

College and Community Partnerships

Extending the Benefits of Therapeutic Recreation to Veterans

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Abstract

In fall 2010, St. Joseph's College initiated a partnership between the college, Northport VA Medical Center, and Long Island State Veterans Home that provides a therapeutic platform for the integration of the three communities through sustainable and mutually beneficial curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning programs. In doing so, the partnership dramatically expands the resources of therapeutic recreation to include college students, staff, and faculty who do not possess formal therapeutic recreation training, but who willingly participate in programs offering therapeutic value for veterans. Students benefit through the development of a sense of social responsibility and civic engagement, refined communication skills from intergenerational contact, and a connection between classroom learning and the local community. This paper examines the rationale behind the initiative, the development of its programs, and the benefits for all participants. It will also suggest opportunities for innovative partnerships with other communities served by therapeutic recreation.

Keywords: *curricular and co-curricular; partnerships; patient-centered care; service and experiential learning; therapeutic recreation; veterans*

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In fall 2010, St. Joseph's College (SJC) initiated a partnership between the college, the Northport VA Medical Center (Northport VAMC), and Long Island State Veterans Home (LISVH) that provides a therapeutic platform for the integration of these three communities through sustainable and mutually beneficial curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning programs. In doing so, the partnership dramatically expands the resources of therapeutic recreation to include college students, staff, and faculty who do not possess formal training in therapeutic recreation, but who willingly participate in programs offering enormous therapeutic value for veterans. This paper examines the rationale for and provides the reader with opportunities for cost-effective and innovative partnerships designed to integrate veterans and a college community while realizing benefits for everyone involved (Hirsh & Ginsburg, 2011). Furthermore, the principles that underlie the initiative offer a framework for developing partnerships with other communities and facilities served by therapeutic recreation.

Therapeutic Recreation: Its Inception, Purpose, and Relation to Quality of Life

Therapeutic recreation has its roots in the veteran experience. After World War II, VA hospitals established medically approved recreation programs, thus marking a milestone for the profession. At that time, the primary goal of recreational activity was to distract persons in institutionalized and health-related settings. Though the therapeutic qualities were not initially recognized, this changed as American Red Cross workers "recognized the negative effects of boredom and inactivity and began experimenting with the use of recreation leaders and volunteers to conduct bedside and group activities in military and Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals" (Carter & Van Andel, 2011, p. 35).

Since then, therapeutic recreation has played a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the well-being and quality of life of many veterans by promoting skill development and a sense of personal capacity that fosters emotional and physical self-efficacy (Carruthers & Hood, 2007). Yet, the demographics of today's veterans have challenged traditional conceptions of veteran care. According to Sarah Williams Volf, Director of Challenge Aspen Military Opportunities, medical advances and changes in warfare have decreased the number of mortalities while increasing the number of permanent disabilities. Wounded veterans between the ages of 20 and 40 have suffered amputations, brain injury, and visual impairments. The nature of their disabilities is radically different from someone who has been ill over a long period of time (Sharecare, 2011). Though the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs predicts that the veteran population will decline from approximately 23 to 15 million veterans from 2010 to 2040 (2013), a veteran population suffering from physical, mental and readjustment issues and an aging national population (Committee, 2010) represent an immense challenge to therapeutic recreation that can best be met by designing and implementing services that integrate community partners.

Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility through Community Partnerships

Carruthers and Hood (2007) discuss how academic preparation and the models and principles that guide it will shape the training of the next generation of therapeutic recreation specialists and, by extension, the treatment of the people who require their services. In many ways, the St. Joseph's College-Veterans Community Initiative challenges the limits of this approach. Cost-effective initiatives between colleges and veteran institutions that combine the expertise of therapeutic recreation with the recent trend in higher education

to connect students to the community through curricular and co-curricular programs can help veterans overcome the challenges they face and improve upon their quality of life.

Institutions of higher education have made civic engagement and social responsibility a priority. According to Eugene M. Lang, “As a regular part of their educational missions, colleges and universities should provide students with a sense of social and civic responsibility—that as advocates of their thoughtful judgments, they can make a difference” (as cited in Liss & Liazos 2010, p. 46). Many have implemented curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning programs that encourage their students to become more active, informed, and socially responsible citizens. Moving students from the classroom into real world situations promotes altruism and awareness of the world around them. Students may also enhance their knowledge base and develop the skills to become more active community members. Furthermore, these opportunities may be open to the entire student population and college community, and not confined to specific courses or departments such as therapeutic recreation (Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Liss & Liazos, 2010). According to Liss and Liazos (2010), such opportunities foster:

the ability to recognize and view issues of social concern from multiple perspectives, to formulate and express an informed opinion on those issues, and to use academic knowledge to address issues of social concern—as well as the motivation and capacity to use those abilities to take action in the community. (p. 50)

At SJC (2013d), the service and experiential learning requirement of the new liberal arts core curriculum combines “experiences and reflections within real-work contexts” that “encourage students to forge a link between theory and practice while clarifying students’ connections to their local and global communities.” Students can fulfill the curricular option (for credit) by enrolling in designated courses or the co-curricular option (not-for-credit) by completing no less than 15 hours of active participation at an approved community agency. Such experiences benefit students regardless of whether they are curricular or co-curricular (Keen & Hall, 2009). Much like Watson Jr. (2004) described in his work, SJC’s emphasis on service and experiential learning is based on the assumed potential such programs have to improve student learning while providing benefit to the community. To achieve these benefits, careful consideration must be given to the design, implementation, and administration of programs that bridge potentially different academic and community cultures (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012). While students and faculty can provide new insight, expertise, and free up valuable resources, Watson Jr. (2004) detailed how poor student conduct, scheduling challenges, the time involved in student training, the failure to align college and community objectives, and the lack of communication can erode the benefits for community organizations by wasting precious time and resources. According to Watson Jr. (2004), “An awareness of civic engagement encourages faculty to conduct research that treats communities as partners instead of subjects or passive recipients of information” (p. 78). Higher education’s engagement with the community is “a joint venture” that requires “true collaboration” (Blouin & Perry, 2009, p. 130).

Zlotkowski, Benson, and Horowitz (2011) remind us that while faculty, educational institutions, and community partners are critical to the design of such programs, so too are the students, “not just students as the good ‘foot soldiers’ in a plan designed by others, but as leaders in their own right” (p. 50). Leadership skills are not necessarily acquired through

action alone. Ongoing analysis and self-reflection must be combined with student initiative and responsibility.

Origins of the St. Joseph's College-Veterans Community Initiative

As a result of several meetings, representatives from SJC, the Northport VAMC, and the LISVH developed a collaborative series of reciprocally rewarding and person-centered programs and activities services with the potential to positively impact the lives of the members of all three communities. SJC found receptive partners with shared values and goals at the Northport VAMC and the LISVH. Their efforts to diminish veterans' sense of isolation and institutionalization through community integration programs are guided by many of the same principles the college uses in its approach to service and experiential learning. Both facilities value programs that foster intergenerational bridges resulting in mutual understanding of the past and present. The therapeutic value of socializing with community members increases veterans' self-esteem through the validation of their sacrifices, promotes cognitive stimulation through dialogue, and stimulates their motivation to explore new programs and ideas. Life review, reminiscing, and passing on their legacies are other important aspects of the therapeutic process. For colleges, such interaction provides an element often missing from campus life, age diversity.

The Northport VAMC is a 306-bed tertiary care teaching hospital with state-of-the-art technology, providing a full range of patient care services, as well as education and research, for veterans. Comprehensive health care is provided through primary care, tertiary care, and long-term care in the areas of medicine, surgery, psychiatry, physical medicine and rehabilitation, neurology, oncology, dentistry, geriatrics, and extended care. It also has community-based outpatient clinics on Long Island. Its Community Living Center is a 170-bed skilled nursing facility providing post-acute rehabilitation and restorative care, palliative care, respite care, and long-term care for eligible veterans (Northport VAMC, 2013).

The LISVH, located on Stony Brook University's campus, is a 350-bed skilled nursing facility with a medical model Adult Day Health Care program. Dedicated to providing long-term care to honorably discharged veterans of the U.S. armed forces, their spouses, and Gold Star Parents (parents who have lost a son or daughter in military service), the LISVH's mission is to provide a place where veterans receive compassionate care and the highest quality of life. The LISVH utilizes the latest technology to promote therapeutic and educational approaches to care, and is one of the few nursing homes nationwide that is fully integrated into the academic mission of a major teaching and research university. It serves as a model site for research and the education and training of health care professionals in long-term care (LISVH, 2013).

SJC is a private college rooted in the liberal arts, with campuses in Brooklyn and Patchogue, New York. As a part of the college's mission "to provide a strong academic and value-oriented education" and to prepare "each student for a life characterized by integrity, intellectual and spiritual values, social responsibility, and service" (SJC, 2013c), the faculty initiated an innovative partnership with the Northport VAMC and the LISVH.

The Mission of the St. Joseph's College-Veterans Community Initiative is to integrate the St. Joseph's College community with that of the Long Island State Veterans Home (LISVH) and the Northport VA Medical Center (VAMC) through

the development of meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships that reflect both academic and co-curricular programs. These partnerships will afford persons residing at the LISVH and the Northport VAMC opportunities to participate in campus-based programs, and will afford members of the St. Joseph's College community with opportunities to provide a variety of programming and support services to both the LISVH and the Northport VAMC that will improve the quality of life for their residents (SJC, 2013b).

The Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies and the Department of History at SJC, Recreation Therapy Service at the Northport VAMC, and the Department of Therapeutic Recreation at the LISVH established the initiative in response to several developments at SJC. The college experienced a surge in the number of service members (Active Duty, National Guard, Reserve, and veterans) enrolled in undergraduate and graduate degree or certificate programs offered on campus, online or at military installations from 125 in fall 2009 to 200 in fall 2013, primarily as a result of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. An oral presentation by a student detailing his struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from his military service inspired a faculty member (Steven Fuchs) to review the volunteer positions listed on the Northport VAMC and the LISVH websites. This, followed by a meeting with representatives from these facilities, revealed opportunities for students from all disciplines, not just those enrolled in nursing and recreation internships under existing affiliation agreements. The inclusion of a curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning component in the new liberal arts core curriculum provided the context for exploring those opportunities. Finally, clubs and the Athletic Department were seeking new outreach projects and charitable causes.

The first step in establishing the initiative was to recruit SJC faculty and staff who were interested in veteran-related issues and/or who already had contact with the Northport VAMC and the LISVH. Approximately 10 such faculty and staff, motivated by professional or personal interest or who are veterans themselves, began examining SJC's current relationship with the two facilities by identifying existing campus-based programs. The results revealed a surprising number of veteran-related programs, most of which were not tied to or coordinated with the Northport VAMC or the LISVH. The second step was to invite representatives from both facilities' therapeutic recreation departments to campus for a series of meetings. SJC already had strong ties to both facilities through its therapeutic recreation internships directed by Gail Lamberta and through its extensive alumni network. Both Susan Pisano, Chief of Recreation Therapy Service, and Lee Cannella, Director of Therapeutic Recreation at the LISVH, are SJC graduates. These connections provided valuable contacts and institutional trust that expedited the creation of the initiative. Equally important was being able to quickly identify members of the SJC, Northport VAMC, and LISVH communities who would be willing to commit to the additional responsibilities the initiative would surely bring.

St. Joseph's College-Veterans Community Initiative: Summary of Programs

The synergy created by the ongoing meetings of representatives from SJC, the Northport VAMC, and the LISVH has led to a creative and collaborative series of curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning programs. With an emphasis on patient-centered care and improving the quality of life of veterans, the combination of campus-based and onsite opportunities provides a strong alliance and an open interaction among all groups.

The focus on patient-centered care provides residents of both the Northport VAMC and the LISVH with programs and support services that reflect individual needs, preferences, and values. These programs and support services foster the veteran's ability to enhance his/her quality of life through leisure experiences that embrace physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Stumbo & Peterson, 2009). To further this partnership, SJC faculty, staff, and students have an opportunity to raise their own awareness of the many sacrifices made by all veterans, while developing a sense of both social and civic engagement and responsibility.

The initiative supports existing projects run by SJC departments and clubs. For instance, SJC has an active Armed Forces Association (AFA) that predates the initiative. Thus, the initiative's role has been to support the AFA by assisting with advertising, providing volunteers, and exploring new opportunities for the AFA to pursue its mission. The AFA independently facilitates and initiates programs designed "to promote awareness and understanding of the many sacrifices made by all veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces (regardless of status), and their families, by interaction with the SJC student body and the local community" (SJC, 2013a). It also provides "a forum for updating student veterans on GI Bill issues and benefits" and "to provide for the social interaction of student veterans" on and off campus (SJC, 2013a). To accomplish these, the AFA helps organize and participates in SJC's Veterans Day Ceremony. It sponsored military-related presentations and invited representatives from America's VetDogs—a subsidiary of the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind (America's VetDogs, 2013)—to campus to discuss the movie *War Dogs: America's Forgotten Heroes* (Bison, 1999). It also co-sponsored an Irish Tenor Concert with Since You Went Away to raise funds for that organization's mission "to be an encouragement to military mothers by performing random acts of kindness for them" (Since You Went Away, 2011). The AFA has conducted fundraisers to support veteran-related charities, successfully advocated for a veterans lounge on campus, delivered presentations to veteran audiences, and collaborated with off-campus veterans groups such as the Veterans Health Alliance of Long Island and the Student Veterans of America. Such events have strengthened the bonds among an active service and veteran population adjusting to academic life, integrated them into the fabric of the college and local communities, and provided access to additional campus and community resources.

The AFA and the initiative have supported the college's efforts to foster a military-friendly environment by addressing the challenges active service and veteran students face in making the transition to college life. The new Military Open House and the Military Meet and Greet offer student veterans a chance to meet and to learn more about college services. The web-based Military and Veteran Portal provides resources regarding benefits, tuition assistance, and other relevant information while the Military and Veterans' Student Lounge acts as a resource center and a communal meeting space. A Veterans Health Alliance of Long Island grant allowed SJC to hire a part-time employee dedicated to faculty training and student support services, including the AFA. Moreover, SJC has provided space on campus for veteran support groups, such as the Suffolk County's Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans PTSD Peer Support Project.

In November 2013, SJC hosted Veterans Awareness Week as a way to educate the college community about the issues veterans face during and after their service and to provide resources to help veterans navigate their college experience and personal lives. On Monday, Veterans Day, SJC continued its tradition of honoring all veterans within the college community. On Tuesday, the college hosted a panel comprised of three student veterans

and a student whose family member had deployed overseas. The panelists presented a personal look at deployment, military culture, and adjusting to civilian life. Wednesday offered “Veteran’s Visions: Artwork by the Veterans from the Northport VAMC and the LISVH,” an art show comprised of art in various media. Veterans from both facilities attended a reception that included lunch, a presentation by a Northport VAMC art therapist, and a two-hour celebration of their art. Wednesday’s Veterans Resource Day assembled off-campus organizations with the purpose of providing information about available benefits and services. Throughout the day, Northport VAMC staff demonstrated adaptive sports programs, while the Mobile Medical Unit staff provided enrollment, health screening, and informational sessions services for veterans from campus and the surrounding community. Finally, Thursday’s “Deployment Care Package Drop Off” continued SJC’s ongoing commitment to supply a National Guard unit that had deployed from the campus. While no formal assessment of Veterans Awareness Week was conducted, the excellent turnout and the positive feedback encouraged organizers to make it an annual event.

The Suffolk County Senior Golden Games is another example of the initiative supporting existing programs. Veterans from the LISVH boarded the facility’s Freedom Express Bus in their “LISVH Patriots” t-shirts and headed to the annual May event hosted by SJC. Having practiced all year, the nine-person team, including two women, was ready to challenge teams representing 12 nursing home residences from across the county in events such as the wheelchair relay, the distance throw, volleyball, and bowling. The events cultivate skill development, competition, and sportsmanship among older athletes while broadening interaction within their peer group. Thirteen SJC student volunteers recruited through the initiative assisted the Patriots from the bus to the gym, escorted them during the Parade of Athletes, and provided encouragement and inspiration. Upon returning to the LISVH with their medals, the veterans expressed pride in their accomplishments and gratitude for the students’ kindness and assistance. In a postevent questionnaire, students described the competition as “exciting” and as a “positive volunteer experience.” The afternoon proved how rewarding intergenerational bridges could be as well as the value of having youth experience firsthand the vitality of older adults.

SJC partially sponsored the Northport VAMC’s award-winning renovation of the “Sandbar” room in the Palliative Care Unit, a unit designed to create a healing environment and improve the quality of life for hospitalized, terminally ill veterans. The Sandbar’s nautical-beach theme offers visitors a peaceful and positive atmosphere through its holistic approach to soothing and colorful paint selections, decorations, and furniture. Its child-friendly design in the midst of a hospital setting addresses the needs of visiting children and grandchildren. Recreation Therapy Service started by identifying the veterans’ needs, forming a collaborative resource team, locating an appropriate area, and establishing a renovation plan. A survey administered to the veterans yielded a list of suggested items that included art supplies, puzzles, cards, board games, reading material, a television and DVD player, music, and mobile devices.

As the centerpiece of its month-long donation campaign, SJC’s Child Study Club created a yellow ribbon display board with gift tags that each listed a needed item. After collecting enough donations to satisfy the project’s needs, five club members went to the Northport VAMC to present the donations to the Recreation Therapy Service and to meet with veterans during a tour of the Palliative Care Unit. The Recreation Therapy Service then captured student responses through a written survey. One student described

the unwelcoming invisible spatial boundary that surrounds other hospitals and medical facilities: “The feeling I get when I come to most hospitals is bleak, sterile, and unfriendly.” Another added the emotional boundary: “My first reaction to a hospital is it’s depressing and sad.” However, in what has become a familiar shift in sentiment among students who participate in initiative programs, both students were surprised by how effectively the Sandbar had transformed what might have been described as a conventional hospital room into a welcoming place. Of particular interest was the potential impact on visiting children. The institutional and emotional aspects of the facility were not easily separated for a student whose boyfriend had served in the Marines and another remembering a grandfather who had proudly served in the Navy: “Being here and a part of this makes me feel close to him even though he has passed.” Having students visit a medical facility under conditions in which they feel empowered to improve the setting, the quality of life of the people receiving treatment, or the visitor’s experience seems to erode the fear and stigma associated with such an environment and to humanize the people receiving treatment.

The initiative also connected SJC’s Habitat for Humanity with the Northport VAMC’s horticulture therapy programs. The Recreation Therapy Service provides clinical interventions that incorporate horticulture therapy programs to improve social, educational, psychological, and physical domains. Interventions include, but are not limited to, pruning and watering indoor and outdoor plants, repotting over grown plants, planting bulbs, visits from garden clubs, trips to botanical gardens and arboretums, and gardening. Researchers commonly note the positive mental outlook obtained by veterans who participate in gardening and horticulture programs or who utilize them as a place to relax and reminisce (Armstrong, 2000; Wakefield, 2007).

Habitat for Humanity started with a spring cleanup of the Northport VAMC’s patient-centered gardens. Fourteen students, staff, and family members from Habitat for Humanity began with the largest, most visited therapeutic sensory garden. Consisting of more than 7,000 square feet of shrubbery, vegetable plants, and flowers, this tranquil and beautiful collection had been maintained by one dedicated veteran for years. As his health declined, other veterans began to help. Although their attempt was valiant, the grounds were not completely cleared until Habitat for Humanity arrived. The group also cleared two smaller gardens where veterans engage in various therapeutic recreation activities, such as bocce ball, shuffleboard, table games, and barbeques.

Habitat for Humanity also cleared the Vuoto Memorial Garden and attended to its flowerpots, birdbaths, and bird feeders. The garden’s five raised beds provide an area for persons who may not be able to bend, kneel, and work at ground level. The Recreation Therapy Service utilizes this area for programs to improve a veteran’s body, mind, and spirit by working with the plants while enjoying the beautiful and serene atmosphere. Habitat for Humanity then organized a campus-wide fundraising event, a European Handball Tournament, to purchase items for the four gardens and reached out to local businesses for donations.

An anonymous survey given after each visit asked Habitat for Humanity participants to provide feedback regarding their experience. Their motivations for participating ranged from a general desire to “give back” to veterans who have protected their freedom to a more personal connection relating to family and friends who had served. Most expressed gratitude for being involved in such a worthwhile community partnership and for the sense of accomplishment that came with the revelation that “raking leaves and planting flowers” could “make such a difference in people’s lives.” As one student wrote, “The appreciation

that is evident from the veterans makes our hard work worth it.” Along these lines, another self-proclaimed experienced volunteer described the difference between Habitat for Humanity’s efforts and past experiences: “The interaction with the patients is like no other; you can tell immediately that their day was changed.” When asked why he/she had returned for a second visit, this volunteer wrote, “because of the sheer joy and enthusiasm that the patients bring” and because “patients were actively involved.” The students, inspired by the appreciation expressed by staff and veterans throughout the day, believed they had “made a difference in the hospital as well as the patients’ lives.” As was the case with the Sandbar room, such comments referred to both the physical setting and the veterans’ quality of life. One participant tied the horticulture project directly to SJC’s mission statement: “a life characterized by social responsibility, intellectual and spiritual values, integrity and service, and the college’s motto, *Esse non videri*—To be, not to seem.”

When LISVH staff learned of Habitat for Humanity’s efforts, they expressed interest in having SJC undertake a World War II veteran’s proposal for a butterfly garden. Perhaps the idea emanated from his appreciation of a butterfly’s natural beauty. Or perhaps the idea was born during the war when a plane carrying 10 men was descending rapidly because of engine failure. Nine survived; the words of the tenth, the pilot, would linger for decades: “Hit the silk, men.” Thus began a lifelong connection with silk, the caterpillar, and the butterfly. LISVH staff had already researched the project and selected the area to ensure that the plants would thrive and attract butterflies. SJC’s Recreation Club assisted with the completion of this project—or, more accurately, this tribute. Inclement weather forced staff and students to cancel the outdoor activities and change the theme to Earth Day Awareness. Instead of releasing the butterflies, veterans viewed them in a portable cage. Students, staff, and veterans worked together on crafts, exchanged stories, sang, and danced. According to one student, such “multigenerational interaction was stimulating for numerous residents as well as for us students.” Students enjoyed listening to the stories of an “often overlooked and forgotten population” and the “appreciation for our veterans” that came with it. For one veteran, the day was a dream come true.

Technology has transformed how people communicate, access information, and pursue entertainment. Yet many veterans residing in long-term care facilities have little or no experience with technology. They remain isolated from social networking with family and friends through common platforms such as e-mail, Skype, and Facebook. For older veterans, technology is often intimidating and frustrating. Faculty and students can help veterans navigate technology by sharing their skills and expertise. Learning new skills promotes cognitive stimulation, and being engaged in evolving technology increases motivation while contributing to a heightened sense of well-being (Carter & Van Andel, 2011; Stumbo & Peterson, 2009).

SJC implemented an iPod program at the Northport VAMC and the LISVH with the hope that it would serve as a model for other technology-based initiatives. New York Community Bank Foundation awarded the college a \$10,000 grant to purchase 70 iPod shuffles with headphones, five iPod classics, three docking stations, and 100 iTunes cards (\$25 each). Based on the Music and Memory model, which uses music to assist those “struggling with Alzheimer’s, dementia, and other cognitive and physical challenges to reconnect with the world” (Music and Memory, 2013), the iPod program was designed to improve socialization and behavior in addition to stimulating veterans’ cognition and verbal communication skills through the recollection and discussion of past events while listening

to familiar music. At the same time, it offered students an experiential learning experience while providing leadership opportunities in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of a therapeutic recreation program. Though an SJC faculty member and a Northport VAMC and a LISVH representative oversaw the program, a student served as the site administrator at each facility and was assisted by other students. After developing an assessment plan and having it approved by each site administrator, students queried veterans about their music preferences and compiled music selections for each facility and its residents. Students also created a book with CD and album covers to help non-communicative veterans express their preferences from the proposed play list. Students then downloaded the music and began training the veterans how to use the iPods.

The preliminary assessment of the iPod program has been encouraging. Northport VAMC and LISVH staff reported that it was a highly successful collaboration and valuable service and experiential learning experience in that it allowed students to take responsibility for the implementation of a therapeutic recreation program while showcasing their professionalism, technology skills, and sensitivity to veterans' needs. Staff believed that student engagement contributed to the benefits reported by participating veterans: being able to access technology, successful manipulation of the iPod, and individualized music selection (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Veterans also were excited about being able to listen to music whenever and wherever they wanted. As one veteran explained during an interview with Northport VAMC staff, he "likes to close his eyes and go back to the times when I first heard some of my music."

While long-term and more formal assessment remains, Northport VAMC and LISVH staff concurred with the veterans' assessment of the iPod's benefits though they were quick to add that headsets were particularly helpful in a geriatric setting with a large hearing-impaired population. Staff also noted improved socialization even among veterans who resisted participating in activities in the past, memory stimulation and recall, and the promotion of individual choice and autonomy. In the end, the risks associated with losing or breaking the iPod and the challenge of having students implement a program within a semester were minimal compared to the generally recognized benefits. Moreover, the iPod program, according to a Northport VAMC staff member, is representative of changes in therapeutic recreation that "strongly emphasizes individuality while addressing the more holistic needs of the person. The Music and Memory Project is one way to meet the music preferences of each person, while increasing quality of life and autonomy."

Because many veterans at the Northport VAMC and the LISVH are athletes and sports fans, the initiative reached out to SJC's Athletic Department to have student-athletes connect with the community. The initiative started by inviting veterans from the two facilities to SJC basketball and volleyball games. The next step was to assess the feasibility of holding clinics and scrimmages at the Northport VAMC. The Athletic Department has finalized the administrative details and is in the process of making arrangements with the appropriate teams. College athletes can promote engagement in sports for injured and older veterans by providing motivation to resume activity in adaptive games. Sports and other physical activities help release the individual from injury-imposed barriers. Students, in turn, gain meaningful experience assisting veterans' quest to improve their quality of life and well-being and can achieve a sense of altruism and camaraderie with people with disabilities (Jacoby & Associates, 1996).

Expanding faculty involvement was also critical to the initiative's development. The Northport VAMC and the LISVH were already offering veterans a variety of educational

opportunities at their respective facilities under the premise that age or disability should not be a criterion for learning and/or acquiring knowledge. Knowledge, especially new material, stimulates cognition, increases socialization, promotes quality of life, and enhances self-esteem. According to LISVH staff, residents consistently display more energy and motivation during and after educational programs, and will often ask for additional material.

To supplement the LISVH's existing programs, the initiative established the St. Joseph's Faculty Lecture Series. Each month a faculty member gives a presentation on his/her teaching or research field. Such presentations embrace the broad ideal of connecting faculty expertise to the community as expressed in SJC's new core curriculum. But for one faculty member, a veteran himself, the connection was even more significant. "People who have served share the common bond of serving something or someone beyond self. As servicemen we have shared some similar experiences, often at a similar place and time. That connection is meaningful." Many of the approximately 50 veterans and staff who attend the presentations ask questions, reflect on and share their own stories, and talk among themselves after the speaker has left. These lectures are now part of the LISVH's Adult Education Program. This program uses LISVH and community resources to promote life-long learning through the creation of an academic environment in which veterans autonomously choose content of interest to them and share it with their peers.

The desire to incorporate veterans into campus life motivated the professor (Steven Fuchs) for *American Heritage II* to invite eight World War II veterans from the LISVH to present a wartime or life experience in a panel style format. The veterans discussed military culture, combat experience, life as a POW, and what it meant to them to serve their country. Based on student evaluations, this was the most memorable experience of the semester. One student claimed, "History came alive for me" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 51). Many others claimed that it gave them a better "understanding of the war and the people fighting for our country." But students also perceived that the veterans might have benefited from the panel as well. One was surprised by how eager veterans were to answer questions while another thought, "Just to have someone to listen to the veterans and to talk to them was beneficial to them, as well as the students" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 52). Another hoped that the panel "showed that their service does not go unnoticed and that they are still appreciated for what they have done for this country" (Fuchs, 2013, pp. 51–52).

After returning to the LISVH, the veterans expressed to LISVH staff that they enjoyed interacting with the students. Sharing their stories provided both a sense of validation and a way to pass on their legacy (Fuchs, 2013). Several veterans requested more information about the class so that they could better prepare their comments in the future. This confirmed that for veterans living in long-term care facilities, life review is an important therapeutic intervention. By reviewing their lives, especially their dedication to country and community, veterans can experience catharsis and gain a deeper appreciation of their contribution to society. Veteran-student interaction offers the possibility of deriving a sense of satisfaction and validation that can diminish the despair that often emerges later in life (Erikson, 1980).

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from veterans, LISVH staff, and students to the *American Heritage II* panel led to the development of *Oral History and the Veteran Experience* in fall 2012. This service and experiential learning course requires students to spend 15 hours interacting with veterans at the LISVH. After a short orientation at the LISVH and

several weeks of training at SJC in the best practices of oral history, students conduct five one-hour oral history interviews with the goal of creating a recording, a transcript, and a written life story. Students and veterans also spend 10 hours in class discussing historically relevant reading based on the veterans' experiences and on topics designed to foster intergenerational dialogue. Students have been raving about the interview process, but perhaps the best moment was the day students and veterans discussed an assigned reading on D-Day. While students played the role of the historian, one veteran recalled events in his small town in Kentucky, another veteran recounted events on his ship in the Pacific, and the other veteran described his experiences at Normandy on June 6, 1944 (Fuchs, 2013).

Students expressed a great deal of satisfaction that they were able to earn the veterans' trust and that the veterans were willing to share their life stories. But they were also aware of how the interview process shaped their own personal growth: quirky speech patterns caught on tape, improved listening skills, overcoming shyness, and adjusting to interacting with older adults. For the veterans, they relished remembering long forgotten aspects of their past. All veterans expressed the sentiment "Now you got me remembering" and their intention to give family members the transcript and recordings. LISVH staff has noted the therapeutic value of providing older adults with educational opportunities, creating intergenerational bridges, involving veterans residing in a nursing home with the broader community, and affirming the value of their lives (Fuchs, 2013).

Closing Remarks

While initiative members are excited by the growth in interest and programs, many of the challenges faced in the early stages remain. Recruiting clubs for episodic involvement has been relatively easy; permanently fitting the initiative into their other commitments given their limited manpower and turnover in membership has been more difficult. The same applies to academic departments and faculty members. Existing teaching, service, research, and administrative commitments make finding a faculty member or department willing to take responsibility for a program more challenging. Hopefully, the emphasis on curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning in the new liberal arts core curriculum will make such an approach central to each department's mission and spark innovative course design. Much like faculty, staff at the Northport VAMC and the LISVH also has been asked to take on additional responsibilities in recent years. While recruiting new departments to inspire program creation and new staff to broadly distribute responsibility for the initiative is critical for future growth, doing so will require improved communication and coordination. To accomplish this, the initiative is considering the creation of a coordinating committee at each facility.

Financing is another obvious challenge for the initiative. Until the initiative sponsored Veterans Awareness Week in November 2013, the entire cost of the first three years of programming for the Northport VAMC, the LISVH, and SJC combined was almost zero. This was largely accomplished by having students and faculty develop and participate in events as part of their curricular and co-curricular service and experiential learning requirements and by having Northport VAMC and LISVH staff contribute during their normal work schedules. From day one initiative members have favored a loose association of interested parties rather than a more formal administrative structure. Moreover, the initiative has no dedicated staff. As a result, it is dependent on the continued dedication of participating members. Whether this level of institutionalization is sustainable remains

to be seen. While developing an initiative that offers as much benefit at no cost is certainly appealing to administration and provides a model for budget-strapped institutions, the lack of dedicated funding also makes it hard to build on successes like the iPod program. Moreover, constant diligence is required to make sure that no financial burdens are placed on students as a result of their participation (Hartley, Harkavy, & Benson, 2005).

The other area of concern is developing a more systematic approach to assessing the programs supported or designed by the initiative. In the early stages of the initiative, the emphasis was on designing programs that reflected the values and best practices of therapeutic recreation and service and experiential learning in such a way that would benefit students and veterans as well as the Northport VAMC, the LISVH, and SJC. The growth and expansion of initiative-related programs has started to put pressure on available resources. It is essential that the initiative better assess outcomes for all participants in order to identify which programs provide the most benefit, to more accurately assess what those benefits are, and to more effectively allocate available resources.

Though still in an early stage of development, the initiative has created a cooperative and collaborative environment in which to fulfill the missions of SJC, the Northport VAMC, and the LISVH. The emphasis on patient-centered care and curricular and co-curricular programs that enhance both the quality of life and the well-being of everyone involved continues to be the driving force behind the initiative's success. As echoed in their responses, veterans, students, staff, and faculty have all reported positive interactions and reciprocal benefits. Students who expected to help veterans often were surprised by how much more they received in the process. The words of one student who worked on the Habitat for Humanity garden project provides a valuable reminder about what the initiative hopes to accomplish: "I wish I could have talked to him (veteran) more, learn about him and what he's been through. To connect with someone else, maybe make him smile, makes me feel amazing." The St. Joseph's College-Veterans Community Initiative's programs provide a therapeutic platform for the interaction of people and the integration of communities.

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