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The Green Zone Initiative: Combining Virtual and Face-to-Face Training to Support Veterans in Higher Education

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Program Profile—The Green Zone Initiative: Combining Virtual and Face-to-Face Training to Support Veterans in Higher Education

Seth Kastle, Robert Bruce Scott, Kenton Olliff, & Jeremiah Carlton

Abstract

The purpose of The Green Zone Initiative is to address the needs of the nearly 700 student veterans at Fort Hays State University who are enrolled either on campus or online. The number of veterans reintegrating into civilian life is higher than at any time in history since the Vietnam War. As Traumatic Brain Injury is the signature wound of the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as the civilian military divide, are all having a monumental impact on our veteran population across America. Student veterans re-entering civilian life and adjusting to college are under additional pressures which place them in a category of students who may need additional resources and supports to be successful. The purpose of The Green Zone Initiative is to educate and equip faculty and staff to identify those needs and provide support and direction to those resources. The combination of virtual and face-to-face training creates a learning environment which fosters reflection and participation, in addition to both anonymity and community.

Keywords: Student Services, Higher Education, Transition, Professional Development, Program Profile

Introduction

Professional development opportunities are needed for collegiate faculty and staff to help them better understand the needs of the military connected community (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). The Green Zone Initiative was developed in 2013 as a program to assist in educating faculty and staff at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) on veterans' issues, warning signs of at-risk behaviors, and awareness of local and national resources. This program is a result of collaboration among academic departments, the office of military student success, the campus counseling center, and the local Community Based Outreach Center (CBOC) for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Since 2013, The Green Zone Initiative has educated over 100 faculty and staff members (nearly 10% of the professional staff) at FHSU.

While many universities have programs with similar outcomes as those of The Green Zone Initiative, streamlined processes and simplicity of structure make this program unique. The Green Zone Initiative embraces the perspectives of the faculty and professional staff that interact with veterans in almost every capacity on campus. In addition, The Green Zone Initiative considers that the university is not always capable of fulfilling all the needs of student veterans and the military connected community; in response to this, a representative from the Department of Veterans Affairs hosts a portion of the curriculum to assist participants in understanding not only local, but regional resources available.

This program profile explains how one institution uses virtual and face to face training to educate and equip faculty and staff to identify the needs of student veterans, and provide them with support and direction to resources. This profile describes a review of the literature on relevant issues, veterans in higher education, and designated university space. Second, it describes the structure of the program being profiled. Next is a detailed account of both sustainability and program limitations. Finally, the profile includes both participant and practitioner perspectives regarding the efficacy of the program as well as discussion regarding implications for clinical practice of the initiative.

Review of the Literature

America has been in a constant state of armed conflict since 2001. According to the US Census Bureau (2015), there are 21.3 million veterans of military service in America. Over 11.5% of

America's veterans have served during the current conflict spanning nearly 18 years. The current rate of veteran suicides is 20 a day (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). The need for communal understanding in this segment of our society is palpable. Countless resources and scholarship have been poured into responses to the effects of wartime military service. The weight veterans carry of wanting to live fully within a community while bearing the physical and mental scars from having served in times of conflict can range from negligible to debilitating. Consequently, this population of higher education students have complex needs in addition to relying on a bureaucratic government system for their educational support (Church, 2009).

According to the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium (2012), military students behave differently from other non-traditional students. Deployments and the nature of military service make it difficult to predict when is a good time to start a course or if they will be able to complete it on time. The burdens borne of war have a direct impact on student veterans and on the institutions they choose to attend. Starfish Retention Solutions (2014) suggests that institutions need to engage the student, taking active steps to facilitate the connections that may be most beneficial to student veterans.

When speaking of safe spaces on college campuses it is necessary to delineate between “dignity safety” and “intellectual safety.” The notion of dignity safety refers to the basic human right—the true idea behind designated safe spaces. Intellectual safety (or coddling) in education can only be conferred by indulging close mindedness (Callan, 2016). The development of The Green Zone Initiative was in no way a response to the continual demand for trigger warnings and safe spaces by some college students today. According to critics of these spaces, they allow students to avoid exposure to information with which they disagree. This shallow interpretation of the concept of “safe spaces” provides students a way to claim discomfort as trauma, and claim trauma as an excuse to avoid critical thinking (Byron, 2017). This notion of intellectual safety is neither beneficial to the academy, nor to the students who are its patrons. The purpose of The Green Zone Initiative aligns instead with the pursuit of dignity, safety, and education for the purpose of assisting those with diverse needs.

When designing a program that aims to create safe or secure spaces, concerns related to training must be considered. There is often not a shortage of participants who will open their doors to those in need, but open spaces do not necessarily correlate with the objectives of this program. A required training should be integral to any designated safe-space program. Posting a sign or symbol is helpful in communicating nonverbal support, but it does not necessarily mean those persons can communicate effectively on the issues at hand. Training alleviates those communication issues (Poynter & Tubbs, 2007).

Description of the Structure

The Green Zone Initiative operates with the purpose of meeting three primary objectives: 1) to educate faculty and staff members of FHSU on at-risk behaviors of student veterans; 2) to educate faculty and staff members of FHSU on campus, local, and regional resources available to veterans; and 3) to create a supportive, empathetic network for student veterans and their connected military community in need of resources, support, or guidance. The program works to meet these objectives through facilitating a two-tiered training process. The training consists of completing the (approximately) one-hour *Kognito* online simulation training *Veterans on Campus for Faculty and Staff*. Following completion of the *Kognito* simulation training, participants attend a one-hour training seminar.

Virtual training

Research suggests that virtual training early in the training curriculum has been shown to increase levels of empathy in participants (Kleinsmith, Rivera-Guiterrez, Finney, Cedan, & Lok, 2015). The virtual portion of The Green Zone Initiative training fulfills the third program objective through increasing empathetic capacity and understanding. The purpose of the *Veterans on Campus for Faculty and Staff* simulation training is to educate faculty and staff about the military culture, and how they can assist in making an environment which is supportive to student veterans and the military-connected community. This simulation begins with an initial phase of training, in which participants meet “virtual student veteran coaches” that will be their guides during the simulation. These coaches discuss their experiences in the military as well as their motivations for joining. The purpose for this is to help participants develop empathy for the experiences of military students. The simulation then presents multiple conversation challenges. These challenges put users in three different situations interacting with different types of student veterans. The challenges range from a student who is currently serving in the military and is being deployed, to a professor facilitating a discussion on military spending with student veterans in the classroom. The simulation ultimately leads to a virtual conversation with a student who is struggling in school and exhibiting at risk behaviors (Kognito, 2018).

Face-to-face training

The face-to-face seminar focuses on several facets of student veteran support, and aligns with objectives one and two of the program. Through partnership with the local VA CBOC, a medical social worker presents on services available both at the local VA facility as well as those at regional offices. This also provides information on VA protocols and the process veterans must go through to gain access to services and benefits. The seminar includes a presentation from the university student accessibility services coordinator who speaks on signs and symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), which is being called the signature wound of the current conflicts, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Wallace, 2009). This presentation furthermore explains how faculty can identify at risk behaviors of student veterans. Attendees will additionally learn the process faculty and staff can use to refer students to university services and follow up with students who confide in them. Finally, those in attendance participate in a situational activity in which they have the opportunity to put learning into practice through analysis of scenarios dealing with student veterans in need. After faculty and staff have completed both the *Kognito* training and attended a seminar, they receive a Green Zone placard that can be placed outside of their office identifying it as a military-friendly space.

Expanding to the virtual environment

The population of FHSU is comprised of over 15,000 students, over one third being virtual students (Fort Hays State University, 2018). There are approximately 700 military-connected students (service members, veterans, and their dependents or survivors), of which over 600 are virtual. Beginning in 2017, each seminar was recorded and put online in order to expand the reach of The Green Zone Initiative, to not only on-campus faculty and staff who cannot attend seminars, but also to online faculty teaching virtually who may not be on campus. Virtual faculty members also interact with student veterans, and can benefit from training and education assisting in identification of at-risk behaviors, and awareness of local community resources available. As the virtual college at FHSU represents over one third of the total enrollment, and 67% of the faculty (including adjuncts) teach solely online, it was imperative for the program to reach this subset of the faculty and student populations.

Sustainability

The initial years of The Green Zone Initiative saw a strong level of participation. In the first four years, over 100 members of the nearly 1,000 faculty and staff at FHSU completed the program. Following these first years, participation sharply dropped off. Years five and six of the program saw minimal participation in both completion of the *Kognito* training and attendance at the seminars. The drop-in attendance is attributed to an increase in professional development programming available at the university. A change was made in the marketing tactics of the program to keep it viable.

In the fall semester of 2019, the program began to individually market to departments on campus, as opposed to the general campus population. Individual department heads were contacted, and for those interested, The Green Zone Initiative personnel have hosted a departmental seminar. Schedules are coordinated and a private seminar is facilitated for the individual department. Direct marketing and private hosting have bolstered attendance once again. In the first year of direct marketing program, completion rose nearly 300% over the previous two years' composite completion rates (See Figure 1).

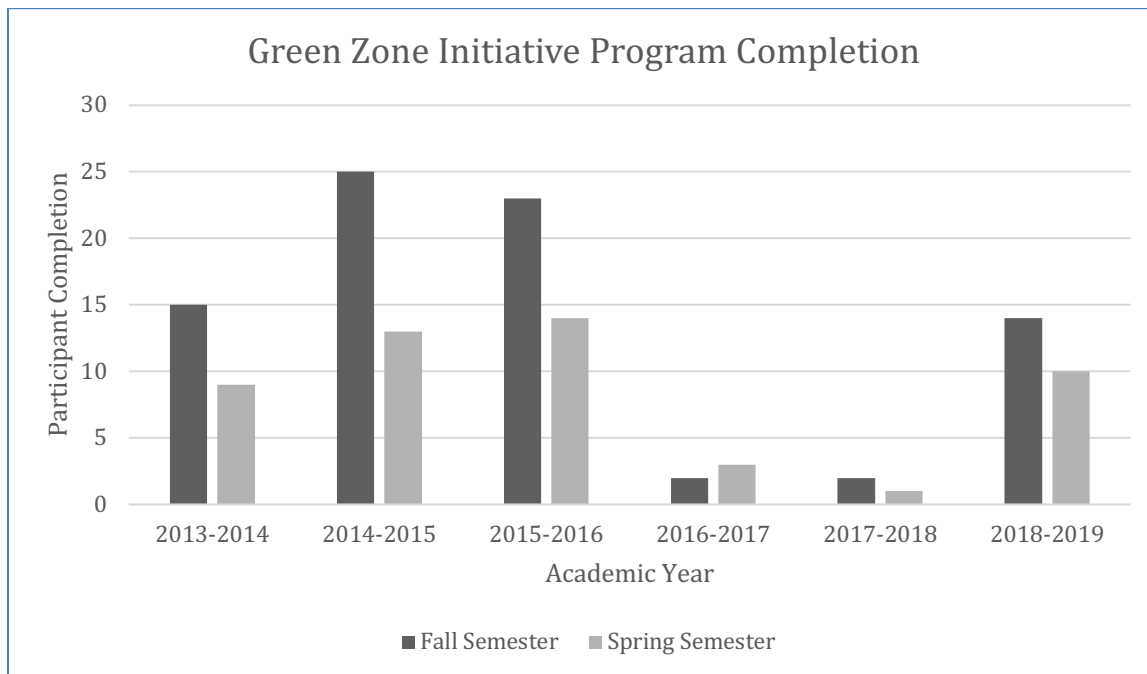


Figure 1.

Limitations

As any program or initiative in higher education, The Green Zone Initiative is not without cost. While minimal, this is a barrier that could prevent institutions from replicating the structure. The largest cost associated with this initiative is the access to the *Kognito* online simulation training *Veterans on Campus for Faculty and Staff*. For the purpose of FHSU, the funding for this aspect of the program is budgeted through the counseling center on campus. *Kognito* has a banded pricing system based on the size of an institution and the variety of *Kognito* products already being licensed. As FHSU already had a licensing agreement for other products with *Kognito* at the time of The Green Zone Initiatives' development, an additional license was attained for minimal cost. The only other cost associated with the development and facilitation of this initiative is the printing of the placards that can be placed outside of faculty and staff offices after they have completed both tiers of the

training. The cost for these placards is exceedingly minimal, and at FHSU is channeled through the Office of Student Affairs.

Facilitating the program comes with a number of obstacles, most notably scheduling. As The Green Zone Initiative requires high levels of collaboration from entities both on and off campus, selecting a date for the seminars can be difficult. With the onset of the direct marketing and departmental seminars, an individual department first selects a date. After a series of three alternative dates are proposed, the online polling program *Doodle Poll* is used to schedule the informational luncheon.

Participant Perspective

A faculty member who was not involved in the development of The Green Zone Initiative was asked to share his perspectives as an attendee at one of the first Green Zone activities.

I became aware of The Green Zone Initiative on our campus when I received an email in November of 2014 distributed to all faculty and staff, inviting us to their seminar scheduled for December 2nd that semester. I was struck by a statement in their invitation: “You don't have to be a [veteran] to support our student [veterans].” I went through the online *Kognito* training and I attended the seminar. At the seminar, the three-part message was: 1) The number of veterans with PTSD is higher than at any time in history since the Vietnam War; 2) TBI is the signature wound of this war leading to social adjustment and anxiety disorders; and 3) The suicide rate among veterans is currently at 22 veterans a day taking their own lives. There was strong attendance at that meeting, and the presence of the director of the university's counseling center—which offers academic and counseling support to students on campus—gave the program instant credibility. Much of the discussion at the first meeting I attended revolved around how to recognize signs of distress and where to direct veterans for support, including the national suicide hotline. For doing the *Kognito* training and attending the seminar, I received a Green Zone logo to post outside my office, signifying my increased level of knowledge and awareness regarding concerns of my students and advisees who are veterans.

There were follow-up Green Zone seminars throughout the next two years, and I attended all of them. What hit me in these follow-up meetings was the statement that “faculty and staff that would be interested in making themselves available to student [veterans] in need are encouraged to participate in this initiative.” I became more deeply interested and concerned at this point, and I have remained in communication with the leaders of The Green Zone Initiative.

However, the impact of my exposure to Green Zone advocacy became clearest to me on a day that stands out in my mind, the Friday before the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, in early 2017, the first time I actually worked with a veteran who needed to adjust his enrollment hours to qualify for his financial aid for the new semester. Our departmental special academic advisors assisted me and the veteran, using a conference call set-up, and it was late in the afternoon on the last day he could make changes in his enrollment. Once the student had been guided through the process of dropping a one-hour lab and adding a three-hour class to bring his enrollment to the required nine hours to qualify for his funding, I knew from The Green Zone Initiative training who the VA representative was in our financial aid office, and conferenced her in, just before closing time, and she updated her report to the VA that moment to reflect the student's correct enrollment. It was so great to be involved in helping this student.

After that experience, I became more proactive in connecting with colleagues in my department to raise awareness regarding important issues impacting veterans in our face-to-face as well as our online courses: concerns such as “unfriendly” policies and procedures, feeling out of place with traditional students, and a lack of empathy from instructors, staff, and fellow students. I remember there was a Green Zone meeting in early November of 2017, with a number of presenters,

including a counselor from the university's counseling center, the financial aid person who had helped my student correct his VA report, and an especially strong appeal from the medical social worker from Wichita's VA center. It hit me that the person from the VA center said, "if you are speaking to any veteran who has any question or concern related to access to medical care, give them my contact information." I prepared an information sheet with the contact information for our VA representative in financial aid and for the person from the VA center, and made sure to put a copy in the mailbox of every one of my department colleagues, as well as bringing this up on the agenda at our next department meeting.

I am excited about the new phase of The Green Zone Initiative, in which leaders are working directly with departments. It will be great when they get to our department. My awareness and my capacity for understanding the conditions and experiences of students who have served in the US Armed Forces have increased significantly through my participation in The Green Zone Initiative.

Practitioner Perspective

A clinician who was involved in the development of The Green Zone Initiative was asked to share his perspectives on the Green Zone activities.

When I was first approached with the idea of expanding on our use of *Kognito's* Veterans on Campus, I thought it would be a great way to enhance this program. As more veterans look to further their education, universities need to be able to provide resources for the unique needs of this population. Veterans on Campus provided a start for our faculty and staff to understand veterans returning to school, but The Green Zone Initiative takes it a step further. Providing an hour of training after the *Kognito* program has been viewed, the program enhances the knowledge and increases awareness of what the veteran returning to college needs in order to be successful. Partnering with departments on and off campus, The Green Zone Initiative has evolved into an effective way for the campus community to work better with returning veterans. From a clinician's point of view, probably the most important thing to come out of this training, is how and when to refer to campus resources.

Implications for clinical practice

Participants are given information in two formats. The first is a research based online program discussing how to work with veterans. This gives the learner time to process and reflect prior to attending the face to face presentation. The hope is that by viewing the online program first, participants will be more engaged in the face-to-face discussion. Since one cannot ask questions during the online program, the face to face meeting gives them the opportunity to add to their knowledge and work with others in the process. This type of training also allows online faculty and staff (who are not located on campus) to participate and complete the online program and then join the presentation on campus via a Zoom or online meeting format, or simply watch a seminar which was recorded. Faculty having this knowledge and training is important as many veterans take online academic coursework.

The clinical implications of participation can be significant. Just being aware of frustrations the student veteran might have is important. This knowledge can help someone working with them know when to listen, when to assist in getting help, and when to refer to appropriate professionals. The struggles of TBI, PTSD, and other issues those having served may endure are well documented. It is important that those assisting them know the signs and symptoms so they do not underreact or overreact to situations.

This training educates participants on the struggles a veteran may have when furthering their education. Having someone who understands can go a long way in helping someone be successful.

Veterans may feel like no one understands how they feel. If they have a sense that someone understands and is willing to help it can make a world of difference toward their success.

Conclusions

A major driver of the program's success is the simplicity and ease of completion. Approximately two hours is all that is needed to complete the curriculum from beginning to end. While this amount of time is merely enough to give cursory knowledge, the knowledge that can be relayed is theoretically enough to help begin faculty and staff on their way to understanding student veterans and acting as a sensor for at-risk behaviors. Creating secure, supported spaces by means of trained and qualified faculty and staff, along with visible demarcations of said secure, supported spaces, markets to the student veteran that the institution can be trusted and is committed to their continued success. Programs and initiatives like this emphasize to both higher educational service providers and student veterans that developing the whole learner matters, and that creating secure, supported spaces leads to a more meaningful experience for all stakeholders involved. The Green Zone Initiative and framework is useful to veteran scholars because it addresses a critical need in higher education. Mutual misconception between the military and civilian sectors is greater now than it has been at any time since the 1960's (Fleming, 2010). As higher education is a common destination of current service members and veterans, the military-civilian divide should be addressed. The experiential distance between students who have served in the military and their professors and professional staff at universities affects the quality of interaction and learning. The Green Zone Initiative works to reduce the experiential distance and increase the empathetic ability of faculty and staff members towards students who are veterans.

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