider the audience for the retreat and the audience for the proposal report, students involved in this project needed to develop not only their business communication skills but also research and understand basic demographics of

local veterans, current concerns of military veterans, similar camp retreats, the resources available at the university's camp facility, and more.

The junior-level business communication course is required for all business majors at my university. In all sections of this course, students are required to complete a research-based report, but the nature of the report is determined by individual instructors. Some other objectives for this course include developing the ability to conduct research; construct clear, logically organized messages using accepted standards of English grammar and mechanics and business style conventions; and identify ethical, legal, cultural, and global issues affecting business communication. In addition to fulfilling these objectives for the business communication course, my intention for the academic-community engagement project was to engage the students in fulfilling the university's service-oriented motto—"A measure of a life is its service" (Sam Houston State University, 2017, para. 1)—and to provide students with a meaningful opportunity to learn more about U.S. military veterans and the issues they faced. Through this opportunity, I aimed for students to improve their understanding of the military and its members.

Approximately 60 students participated in this project each semester, with about 30 students in each of the two sections. Although most of the students were traditional college juniors and seniors, there was a small number of non-traditional students and student-veterans enrolled in the sections each semester. The primary partner for the service learning project was the university's Director of Emergency Management and Preparedness, Ret. Lt. Col. David Yebra. Lieutenant Colonel Yebra was selected to be the primary contact based on his military veteran status, connections within the university and the community, and his interest in the project. In addition, the retreat development project is supported by the university's Center for Community Engagement and the Recreational Sports unit. The retreat was designed to be part of the university's wider commitment to serving the community. Local military veterans were not officially connected to the academic-community engagement project. However, a few local veterans were involved by the university partners, including Lt. Col. Kathleen Yancosek, Director of the Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio, TX, and Honorable Thomas Fordyce, a retired Marine and Honorary Founding Board Member for the Lone Survivor Foundation. In addition, many students took the initiative to interview local military veterans whom they knew personally, and student-veterans enrolled in the courses often shared their experiences, perspectives, and expertise during planning discussions.

Project Process and Details

The students in the Fall 2016 sections worked in teams to provide me (the professor) and Lt. Col. Yebra with recommendation reports detailing five guiding considerations for the retreat planners. Recommendations were based on research into military and veteran concerns, the effectiveness of developmental camp retreats, and the resources available at the university facilities. The students' work and research on their recommendations reports was supported by instruction in business research practices and report writing, an informational visit by Lt. Col. Yebra, and a site visit for approximately 20 students to the university's camp facility. The students' recommendations generally focused on the number of attendees, type of attendees, potential safety considerations, and potential activities. Lt. Col. Yebra and I reviewed the students' recommendations and then determined the final planning guidelines that would be provided to the retreat planners—the students in the Spring 2017 sections of the course.

The students in the Spring 2017 sections were divided into teams to plan five key aspects of the retreat: marketing, scheduling and reception, use of the on-site challenge course, additional organized activities, and resource collection and budgeting. The teams focused on their assigned aspect while also partnering with other teams to ensure that a complete proposal for the retreat was

delivered at the end of the semester. To develop the proposal, the Spring 2017 students also researched a range of military and veteran concerns, similar camp retreats for military personnel and veterans, and challenge course and other organized activities focused on personal development. Like the Fall 2016 students, the Spring semester students' work on their proposal reports was supported by instruction in business research practices and report writing, an informational visit by Lt. Col. Yebra, and a site visit for about five students to the university's camp facility.

At the end of each semester, students delivered presentations to Lt. Col. Yebra and other university leaders, as well as local military veterans. In the Spring, students from the previous semester also attended the final presentation period. Presentations each semester were followed by a feedback session that included further inquiry.

Currently, Lt. Col. Yebra, the university leadership, and I are seeking financial assistance to implement the retreat. In addition, we are seeking a student-organization partner to take responsibility for the long-term hosting and maintenance of the retreat.

Student Reflection Data and Changes in Understanding

Measuring actual understanding of an identity or experience is highly subjective, and like the Pew Research survey (2011), measurements are typically focused on perceived levels of understanding. When this project was introduced, students were asked to reflect on and consider their level of understanding of military personnel, the concerns of personnel, and the military in general. This reflection work was, in part, preparation for a visit from the project's primary community partner contact, Lt. Col. Yebra, so that they would be prepared for his presentation and to ask questions. In addition, in the Spring semester, there were at least three vocal students in each section who were either student-veterans or military spouses, and these students actively participated in class discussions—particularly discussions that brainstormed and finalized the retreat objectives and marketing.

After completing their reports and presentations, students wrote reflections about their work on and through the project. The reflection prompt (see Appendix A) asked six total questions across two parts. The first part of the reflection asked about the ways in which the project changed the students' understanding of and beliefs about civic engagement while the second part asked about the ways in which the project provided an opportunity for them to develop their business communication skills. One of the questions in the first part specifically focused on the ways in which students' understanding of the military and military personnel was changed through the project. Students were asked to be specific and provide concrete details in all reflection responses. The question specifically referring to understanding of the military read as follows: "In what ways, or to what extent, did this project change your understanding of military personnel, their experiences, and their concerns? Offer concrete details."

Forty-four of the students in the Spring 2017 semester[2] submitted their final reflections and allowed analysis and use of their reflections. Forty-one of the reflections offered detailed responses to the question about how the project influenced their understanding of the military, its members, and the concerns of military members. Of those 41 responses, 36 were from civilian students, four were from student-veterans, and one was from a military spouse. Grounded analysis of the students' reflections was used to identify trends in the students' reflections that indicated the ways in which

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[2]Only reflections from the Spring 2017 courses were considered herein, as IRB approval was secured only for the Spring semester. Students were asked to indicate their willingness to participate after their reflections were composed so that their reflection content would not be biased by concerns or interest in having their work used in future publications.

students' understanding of military personnel changed through the completion of the project. The following sections discuss trends in the students' reflections about any changes in their understanding of the military, military members, and the concerns of current and former military members.

Civilian Students Learn "A lot" – Trends in their Reflections

Thirty-six of the civilian students' reflections offered detailed responses to the reflection prompt about changes in their understanding of the military and military personnel. Of these 36 responses, there were three topics about which students felt they learned more through the project: the military in general, challenges with physical and mental health, and challenges with transitioning out of the military. Each of these topics occurred with roughly equal frequency in the responses.

First, students wrote about learning more about the military in general and about ideas for interacting appropriately with military personnel and veterans. There were nine detailed comments related to this topic. Some students wrote that they learned what might seem to be basic information about the military. For example, two students wrote that they learned about the different branches of the military and the "importance" of each branch. Another two students wrote that they learned about personality traits of military personnel, such as having high motivation and drive. For those familiar with the military, these topics may seem especially obvious, but the civilian students' inclusion of this information as "learned" or "new" knowledge for them validates the strong sense of disconnect that military-affiliated individuals often report when interacting with some civilians.

Students also claimed to have learned through this project that when talking with personnel or veterans about their experiences, they should be careful about the approach and word choice. Concern about appropriate topics and word choice came up often throughout the planning process because curating a list of key terms that could be used in the branding of the retreat was an important first step for the marketing team. Also, this list was often discussed in class because the other teams needed to incorporate the branding language into their own materials. In addition, there were a few class discussions about the inappropriate use of phrases like "getting back to normal," which is discussed in more depth later. Since the course covered business communication, these conversations worked to refine the students' communication skills broadly but also clearly had an effect on their understanding of military personnel and veterans.

Positively, these conversations and the project in general helped students feel more confident about talking with veterans. One student planned to talk more often about military experiences with family members who were veterans as well as a friend who had recently enlisted. One student explained that previously,

> I never really felt comfortable talking to [family members who served in the military] about [the military/their service] because they seemed like they never really wanted to talk about it. … [But now] I want to be able to have that conversation with them to show them that I care about them, not that I want to know 'what's wrong with them' which is how I always felt I would come across when asking them about their military experiences.

Six other students implied similar changes in their hopes to interact more often with veterans, but they almost always noted that some topics, such as physical and mental health, should be carefully brought up or potentially avoided.

The other two topics about which students felt they learned more were the difficulties surrounding physical and psychological struggles that personnel and veterans may have and the difficulties of transitioning out of military service. It is somewhat surprising that many students claimed to be unaware of the physical and psychological struggles of military personnel and veterans, given the popular cultural trope of current and former military members suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Nevertheless, in 14 separate comments students claimed that

they had not previously realized that mental health concerns were an issue for military personnel. Three of the students admitted that they only previously considered the physical struggles of personnel and did not recognize the psychological struggles with which personnel may deal.

Similarly, students noted in nine different comments that they had not considered that transitioning from military service into the "civilian world" might be difficult for military personnel. Reflections discussing military-to-civilian transition difficulties often noted, for example, that "I was aware about the physical and emotional challenges veterans suffer during their time serving, such as losing a limb and PTSD, but I was not aware about the challenges they face in readjusting to civilian life." Some of the challenges that specifically appeared in these nine transition-focused comments included readjusting to living with families, securing a civilian job, getting engaged in civilian communities, feeling a lack of purpose, and managing a less structured daily life. Learning about, or even simply becoming aware of, these potential concerns for military personnel and veterans was revealing for many of the students involved in the project.

When reflecting on learning more about struggles around transitioning and physical and psychological concerns, students often remarked that this information moved them emotionally. Similar to the findings in previous research (Garcia & Frank, 2017; Morgan-Consoli et al., 2016; Vega & McHugh, 2003), 14 of the students used phrases that suggested increased empathy or sympathy. For example, two students wrote that they were now more "sensitive to" or more aware of the military veterans they encounter in their everyday lives and what these military veterans might have experienced or be experiencing. Another student wrote that doing research on creating meaningful activities for personnel transitioning to the civilian sector was "heartbreaking." In these comments, students often emphasized the changes in their perspective or emotions with emphasizing phrases like the following: "I was shocked and amazed…," "It made me feel guilty…," "I did not realize how much … and how hard…," and "I couldn't even imagine…". In his *New York Times* opinion piece, "After War, a Failure of Imagination," Phil Klay (2014) warns that such comments can encourage civilians to feel that they are "off the hook" from trying to understand. Still, these students' comments revealed the strong effect of the research and presentations on their understanding of and feelings toward military personnel. These students' perspective changes are a potentially important internal shift for many of these students who claimed they had not thought much about the experiences of military personnel prior to this project.

The emotional response from students, particularly those who felt they learned more about psychological struggles, was typically discussed in conjunction with reference to another student's personal testimony during the final presentation. A student-veteran in the course requested that he close our final presentation with a short testimony about a fellow soldier who committed suicide. The student used this testimony as a call to action for the attending university leaders and project partners to implement the planned retreat. The student shared this testimony with the class twice, once during a practice session of the presentation and again during the presentation. During the practice session, the student was visibly moved and, in turn, so was the rest of the room. Although our community partner, Lt. Col. Yebra, had shared similar stories from his own experiences, the student-veteran's story was consistently referenced in his classmates' reflections. Perhaps his story connected with his classmates because they worked more closely with him than they had with Lt. Col. Yebra, who visited class only two or three times; or perhaps his story had a stronger affect because the rest of the students had spent the previous 12 weeks learning about military experiences and personnel when they heard his story, while Lt. Col. Yebra's stories were delivered earlier in the semester. Either way, this student's classmates found that his story crystallized many of the topics about which they had previously been unfamiliar.

Finally, learning more about these topics motivated the students to change their behavior, particularly their engagement in civic service. Almost every student noted in their reflections that the project re-energized their previous commitment to community service or that it increased the student's belief that everyone should do some kind of service, even if the act is small, because it takes a combined, significant effort to make a difference in the community. These responses mirror the finding of previous research that shows that service-learning projects often strengthen students' commitment to service (Boss, 1994; Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Marques, 2016; Vega & McHugh, 2003; West & Simmons, 2012; Wittmer, 2004; Wozniak, Bellah, & Riley, 2016). Beyond increased service in general, four of the students planned to increase their outreach specifically to military veterans. At least one of these students decided that for his usual summer community service he would find an organization that serves veterans in his area. Another student wrote that the student's brother, who served in the military, "is perfectly healthy and doesn't suffer from any physical disabilities," but that learning about potential psychological concerns helped the student understand how the brother may be dealing with other issues and made the student want to connect with the brother in more specific ways. Another student wrote about feeling "more sensitive to individuals I see in my everyday life whom [sic] wear 'Veteran' caps and bumper stickers. I want to pull them aside and thank them for what they've done." Although some military-affiliated authors raise concerns about civilians thanking service members or veterans for their service (Bacevich, 2013a; Finkel, 2013), learning about these potential struggles of military personnel and veterans strongly affected these students' perceived level of understanding of the military, personnel, and military life, and as shown above, the students were more eager to engage with veterans in their lives and their communities as a result of their work on the project.

Overall, the civilian students claimed in their reflections that their understanding of the military, personnel, veterans, and military life had improved through the project. It can be difficult to objectively measure someone's understanding of military life, given the complexity and variety encompassed by the military and military culture. The level of understanding it will take to bridge or close the military-civilian gap may be unattainable, but most of these students felt they improved considerably—at least from their individual starting points—over the course of the project. While every student claimed to have improved their understanding, about half of the students, 16 of the 36, used phrases that emphasized their growth. Fifteen of the students included emphasizing qualifiers like "I truly never understood…" and "my understanding on [sic] military personnel has literally changed," or they included phrases like "honestly,…" to point out the sincerity of their reflection. In seven of the reflections, students used phrases like "eye-opening" or "I couldn't even imagine myself in their shoes" to point out how unfamiliar they had previously been with military-related topics. When students described the level of change, they used words like "drastically," "dramatically," or "extreme." Even if these students' current understanding is still minimal, their reflections show that through the project their individual knowledge was greatly improved, and more importantly, their reflections show that many are more open and willing to initiate future learning about the military.

Student-Veterans Bridging the Gap, Too

In the Spring semester, one section of the involved course had three student-veterans who were open, most of the time, about their military affiliation. All were male, served in the Army, and had completed deployments in war zones. The other course section had two Navy veterans, a male and female, as well as a woman who was married to a military service member. All five of these students wrote detailed responses to the reflection prompt about any change in their understanding of the military, personnel, veterans, and military life.

In the development of the academic-community engagement project, the potential presence of student-veterans was somewhat overlooked. Although, as previously noted, nearly one million students are using Veterans Affairs education benefits (United States Department of Veterans Affairs – Veterans Benefits Administration, 2017), there was not a guarantee that there would be student-veterans in the participating course sections. One of the two initial goals in the development of this project was to improve civilians' understanding of the military and military-affiliated individuals. If student-veterans were enrolled in this course, this was seen as an added benefit for the insight they might provide, if they were willing to self-identify, and for their potential to help improve their civilian classmates' understanding. Additionally, there was a hope that any enrolled student-veterans would have an opportunity to learn about experiences in the military or dispositions of affiliated individuals that may differ from their own since some research also finds that partner participants in academic-community engagement projects report positive changes in their perspectives and understandings of those with identities different from their own (Morgan-Consoli, et al., 2016). Thus, the initial goal of improving understanding about the military seemed equally applicable to civilian and military-affiliated students.

All of the military-affiliated students claimed that they did not learn much if anything new about the military through the project. However, these students did explain in detail—often more detail than their civilian peers—that they learned a lot about civilians' understanding of the military. As one student-veteran wrote, "I never realized just how little my classmates knew about veterans." The student-veterans wrote that they felt this type of project was useful for the other students in the class to learn even a little bit more about the military and those who serve. Generally, these students felt positively toward their classmates and their classmates' potential to improve their understanding.

Two of the student-veterans, each in a different section, wrote about a concern that arose while working with their classmates. These two students noted that their classmates often approached military personnel and veterans as people who were not "normal." Both students agreed that personnel were "not normal" but that these military members' difference from "normal" is the result of a different set of experiences. One of these students explained that personnel "experienced life in a concentrated form and matured different aspects of [their] lives at different times"; he also noted that enlisted military members (including himself) may not have matured as much in terms of humor and entertainment. While the student-veterans admitted that military personnel and veterans were not "normal," they were worried by the other students' apparent belief that personnel and veterans should become normal.

The idea of "normalcy" came up during class discussions early in the semester and was promptly addressed. The instructor (the author) as well as some military-affiliated and civilian students quickly expressed concern about the negative tone and approach that "helping veterans get back to normal" suggested. Still, our community partner's focus for the retreat was on personal development, and he often spoke of the struggles transitioning and struggles with physical and psychological challenges. In many ways, there was a strong focus on retreat participants *improving* in whatever aspect they hoped to address when they signed up for the retreat. Class discussions suggest that many civilian students interpreted the emphasis on improvement as an emphasis on becoming *normal*, or alternatively, the students' lack of familiarity with the military led them to ineffectively adapt the way in which they talked about personnel and veterans, despite frequent conversations about language and the civilian students' claims in their reflections about being more aware of their language. Still, the student-veterans were tentatively optimistic:

> Although this [the idea of helping veterans become normal] is not a bad concept, I did not see them come up with the right answer, which is you cannot. I appreciate the effort by those students, but they have an attitude of "our project will fix them" and are just short of high-

fiving each other when in reality they are just scratching the surface. … I also don't think that a college student can understand all of this in a single semester, but being able to see it firsthand helped me gain insight on how we are viewed and what to expect from college students.

Strategies for bridging the military-civilian gap often focus on ways to inform civilians about the military and related topics. The general assumption seems to be that civilians need to do all, or at least most, of the learning or provide the most effort. These student-veterans' reflections show that strategies for improving understanding between civilians and those with military affiliation can be beneficial for both sides. Additionally, as Morgan-Consoli et al. (2016) found in their project with Holocaust survivors and at-risk youth, these student-veterans show that academic-community engagement projects that have a focus on military topics can also be valuable learning experiences and bridging experiences for student-veterans and others affiliated with the military. Luckily for all involved, the student-veterans participating in this project approached the project and their classmates with an open mind.

Conclusion

Although the percentage of military personnel and veterans may be small when compared to the total population of the United States, improving relationships and understanding between civilians and military-affiliated individuals is important for the on-going success and effective functioning of the nation. The oft-heard refrain from personnel and veterans is that civilians don't understand, often later followed up by a reluctance by these military-affiliated individuals to share experiences with civilians. This reluctance is understandable as civilian response to military realities is unpredictable at best and negative at worst.

Using academic-community engagement, or service-learning, course projects are one strategy for improving civilian students' understanding of the military, its culture, its personnel, and their experiences. The design of such a project may ask students to directly engage with military-affiliated individuals, but as in this example project, students may only be minimally engaged with personnel and veterans. Either way, intense and meaningful exploration of the experiences and concerns of military personnel and veterans—and/or any population served by such a project—can have a marked effect on students' understanding of that population, as well as their future interactions with the population.

The civilian students in this project were deeply moved by the research they completed about military personnel and the experiences of some personnel. Their emphatic phrasing and emotionally-charged responses in their reflections showed a strong change in their understanding. Of course, civilians' strong emotional reactions to the struggles of military personnel and veterans can sometimes widen the military-civilian gap by discouraging service members and veterans from sharing their stories (This American Life, 2016) or by leading to an "I can't imagine…" excuse that can limit both civilians' and veterans' efforts to improve understanding (Klay, 2014), among other potential outcomes. However, as the students noted in their reflections, these emotional responses may also spark the students to more actively connect with veterans in their families, communities, and beyond. In some cases, even when students claimed great changes in their understanding, the information they learned may seem basic to those more familiar with military culture. While some students' new and improved understanding may be considered basic to others, it is a significant step forward for them. As their student-veteran classmates noted, the civilian students continued to struggle with their phrasing and approach, but such struggles are to be expected when the civilian students who were previously unaware are exposed to so much new and moving information over as little as ten to twelve weeks.

The focus of the retreat, as established by Lt. Col. Yebra, was on personal development and improvement that would ease the challenges that may arise when transitioning out of military service. As a result, it is logical that the topics about which students claimed to learn the most related to physical and psychological struggles and difficulties for personnel during the military-to-civilian sector transition. For those more familiar with military concerns, it may seem surprising that many of the students claimed not to have realized that physical and psychological struggles or transition difficulties were concerns for service members since American news outlets seem to regularly cover such topics, especially PTSD and other veteran healthcare issues. Students' attention to these topics as areas of learning for them may point to focus of conversations with Lt. Col. Yebra and research for the retreat, and/or it may point to the general public's stark unawareness of such issues even when frequently addressed in the media.

Relatedly, while the students encouraged outreach to and connection with military veterans, these students also consistently noted that the approach and word choice when connecting with military personnel should be carefully considered. Again, the students' focus on tone and word choice is likely informed in part by the communication focus of the class that included many discussions of appropriate branding for the primary audience of the proposal report (those funding and hosting the retreat) as well as the audience for the retreat (military veterans). In addition, class discussions about concerns with phrasing such as "help veterans be normal again" likely also influenced students' awareness of the power of verbal responses to military experiences and current and former service personnel. Nevertheless, several of the students noted that they felt encouraged to engage in conversation with military veterans in their family and beyond, suggesting that the warnings of careful phrasing and approach would not deter them from trying to learn more about the military and its members in the future.

While the focus of projects that address in part the military-civilian gap may be to improve civilian understanding, these projects can also have a clear effect on personnel and veterans who are involved in the project. In this case, the student-veterans found their work with civilian students to be enlightening, if somewhat concerning. These student-veterans were shocked by how little their civilian peers knew about the military and its members—a reaction that may not be surprising given that at least two civilian students said that they learned that there were different branches of the military. The student-veterans seemed more concerned, though, that their civilian peers might feel as though they now "really understood" the military or that they had "done their part" and did not need to do more service for veterans. Despite this legitimate concern from the student-veterans, the civilian students' reflections suggest that they felt as though they had much to learn about the military even when they also felt they had learned a lot. More often the civilian students realized through the project how little they knew before starting the project and how much more they could learn. And, several of the civilian students were encouraged by their work on the project to do more outreach, rather than feeling as though they had "done their part." Even with their worries, the student-veterans were ultimately optimistic about their classmates' growing understanding of the military and its members.

In addition to improving understanding that may bridge the military-civilian gap, this project provided a context in which to practice a wide range of professional communication skills. As noted above, audience awareness and rhetorical use of language was an oft-discussed topic in relation to this project. Students gained extensive practice in negotiating communication with and for multiple audiences, and these conversations strongly affected the types of learning that students gained through the course. In the Spring semester especially, students worked both within and across teams to ensure consistency in a proposal that ultimately combined each team's report into a final proposal. This further provided the students practice communicating clearly with yet another type of audience.

Often, it also gave the students experience managing expectations and intermittent deadlines when students were not as prompt, clear, or comprehensive as their classmates might prefer. For students who previously "hated" teamwork, a few noted that the complexity of the project helped them to finally understand the value of working in teams. The potential authentic nature of the retreat, the students' developed interest in helping military veterans in their transition out of military service, and the complexity of multiple audiences provided students an opportunity to practice using and adapting the professional communication skills they will need to succeed in their professional careers. Moreover, while refining these skills, the students' reflections also showed a strengthened resolve toward civic awareness and engagement that will be important to their—and the nation's— professional, civic, and personal success in the future.

Because this service-learning project was focused on developing a detailed proposal for a future retreat, one limitation of the experience was that the civilian students didn't interact with any local military veterans who might actually participate in the future retreat. Although the primary community partner—Lt. Col. Yebra—and the student-veterans and other military-affiliated students often consulted on project decisions based on their military experiences, other veterans from the community were not brought into the class sessions for discussion. Among other bureaucratic reasons, this absence was due to the fact that the retreat planning was in its nascent stages and the implementation of the retreat remains somewhat tenuous due to current funding concerns. To supplement this, some student teams consulted with veterans they knew personally or set up phone interviews and video conferences with veterans who run similar retreats within the state. On the other hand, at least one student wrote in her reflection that her understanding of the military had not changed because she did not get to work with any veterans—despite the fact that she had a vocal student-veteran and ROTC member in her group and the two of them worked closely together for the final presentation. And, in fact, she expressed to me during a one-on-one conversation after the final exam that her understanding and opinions of military members had dramatically changed after working on this project and with her student-veteran group member. Overall, most of the participating students expressed that they learned a significant amount from their research and the testimonies of our partner and the student-veterans. If we had found a way to more explicitly include military veterans who were not directly members of the class or the university, the perceived change in understanding may have been even greater.

Improving military-civilian relations is a complex goal since there are many cultural factors that work to minimize actual understanding between military-affiliated individuals and civilians. As the student who claimed that she didn't get to work with any personnel showed, our perceptions of our own understanding, experiences, and relationships are typically layered with many nuances. Academic-community engagement course projects that serve military personnel and veterans—or other military-affiliated populations—provide students with another layer, another set of experiences, that inform their knowledge of the military. Hopefully such projects and learning experiences inform students in a way that improves their overall understanding. In some cases, a student's improved understanding may mean simply moving from a complete lack of knowledge to understanding only the surface of the situation. Alternatively, for the student-veterans, this project helped them better understand the starting place for many of their civilian classmates. As many of the students involved in this project noted, sometimes even a surface-level awareness can spark motivation to dig deeper either through more reading, more research, or more conversations and outreach. Even that small increase moves us closer to bridging the military-civilian gap, with effort from both civilians and military-affiliated individuals.

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Appendix A – Final Reflection Assignment Sheet

ACE Project Reflection

For your written reflection, review and respond to all of the following prompts. Each section asks that you first think about the topic/relationship presented and then offer a response that addresses *at least* the bulleted prompts.

Format your response as a memo. You are encouraged to use headings and other document formatting in your response. Use Times New Roman 12-pt font. Submit your reflection as a PDF or Microsoft Word document by the beginning of the final exam period.

Community Impact
While sometimes under-considered in business, attending to community needs and supporting "the community" at various levels can lead to tangible and intangible gains in the workplace. Events in and out of class have highlighted some important connections between being an engaged citizen and being a business professional. Considering this, address at least the following:
- In what ways did this project influence your perceptions or beliefs about the value of community engagement and service? Offer concrete details.
- In what ways, or to what extent, did this project change your understanding of military personnel, their experiences, and their concerns? Offer concrete details.
- Why do you believe it is important (or not important) for business professionals to be engaged citizens? Offer at least two (2) concrete, supported reasons.

Link between Theory and Practice
For this response, consider how this project helped you develop your business communication skills. Then, address at least the following:
- In what ways did knowing that your work will be used outside of the course affect your writing process and your final report? Offer specific details.
- Name three (3) concepts covered in this course that you feel you improved on through this project. Offer concrete details of how you improved in each area. "Concepts" include communication topics and skills covered in class and in the textbook, such as organization, design, routine message composition, and so on.
- In what "concept" areas do you need to improve? What can you do in the future to improve in those areas? Discuss at least two (2).
- Describe at least one way that you believe your work on this project has made you more marketable as a prospective employee.