Understanding and Building Effective Narrative on Veteran Experiences to Compel Program and Policy Action

Mary Beth Dunkenberger, Principal Investigator
Suzanne Lo, Project Manager
Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance
The Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance

- Interdisciplinary community of collaborating faculty, staff and students
- Provide technical assistance and governance-related research
- Conduct population needs and organizational assessments, policy and program evaluation, strategic planning and strategic interventions
- Experience in public health, mental/behavioral health, human service programs, disability services, reentry programs
2010 Virginia Veterans Assessment of Experiences and Service Needs

Virginia Wounded Warrior Program – Development and Management of Case Management and Reporting System

2014 Veterans and Broadband Access in Virginia: Implications for Healthcare Planning and Policy

2015 Virginia Veterans Assessment of Experiences and Service Needs
Federal and State officials want empirical research that is

- Valid
- Reliable
- Actionable
- Representative
- Measurable

Veterans want program and policy action that is responsive to

- Individual needs
- Family members
- Service context
- Geographic context
- Comprehensive – health, education, employment, well-being
What are the challenges?

- Veterans are faced with wide-ranging and complex health and well-being needs.
- Veterans' experiences and resulting needs vary greatly.
- Nature of OIF and OEF deployments and combat have resulted in different and more immediate impacts than in prior conflicts.
- Veterans services and programs remain fragmented and institutionally grounded rather than individually focused.
Factors that Impact the Narrative

❖ Era of service

❖ Branch of Service

U.S. AIR FORCE

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

U.S. ARMY

UNITED STATES NAVY

Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran

Kosovo Veteran

Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran

Desert Storm Veteran

Life Magazine Cover

Vietnam Veteran

Cold War Veteran

LIFE
Factors that Impact the Individual Narrative

Military Status:
- Active Duty
- Reserves
- National Guard
  - Active Guard Reserve
  - Drilling
  - Mobilized

Deployments
- Combat/Noncombat
- Multiple/Length/Extended
Factors that Impact the Individual Narrative

Sex, Gender, Age, Race, Ethnicity, Rank, Education, Family Structure
Aim of Research: Grow the sweet spot

Veterans’ Needs

Where services, programs and policies are most effective

Public Policy and Program Capacity

Private and nonprofit engagement (Political)
Effective Research: Imperative 1 – Scientific Rigor

Steps to Empirical Research with Scientific Rigor

Establish Research Question(s)
1. What are the services needs of Virginia Veterans?
2. How does broadband impact veterans health services?
3. Does CBT model 1 improve PTSD symptoms among female veterans?

Identify Variables
1. Characteristics of veterans
2. Geographic scope
3. Existing resources – program parameters
4. Policy parameters
5. Intervening

Data Collection
1. Secondary
   a. Literature Review
   b. Administrative Data
2. Primary
   a. For all variables
   b. Representative of population
3. Qualifying/Causal Data (The Narrative)
Effective Research: Imperative 2 – Capture the Narrative

✿ Digital Storytelling

Gathering veteran stories to produce short videos using their own and local communities’ voices to tell their individual story.

Empower veterans involved and offers a culturally relevant perspective in a creative and visually powerful way.

✿ Culture, Storytelling, Narrative

Framing veteran issues for public understanding and support.

Research-based approaches to better public understanding and engagement.
Effective Research: Culture & Stories

Cognitive Psychology
We think through “mental models”

Cultural Anthropology
Culture shapes our ways of thinking and feeling

Linguistics
Speaking is the mental manipulation of models (e.g. metaphor)
Effective Research: Culture & Stories

WHAT IS CULTURE MADE OF?

- Values?
- Beliefs?
- Symbols?
- Concepts?
- Customs?
- Attitudes?
- Styles?
- Categories?
- **MODELS!**
Effective Research: Culture & Stories

Most models are conventional models shared by communities

- They are cultural models

- One way we organize and understand our social world is through the use of cultural models or culturally shaped mental maps. Cultural models are made up of culturally derived ideas and practices that are embodied, enacted, or instituted in everyday life (Fryberg & Markus, 2007).
Lacking political knowledge and the incentive and time to acquire it, the vast majority of citizens “substitute low-cost cues for the detailed information that they lack” – Lupia, Arthur, 1994.

Heuristics are judgmental shortcuts, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice. – Sniderman, Pal, Brody, Richard, Tetlock, Phillip, 1991
Social issues advocates need to understand that they are framers of social problems.

There is a science of cognition – how people think and process information – which informs the framing of social issues.

There is also a science to communications on social issues.
Effective Research: Storytelling – Frame Elements

“The way a story is told – its selective use of particular values, symbols, metaphors, and messengers – which in turn, triggers the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world” – FrameWorks Institute

Different stories set up different solutions

- episodic vs. thematic

- Values, Order, Context, Metaphors, Social Math, Solutions, Tone, Visuals, etc...
Effective Research: Storytelling – Frame Elements

Tripping the “Policy” Wires

- values
- context
- metaphors
- numbers
- visuals
- tone
- messengers

What is the Problem?
What are the Solutions?
Who is Responsible?
Effective Research: Research Methods

Methods

- Chart the Landscape
  - Media Content Analyses
  - Reviews of Experts’ and Advocates’ Materials

- Expert/Advocate Interviews
  - Cultural Models
  - Interviews
  - Reviews of Experts’ and Advocates’ Materials

- Redraw the Maps
  - Simplifying Models
  - Research
  - Experimental Tests of Frame Effects

Expose the Gaps and Traps
Effective Research: Research Methods

TWO SIDES

• RESEARCH  

• Field-Building
Framing veteran issues for public understanding and support is imperative.

It is necessary to utilize research-based approaches to better public understanding and engagement.

Outcomes:

- Understanding of veteran culture around issues and needs
- Understanding of what veteran and their families want to convey
- Reframes will help bridge the gap—deepen public understanding, perceptions, knowledge and therefore help communities make informed decisions, including supporting policies that will help veterans and their families
Veterans comprise 13% of Virginia’s Population

Veteran Population Density per County or City
Based on 2010 US Census Data
Era of Service Cohorts
September 2013 - US Department of Veteran Affairs (840,000 Virginia Veterans)

Era of Service

- Gulf War: 46%
- Vietnam: 27%
- Korean: 6%
- WW II: 19%
- Peacetime: 3%

Legend:
- Gulf War
- Vietnam
- Korean
- WW II
- Peacetime
In 2012, 135,910 Veterans received treatment at a Virginia-based Veteran Administration health facility.

Veteran population estimates, as of September 30, 2013, are produced by the VA Office of the Actuary (Vetpop 2011).
Older Veterans – Age 55 +

- Higher levels of chronic disease.
- Higher demand for care coordination and specialty services.
- Greater satisfaction with medical care and ability to pay.

Younger Veterans - < 55

- Higher levels of reported depression.
- Higher levels of multiple disabilities (Physical, mental, head injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder).
- Lower satisfaction with medical care and ability to pay.

Type of insurance by VWWP region

What kind of insurance do you have?

Rural Virginia Veterans have:....

- higher rates of reported depression, traumatic brain injury (TBI), substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- higher rates of chronic health conditions such as diabetes and hypertension.

- less access to medical center or specialist care.

Priority Health Service Needs of Veterans

Identified health needs of Veterans from the narrative:

- Inclusiveness and Accessibility of Healthcare
- Availability of Healthcare
- Coordination of Health Services
- Cultural Competency of Healthcare Providers
- Obtaining and Maintaining Eligibility for Services

Want to be able to help themselves – independence, not dependence in services

Veterans trust other veterans

Shared experience is the key, not current or past status

Better connections between the science and the experience

Ability to create, not react - take the initiative to connect and learn from one another – structure follows action, not vice versa

View need for ongoing services – to individual and family as cost of war
Connection to Discourse Discussion

- Focus on Emerging Populations
  - Student Veterans
  - Female Veterans
  - Military/Veteran Families

- The Power to Communicate (lesson from Sophocles)
  - Advocacy coalition framework – broad stakeholders
  - Ability to create, not react- take the initiative to connect and learn from one another – structure follows action, not vice versa

- How do you make the narrative consumable and effectual to larger audience?
  - Bridge the gap among those with military experience and between those with and without military experience
Questions/Comments/Suggestions
Advocacy Coalition Framework
Advocacy Coalition Theory

Relatively Stable Parameters
1. Basic attributes of the problem area and distribution of natural resources
2. Fundamental sociocultural values and social structure
3. Basic constitutional structure

Long Term Coalition Opportunity Structures
1. Degree of consensus needed for major policy change
2. Openness of political system
3. Overlapping Societal Cleavages

External Subsystem Events
1. Changes in socio-economic conditions
2. Changes in public opinion
3. Changes in systemic governing coalition
4. Changes in other policy subsystems

Short Term Constraints and Resources of Subsystem Actors

Policy Subsystem
Coalition A
Beliefs
Resources
Strategies
Coalition B
Beliefs
Resources
Strategies
Decisions by Government Authorities
Institutional Rules
Policy Outputs
Policy Impacts