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A ROAD LESS TRAVELED:

My Experience With Peer Advisors for Veteran Education

Mckenna Jennings, College of Pharmacy

ABSTRACT

In this article, Mckenna Jennings, a third-year PharmD student at Purdue University, describes her experience with the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) program, developed under the University of Michigan Military Support Programs and Networks. She also explains her motivation for involvement and the opportunity for others to become involved.

INTRODUCTION

I am a third-year Doctor of Pharmacy student attending Purdue University College of Pharmacy and am a part of the team that initiated the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) program at Purdue University in fall 2015. My passion for serving veterans began 23 years ago when I was born at the old Womack Army Hospital in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to a young Army sergeant and his high school sweetheart. I am the eldest daughter of Major Justin Fiew and his wife Michelle. My father served this country for 22 years and fought in almost every major conflict during the last two decades, including the Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He retired in 2007, with the rank of Major, a bronze star, and combat scars from an improvised explosive device during one of his four Iraq deployments. Above all else, he is my hero.

DESCRIPTION

My father's selfless service to this country has impacted every part of my personality, values, and future goals.

I have always been passionate about giving back to veterans; however, I never knew where to begin or how I could help. When I told my pharmacy advisor about my passion, he told me that Purdue University opened a Veteran Success Center on September 11, 2014 and encouraged me to contact them. After a few weeks, I mustered up the courage to enter the office and introduce myself. I met with Jamie Richards, Senior Assistant Director of Military Veteran Student Programs. I caught Jamie off guard since I was not military myself, but a dependent; nevertheless, he assured me he would find a place for me within the organization. He invited me to attend the monthly meetings of the Student Veteran's Organization, an invitation I eagerly accepted. Being the only female and nonveteran member in the room was incredibly intimidating. I received confused looks and felt ignored for the first few meetings. However, I was persistent, and I waited patiently to earn their trust. As time passed, they accepted me and became my good friends.

PAVE is a program developed under the University of Michigan Military Support Programs and Networks (M-SPAN) umbrella. M-SPAN programs at the University of Michigan Depression Center focus on military mental health, overcoming stigma, and the care of service members and their families. They serve the needs of over 2.5 million American soldiers deployed in combat zones since 2001. Forty-three percent of these soldiers served two or more tours, with 25 to 30% of them returning with PTSD, depression, and thoughts of suicide.

PAVE is just one of M-SPAN's many programs. Purdue was selected by the University of Michigan to receive

a PAVE program and was a forerunner among other universities, joining the program as school number 13. The PAVE program has now been implemented at over 40 universities. Once Purdue was selected as a PAVE school, the veteran's service coordinator and team leaders completed many hours of training with the PAVE program coordinator. The Purdue PAVE program operates out of the Veteran's Success Center located in the Purdue Memorial Union. This is a university-sponsored program that is run by students with faculty mentorship and instruction.

PAVE was developed as a peer support program for incoming student veterans who are returning to college after careers or enlistments in all branches of service. PAVE has a five-level organizational hierarchy, starting with the new student veteran. Incoming student veterans are paired with a peer advisor (PA). Veterans are given the option of a male or female PA, a PA who was in the same branch of service, or a PA who is in their same major. If there is no preference, students are randomly assigned to PAs.

Peer advisors are responsible for welcoming the student veteran to campus and maintaining monthly contact during their first semester. They inform the new students about the campus Student Veteran Organization meetings, PAVE outreach events, scholarships, and career fairs. The PAs are available to guide the new students to any campus or community resources they may need, including tutoring, parking facilities, psychosocial services, financial aid, and coordination of veteran's benefits. Outreach events are conducted monthly and designed and executed by PA teams with the help of their team leaders.

Peer advisors are required to log all of their interactions with their students in a logging database provided by PAVE headquarters. All new veteran students are assigned a numeric identifier within the logging system to ensure that confidentiality is maintained when data is sent to Michigan for analysis. PAVE is a grant-funded organization; therefore, data is used when applying for grant proposals. PAVE's national and campus success is quantified using this data. Most interactions are causal check-ins to see how the veteran is managing the transition. If, during that interaction, the PA identifies a need (e.g., parking, tutoring, veterans administration (VA) benefit management, suicidal thoughts), the PA will refer the student and document which service was utilized. There is space for interaction notes, and a follow-up plan is required. Team leaders complete biweekly reports summarizing sponsored events, social media posts, e-mail

blasts and any contacts with PAs or students. All data is analyzed by PAVE headquarters in Michigan and quantifies success for each campus and the overall program.

Peer advisors report to team leaders who hold managerial and networking roles for the organization. Purdue has two team leaders: Paul Brayton, a retired marine gunnery sergeant studying environmental and natural resource engineering, and me (see Figure 1). As team leaders, our core role is building a network of campus and community resources for the veteran students. Team leaders familiarize staff in campus offices (e.g., financial aid) with the PAVE program. An office contact is then designated within that office for our veterans. This leads to faster service and increased resource utilization for students. We also write biweekly reports, organize monthly team meetings, coordinate our new veteran student orientation program, and supervise outreach events while completing administrative tasks. Team leaders report to their campus veteran service coordinator, who reports to PAVE staff at the University of Michigan.

Each PAVE school takes on a unique, campus-based personality. PAVE at Purdue added a new veteran student orientation component, which we believe will reach out to over 50 new student veterans this year. We want to give every veteran student the same welcome and experiences that a traditional freshman receives during Boiler Gold Rush (BGR), Purdue's freshman orientation program. Student veterans are often unable to attend BGR because of jobs, deployments, or family obligations. Our veteran orientation emulates the BGR experience, but in a succinct manner that accommodates the needs of student veterans. The orientation includes a campus tour, PAVE introduction, and incorporates the core objectives required by the University (e.g., campus safety, financial responsibility, and academic success). Last year, the core objective requirements were provided by Purdue Span Plan Nontraditional Student Services.

I was nominated for leadership in the PAVE program because of my orientation background with BGR. During my time as a BGR team leader, I guided a group of 15 traditional students through their first week on campus. As a team supervisor the following year, I was involved with the direct management of a group of team leaders, and helped organize and execute programming for the new students during the week of BGR. While PAVE serves a different population, many of my skills are transferable between the two programs. I am a unique PAVE team leader because I am not a veteran myself. However, Jamie Richards felt my orientation background and military upbringing would allow me to

Figure 1. Purdue students Paul Brayton and McKenna Jennings are team leaders in the Peer Advisors for Veteran Education program (PAVE). Courtesy of Purdue University/John Underwood.

be successful in this leadership role. While there is not a direct link between the PAVE program and my pharmacy curriculum, I often find myself applying concepts learned from my courses, especially my patient-centered care class. In this class, we were taught reflective listening skills, motivational interviewing, and how to effectively use open- and closed-ended questions to gain information about a person or situation. We teach these same skills to our PAs during their initial training to promote successful communication between the student veteran and their PA.

CHALLENGES

It has sometimes been difficult to be a nonveteran in a veteran organization. There are individuals who dislike direction from a strong female leader. You can let it get you down, or you can use it as motivation. I let it motivate me to overcome the adversity—nothing worth doing is easy.

In addition to personal challenges, starting a new organization at a major university is a daunting task. Our biggest challenges include contacting the 300+ veterans on campus and flagging incoming students as veterans (see, for example, Figure 2). Veterans generally self-identify at the university, and we use Purdue reports to

reach out to them before they get here. Our first year, we contacted most students through their Purdue-issued e-mail address. Through that process, we found that many students do not respond to e-mail communication; therefore, we had to adjust our plan for the spring. Another challenge has been motivating and keeping PAs. Out of the many student veterans we contact, often only a handful wish to actively participate in the program. Because of this, Paul and I work hard to encourage PAs to continually put time into the program and to keep contacting their assigned students.

During our second semester, we contacted students by phone and saw a much greater response. We have helped students with their benefits, helped them find tutors, and enrolled many with the Student Veteran's Organization on campus. We also started monthly logging parties to encourage PAs to log their interactions and contact their students. We announce a monthly logging winner who receives a prize; this has led to a substantial increase in logging compliance from our PAs.

REFLECTION

My impact on the PAVE program is unique. To quote poet Robert Frost, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made

all the difference.” Throughout my college experience, I have taken a road less traveled; I never shied away from a challenge. I have chosen to leave my student legacy among veterans. I hope my experience has set precedence for dependents within veteran service organizations. There are hundreds of military dependents on Purdue’s campus; many are paying for school with their military parent’s GI Bill benefits, or have been impacted by their parent’s military service. I hope these students will choose to serve our country through organizations like PAVE. My experience with PAVE has impacted me more than I ever imagined. I was prepared to help veterans with no expectation of returns. However, thanks to PAVE, I gained long-term friendships and connected with the military community.

Belonging to a military family presents many challenges. The family is affected by both the presence and absence of their service member; it is a family lifestyle. Once the service member leaves the military, the family is removed from their support network. PAVE and the veterans at Purdue University gave me back my sense of community that I lost when my father retired. For this, I am eternally grateful. I will carry these friendships and my knowledge from PAVE long after I graduate from Purdue University. I have honed my leadership abilities, gained insight into my strengths and weaknesses, and learned how to ask for help. Throughout the process, Paul and I have shared information learned with our PAs, and

have already begun training our replacements. We have laid the foundation for the next generation of leadership.

I see my time with PAVE as the first step toward fulfilling my life’s passion—serving veterans through the practice of pharmacy. My career goal as a future pharmacist is to work at a veteran’s administration (VA) hospital and improve the quality of medical care. I am serving as a clinical intern with the VA during the summer of 2016. I am honored to be able to start my professional career with the VA and merge my passions for pharmacy and veterans in one experience.

In conclusion, by serving our nation’s veterans and military personnel, I will fulfill a charge from President Reagan, “freedom is never more than a generation from extinction; it must be fought for and defended by each generation.” Through PAVE, and hopefully a career with the VA, like my father, I will do my part to fight for and defend the freedom of the United States of America.

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Figure 2. Veteran’s Success Center staff and PAVE peer advisors during the October 2015 outreach event on Purdue Memorial Mall. From left to right: Sarah Underwood, McKenna Jennings, Adam Minkel, Kyle Schnetzler, Katrina Molina, Tyler Hirschinger, Teresa Harris, Jamie Richards, and Paul Brayton. Courtesy of Jamie Richards.

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