



Divisional Strategic Planning Brief – Humanities, Foreign Language

Campus Outcome

Improve understanding, dialogue, and relations between Valencia's veteran population and civilian students and faculty.

Department Outcome

Promote Historical and Cultural Understanding

BACKGROUND

Valencia has a large number of student veterans and veteran dependents, and yet the number of Americans who served in the military is less than 1% of the population. The experience of combat veterans returning home is therefore not well understood by the general population. Faculty pedagogical approaches could benefit from a greater understanding of the student veteran population, and civilian students could gain a greater appreciation for the experiences and challenges of their veteran peers. Among the most notable issues facing veterans today are PTSD, suicide, and reintegrating into daily life outside of the military.

In order to help bridge the gulf between veterans and civilians and foster greater understanding, Sean Lake and Julie Montione won a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant, Dialogues on the Experiences of War. The grant has allowed us to create a version of the popular course, Greek and Roman Humanities (HUM 2220) that focuses on ancient military history, war literature, and the shared experiences of veterans over the last two-thousand seven hundred years. The NEH grant has also provided funds for a series of four public events focusing on veteran issues in the context of the Greek and Roman Humanities course.

On April 12, 2017, Valencia College received the Official Notice of Action awarding our project, Tragedy, Catharsis, and Reconciliation: Voices from Ancient and Modern Warfare. We believe students taking our course should receive credit for a "Gordon Rule" writing course. As a result, our course is listed as both a special topics course HUM 2930 Dialogues of War and with the same course number as Valencia's HUM 2220 Greek and Roman Humanities. Our course covers some of the same general material as Greek and Roman Humanities, but has a much different focus. Our course uses different texts and additional sources and does not share a syllabus with the Greek and Roman course. The most important difference in content is that our course juxtaposes ancient and modern war narratives that address core questions relevant to warfare and our sources.

We have partnered with various members of Valencia College, the regional veteran community, and outside groups to create a course that centers on Aristotle's theory of catharsis. Aristotle theorized that tragedy in particular brings about a release, or catharsis, of negative emotions, helping to maintain a healthy "psyche." Our students will be trained in class by our partners in

this course, in particular by the Peace and Justice Institute at Valencia. Professors Montione and Lake, the Project Directors of this grant project, have also planned workshops to help prepare students for leading discussions.

INTERVENTION

The course was first taught on Valencia West Campus in the spring of 2018 and will be taught on East Campus in the fall 2018. Originally we intended to limit the class to student veterans and their dependents, but we have found that inviting civilians into the class has facilitated the dialogue between veterans and the community-at-large.

The public events are particularly geared toward fostering dialogue between the veteran and civilian communities. As part of the grant, our students are trained in class and through readings, as well as in partnership with Valencia's Peace and Justice Institute. The students are trained to lead the discussions that during the public events so that they are actively contributing to the dialogue, and learning skills related to public speaking and leading group discussions on complicated and difficult topics. These events are academically valuable to the general student population, even outside of the focus on veteran issues, and would be useful events to supplement many Humanities courses.

The first of the public events is Theater of War, a theater group that hires well-known actors and actresses to perform scenes from ancient Greek tragedy relevant to veteran issues today. This presentation includes a panel of local veterans who discuss their experiences, and a guided question and answer period with audience participation. The first time this group came to campus was January 24th, 2018.

The second public event is a meeting at the Islamic Society of Central Florida where dinner and selections from two films are followed by discussion. The first time we held this event was on April 4, 2018. The films we chose are *Troy* and *Joyeaux Noel* and the theme of the selections and the conversation is finding common ground with the enemy.

The third public event is a screening of the film, *Trojan Women*, a film that shows the effects of war on women and children.

The final event is a discussion led by Dr. James Finn, a Vietnam Veteran and Classicist. Dr. Finn was embedded in Vietnamese culture while serving in Naval intelligence on a top secret mission; he explains how his own experiences reflect portions of the narrative in the ancient epics, the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*. He visited our class on December 5th, 2018.

Outside of the dialogue and understanding that occurs in the classroom, the public events provide the opportunity for much wider engagement of the Valencia community. We encourage faculty to bring their students, our students were encouraged to bring friends and family, and we publicized the events to veterans and the general public in the Orlando region.

On May 23rd, 2017 we held a Kick-Off Meeting to meet the various members of the Valencia faculty and administration who would be available to help us in marketing, planning, and executing the grant. In that meeting, the project directors shared their vision of the grant with the group of nineteen administrators, faculty, and staff who attended. Small group work was done with Public Affairs and Marketing, and Donald Gibson, Financial Aid Specialist for Veteran Affairs at Valencia. Among the outcomes of this meeting was starting the process to create flyers, posters, campus wide emails, and other promotional materials. We strategized about how to make the course available to veterans, and how to make sure veterans had first choice for registration. An important example of our attempts to make the campus aware of our grant is the

article in the electronic newsletter the Grove (<http://thegrove.valenciacollege.edu/valencia-awarded-grant-to-support-veterans/>) In order to promote the class to veterans in the Orlando region, Professor Montione met with the Mayor of Orlando's Advisory Veteran Council in November which produced fruitful connections and partnerships to promote the course and our January 24th event. Professor Montione also visited two veteran only classes at Valencia to promote our course.

The project directors created Facebook and twitter accounts for the grant. In order to promote the grant efficiently and according to NEH guidelines, we attended the webinar offered by the NEH, and used the online materials. The project directors and members of the Resource Development Office and Grants Accounting Office also attended the Project Directors Meeting in Washington D.C. on June 1st and 2nd, 2017. Bryan Doerries, a member of our support staff, will bring his production, Theater of War, to Valencia. On December 8th, we held a conference call with Bryan Doerries to discuss the first public event for January 24th, particularly the discussion panel selection. The panel will feature local veterans and those with connections to the veteran community. This will be the first of three visits by Theater of War. For the first performance, the group will perform a reading of Sophocles's Ajax followed by the panel discussion. Time was also spent in December finding appropriate panel members in our community. Related to this event, our class will perform its own reading of Ajax in Iraq, a modern drama that addresses the issues that have remained in common among veterans for more than two-thousand five hundred years. We have also decided to assign selections from Achilles in Vietnam, another modern work that traces the comparisons between the experiences of veterans in Vietnam with the description of combat it's consequences in the Iliad. Students in groups will read one chapter from Achilles in Vietnam and report back to the group in a jigsaw style presentation. We will make copies of Achilles in Vietnam available to students free of charge. The second public event will be a lecture open to the public by John Minbirole of Pennsylvania 'State University. Dr. Minbirole's lecture is titled "Can Films Make Us Fight," and it focuses on the power of rhetoric in persuading people to go to war. This event will be held on March 7, 2018, and will include a discussion facilitated by our students. The Islamic Society will host a public meeting in which the film *Joyeaux Noel* will be screened, followed by a discussion lead by our students. Professor Montione had three meetings in the fall of 2018 with Bassem Chaaban, our grant partner from the Islamic Society, to plan this event. In addition to these events open to the public, we have also invited the Peace and Justice Institute at Valencia College to visit our class on two occasions (January 17, 2018 and February 21, 2018) to help teach our students to lead discussions at the upcoming public events (the Minbirole lecture and Islamic Society workshop). The first visit by the Peace and Justice Institute conducted a workshop designed to establish guidelines for facilitating discussions about difficult topics.

STRATEGIC RESULTS

We devised survey questions to be used at our first event, Theater of War. This survey, and others, will help us assess the impact and success of these events, promote upcoming events, and make contacts in the veteran community. To improve our survey data gathering and devise other surveys for the course, the project directors had meetings with Laura Blasi from Valencia's Institutional Assessment Office. We got excellent feedback about this event from our class, and from our survey. The event drew a crowd that included veterans who were not in our class, but from the region, and wives and other veteran dependents who participated in the discussion with the panel and director of the production.

This course is the only one offered in Humanities with a specific opportunity for veterans. Our mixed class of veterans and non-veterans achieved a high level of understanding of the experiences of soldiers 2,000 years ago, and saw similarities in their returns and lives

afterwards. Some veterans do not have a place to talk to other veterans, and most have never considered the historical experiences of veterans. Reflecting on these issues, through a historical lens, can help them look at themselves with some detachment.

An understanding of veteran issues is not comprehensive solely through literary and historical texts, but presenting texts, with organized discussion, is a significant and meaningful start to creating genuine sympathy and interest in the public. Among the best examples of the way a text can serve as an intermediary for understanding was our in class reading of the modern play *Ajax in Iraq*. This was among the most impactful on both civilian and veteran students. This play blends plot elements, and characters, from Sophocles's *Ajax*, but sets the action in modern Iraq. Sexual assault and suicide are at the center of the action. After the reading, we organized a group discussion, with veterans reporting the work to be true to life, and civilians, generally expressing shock and sympathy for the lead characters.

Dr. James Finn's talk about his experiences on a top secret mission in Vietnam and how he came to identify with the Vietnamese was well received because of his ability to understand both sides of the course, the ancient and the modern. He related his experiences as a soldier to his reading of the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* following his return from combat. In future versions of the class, we will have our students read the relevant selections related to Dr. Finn's talk before his visit. His talk was helpful for even deeper student engagement with the ideas in a book we used, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

Achilles in Vietnam was written by a psychiatrist who treated Vietnam veterans, and he noted the various ways in which Homer's account of the veteran experience was very accurate and relevant even to modern veterans; he also found several ways in which ancient Greeks provided better care for their veterans.

Students took particular ownership of the ideas set forth in this work. Early in the course, student groups reported to the class about individual chapters, and the issues addressed in these chapters: grief, camaraderie, the bezerker state, PTSD, trust of comrades and mistrust of leadership. These topics became some of the most important issues that students continually found elsewhere in other texts and topics throughout the semester.

NEXT STEPS

We will continue to teach this course for three semesters. Professors Lake and Montione have already learned a great deal from the first version of the course, and will continue to make improvements in the syllabus and content. Among the texts that we are considering are: *Our Ancient Wars: Rethinking War through the Classics*.

The project directors have discussed with the NEH the possibility of making study abroad an element of the third semester version of the course in the spring of 2019. In the fall of 2017, the project directors took the three courses necessary at Valencia to be certified to lead study abroad trips. The other unique elements of the course would remain the same, but a Spring Break trip would be added to the syllabus. Veterans are among the most underrepresented participants in study abroad programs at Valencia so we think this may be a beneficial aspect of our course. Students would also have the opportunity to visit military sites that reflect the ancient sources they have read and again make connections to current war narratives.

The project directors also have considered getting the certification through Valencia to create a service learning version of this course starting in the fall of 2019.

We will also re-apply for the grant for another three semesters starting in the fall of 2019. We

hope that we can expand the special topics course into a permanent offering in Humanities on East and West campus, and ideally expand it to other sections taught by interested and qualified faculty members. To recruit faculty who may be interested, we will discuss the course in division meetings, and plan information sessions and eventually training sessions and reading groups. Discussion with faculty members from other campuses have already begun and we hope it will become a fixture of permanent course offerings on other campuses. In the event that we are not awarded the grant a second time, we can still teach the course and hold all of the public events, with the exception of Theater of War. However, it would be possible to find other Valencia partners who may be able to stage scenes from Greek tragedy, or involve our own students in a public reading of relevant scenes, followed by a discussion. We can also consider a public reading of another text used in the class, *Ajax in Iraq*.

We have funds that may not be spent, and we have discussed several options on how to use these most effectively. There are supplies that we can purchase to enhance the class with Object Based Learning (reproductions of ancient art and artifacts, and authentic ancient coins), and we are considering purchasing student copies of the aforementioned text, *Our Ancient Wars: Rethinking War through the Classics*. Another possibility is inviting additional outside speakers. Dr. Finn's talk was so well received that we are seeking another scholar with a military and Classics background.