

**Local Military Matters**  
**Bridging the Military-Civilian Gap through College-Community Interactions**

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**Abstract**

The call for papers for the 3rd annual Veterans in Society Conference included a statement made by President Ruscio of Washington & Lee University in which he wondered “whether people with different backgrounds, different experiences and different opinions can address difficult questions and, if not necessarily agree with one another, at least strive, with mutual respect, to better understand each other and to find common ground.” Similar questions have been asked by generations of military veterans with respect to the potential impact of their military backgrounds and experiences in their lives as civilians. The oft-cited PEW Research Center’s 2011 study of war and sacrifice in the Post-9/11 era draws attention to the “military-civilian gap” and notes that this gap “is much wider among younger respondents.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, as Woll writes, “Reintegration challenges can be particularly pronounced for young service members and veterans enrolling in or returning to colleges, universities . . . where most of the students are younger and lack experience with and exposure to the military.”<sup>2</sup> Such lack of experience and understanding on the part of “traditional” college students not only can lead to student-veterans feeling frustrated or isolated in classrooms but also, at an extreme, result in behaviors such as those of the University of Florida fraternity members whose chapter was suspended after an incident in which disabled military veterans were verbally insulted and spat upon.<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to bridge the “military-civilian gap” and to help military veterans and college students “better understand each other,” I designed a first-year seminar titled “Meadville’s Military Matters” in which first-year college students at a four-year liberal arts college interacted with, interviewed, and composed profiles and “war stories” (using David Venditta’s *War Stories: In Their Own Words* as a model) for military veterans in the local community. While doing so, the students were asked to develop responses to the questions: Why does the military matter to the local community, to the nation, the world? What military matters have shaped the local community’s economy, history, landscape, etc.?

**Keywords:** military-civilian gap, student-veterans, college students, military veterans, community-engaged courses



# Bridging the Military-Civilian Gap through College-Community Interactions

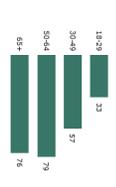


**D. Alexis Hart, PhD, Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing**

“Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility — it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain . . . . If the past 10 years have taught us anything, it’s that in the age of an all-volunteer military, it is far too easy for Americans to send soldiers on deployment after deployment without making a serious effort to imagine what that means. We can do better.”  
 —Phil Klay, former US Marine and winner of the National Book Award for *Redeployment*

## Rationale

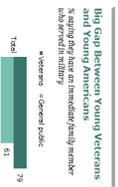
Young Adults Much Less Likely to Have Family Ties to Military



“As the size of the military shrinks, the number of veterans in the civilian population and the broader civilian population appear to be growing more distant.”

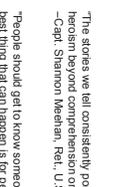
This military-civilian gap is much wider among younger respondents.”

Older Veterans Younger Veterans



“There is a widely held perception among both veterans and civilians that the public does not understand the problems faced by those in the military.”

By age:



“The stories we tell consistently portray veterans in uniform — either emphasizing veterans’ heroism beyond comprehension or their propensity for erratic violence.”  
 —Capt. Shannon Meenan, Ret., U.S. Army

“People should get to know someone in the military — befriend your military neighbor . . . . The best thing that can happen is for people to have natural, human relationships with one another.”  
 —Meredith Kleykamp, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland

The Year of Meadville is about building a sustainable and just future for our town by:  
 • Celebrating Meadville and the voices of its residents  
 • Listening to, learning from, and building with each other



## Course: “Meadville’s Military Matters”

Course Description: In this section of ENGL 101, which is connected to the “Year of Meadville,” students will explore the military history of Meadville, Pa., through the lens of the military and its impact on the town and its people. The course will explore the military history of Meadville and Crawford County and conducting primary and secondary research to discover why the military matters to Meadville.

- Assignments:
- Interview of a local veteran
  - “War Story” based upon David Verdilla’s collection *War Stories in Their Own Words*
  - Research project on a local veteran
  - Artifact Description of one of the military artifacts at the Baldwin-Reynolds House Museum
  - War Memorial Description and Analysis of one of the military memorials in Saint Agatha Cemetery or Diamond Park
  - War Memorial Description and Analysis Speech
  - Public Poster Presentation

Guest Speakers:

**Tony and Marsha Pedone**  
 Lilac Springs Veterans Breakaway Community Center



**Pat Emig**  
 Northwest Pennsylvania Museum of Military Heritage



**Claude Arshin Thomas**  
 Veteran War Veteran and Documental Work



**Kirk Savage**  
 Professor, History of Art and Architecture, University of Pittsburgh



**Baldwin-Reynolds House Museum**

**Baldwin-Reynolds House Museum**



**Saint Agatha Cemetery**



**Diamond Park**



**Active Aging: “Through A Veteran’s Eye”**



**Student Responses:**

“The readings and speakers really helped me have a better understanding of how much the military matters to the town of Meadville.”  
 “The repeated messages from guest speakers and assigned readings have given me more insight into why the military matters.”  
 “Assigned readings and veteran interviews have contributed most to increase my understanding of military matters.”

### About the Author

D. Alexis Hart is an Associate Professor of English and the Director of Writing at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. A U.S. Navy veteran, Hart has published and edited scholarly work on veterans' issues, and was the co-recipient, with Roger Thompson, of a 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Research Grant to study veterans returning to college writing classrooms. She is co-chair of the CCCC Task Force on Veterans and a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Policy Analyst for Higher Education in Pennsylvania.

### Endnotes

1. "The Military-Civilian Gap: Fewer Family Connections," *PEW Research Center*, 2011, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/11/23/the-military-civilian-gap-fewer-family-connections/>
2. Woll, Pam, *Teaching America's Best: Preparing Your Classrooms to Welcome Returning Veterans and Service Members* (Bethesda, MD: National Organization on Disability, 2010).
3. "Florida Frat Suspended After Allegedly Harassing Veterans," CBS News, April 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/florida-fraternity-suspended-after-allegedly-harassing-veterans/>

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