



College Credit for Heroes: Accelerating Degree Completion

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PROGRAM PROFILE

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ABSTRACT

This article overviews lessons learned and findings from implementing state-funded grant initiatives for student veterans and service members (SVSMs) at Texas State University for 3 years. The Texas Workforce Commission's College Credit for Heroes program (CCH) supported 63 SVSMs from summer 2017 through fall 2020, funded the development of 5 new, 8-week undergraduate courses, and streamlined 2 undergraduate courses for a combined total of \$387,125. SVSMs received a scholarship for completing a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) competency portfolio and earned a stipend for completing a 120-hour capstone project. Nineteen SVSMs earned PLA credits ranging from 3–18 hours. Fifty-three SVSMs completed a capstone project and earned their bachelors within 2 to 4 semesters.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Student veterans and service members (SVSMs) bring a unique set of strengths and experiences when returning to civilian life and education. However, transitioning from service to civilian life is not always easy, especially when reentering higher education (Ahern et al., 2015). SVSMs and adult learners bring specific knowledge and unique experiences from service/work, training, and other experiential learning experiences to higher education. Understanding the SVSMs' transitioning circumstances, including values, health, family, and previous service specialties, is crucial in supporting them in their goal to complete an education degree (Bamford-Rees et al., 2010). Through understanding SVSMs challenges to entering higher education, college and universities have the opportunity to expand support services and develop programming that promotes inclusion.

RATIONALE INFORMING THE PROJECT

Texas State University is a nationally recognized veteran-serving institution (MilitaryTimes, 2021). To serve this student population in an impactful way, it is important to not just have university wide initiatives, but the support of individual department, program, and faculty efforts and understanding of SVSMs needs (Texas Workforce Commission, 2020). Many SVSMs enter the Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS) program at Texas State University because of our prior learning assessment program and ability to credential military and technical/vocational training. Block credit prior learning assessment (BC-PLA) is an effective method to credential extracurricular learning such as worklife and noncollegiate learning experiences into college credit (Sherron et al., 2021). BC-PLA has been helpful in serving as a bridge for SVSMs to receive college credit for service and work experience (Texas Workforce Commission, 2020).

BC-PLA has become a significant champion and impetus for educational and social justice by providing recognition of knowledge and access to postsecondary education historically unavailable in traditional higher education institutions (Klein-Collins et al., 2018). BC-PLA aims to provide a holistic approach to valuing learning from real-world experiences, training, professional work, and other nontraditional learning methods (Boden et al., 2019; Travers, 2012).

PROJECT STRUCTURE AND/OR PROCEDURES

Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and College Credit for Heroes (CCH)

In 2011 the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) initiated College Credit for Heroes (CCH), which created a network

for SVSMs and provided for the development of a program that would accelerate degree completion. CCH sought proposals from eligible offerors to develop, modify, or replicate streamlined programs that translate military experience, education, and training into civilian credentials to accelerate degree, certificate, and licensing programs allowing veterans and service members to more easily reenter the workforce. Through grant awards and partnerships, CCH developed, modified, and/or replicated parts of other programs involved in awarding college credit for past military training, education, and experience. Recognizing SVSMs' knowledge and skills from different areas of the military as college-level learning allowed them to reenter the workforce and educational institutions. Today over 50 colleges and universities have incorporated CCH initiatives into their veteran-serving programs (CCH, 2021).

In spring 2017 the TWC-CCH funded a grant, *AccelerateTexas State*, for \$145,495 to streamline BC-PLA and capstone curriculum and provide scholarships and stipends to SVSMs in the Department of Organization, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS). In spring 2018 the CCH awarded \$241,630 to support the development of 5 new online 8-week courses and provide scholarships and stipends to SVSMs. The BC-PLA curriculum was piloted in the summer of 2017 and has been implemented ever since (Sherron et al., 2021). OWLS offered BC-PLA in the BAAS undergraduate degree.

The OWLS BAAS degree program is designed for SVSMs and mature working adults who need an individualized academic program that awards credit for nontraditional forms of learning, such as credit for work experience, noncollegiate training, test scores, military and technical/vocational training. Students may receive up to 24 semester hours for work/life competencies, up to 30 semester hours for training conducted by business or industry if recognized by the American Council on Education (ACE, 2021) or by military training, and an unlimited number of hours from the College Level Examination Program (CLEP, 2021) and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES, 2021). The OWLS BAAS degree consisted of 4 modules: (a) a 42-hour credit module of a general education core curriculum, (b) a 48-hour credit module of occupational emphasis (OE), (c) a 21-hour credit module of professional development (PD), and (d) a 6-hour credit-module for a 120-hour field capstone project.

Funding from the CCH grant allowed for the hiring of a grant coordination assistant. Together, the assistant and the Principal Investigator (PI) managed the recruitment, administrative, and outreach processes for the funding opportunity, plus coordinated the development of 5 new

courses to offer in the BAAS program. To establish the funding, the PI worked with Texas State University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and Accounts Payable. Once the funding process was in place, in summer 2017, the PI and assistant were able to begin award funding to eligible SVSMs.

Funding for SVSMs was available each semester the PLA and capstone courses were offered. For SVSMs completing the PLA course, a \$650 scholarship was provided at the end of the course. Then, for SVSMs completing the capstone course, a \$1,800 stipend was provided at the end of the course. The grant coordination assistant led efforts to recruit SVSMs into the program and managed veteran documentation and data collection. To recruit SVSMs, the assistant contacted eligible students through email at the beginning of their PLA or capstone course of each semester and informed them of the funding opportunity available to them through the CCH grant. Once recruited, the assistant would then provide instructions for the documentation needed in order to receive the scholarship if they were participating in PLA, or stipend if they were completing their capstone. Documentation required to be completed included a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Authorization to Work form, WIOA questionnaire, and the creation of a vendor number for the SVSM with Texas State University. Also, for SVSMs receiving funding for the capstone course, an I-9 through HireRight was required by Texas State University. The assistant would provide the Authorization to Work form and the WIOA questionnaire to the SVSM through a secure file transfer system to where they could either fill out and return the documentation through the secure file transfer system, or they could meet the assistant in the OWLS department office and complete the documentation there. Then the assistant would contact Texas State University Accounts Payable to set up the vendor number process, which entailed an online secure application the SVSM would complete themselves. The PI managed the I-9 through HireRight process. SVSMs would be sent an invitation to complete the I-9 through HireRight, and once complete, the PI would review and approve the submission. The I-9 through HireRight and the vendor number process was a requirement of Texas State University, whereas the Authorization to Work and WIOA questionnaire were requirements of the Texas Workforce Commission. The assistant would store the Authorization to Work forms and WIOA questionnaire in a secure location to provide to the TWC at the end of the grant. The responses from the WIOA questionnaire were also required to be recorded in a data collection file provided by the TWC. This data file was

password protected and was sent to the TWC at the end of the grant, along with the Authorization to Work forms and WIOA questionnaires, through an encrypted email to ensure data privacy to the SVSMs.

OUTREACH

Multiple outreach activities were used to increase awareness of the CCH funding opportunity in the BAAS program. For example, faculty attended education day at Ft. Hood, Texas States' Veteran day, and professional conferences and meetings. A 3-month Community Impact Newspaper campaign was conducted (see [Figure 1](#)). The ad ran in San Marcos, Buda, Kyle, Round Rock/Pflugerville/Hutto, Georgetown, Leander, Cedar Park, Northwest Austin, Southwest Austin, Dripping Springs, and was estimated to have reached 1.5 million readers 3 times. In addition, we ran an ad in the San Antonio Express-News. The San Antonio campaign ran for 1 month and reached over 73,000 individuals (see [Figure 2](#)). Participant demographic and course information data are reported next.

PROJECT RESULTS

Sixty-three SVSMs participated in TWC-CCH incentives from 2017–2020. Forty-eight were men and 15 were women

The advertisement features the Texas State University logo and the 'College Credit for Heroes' logo. The main headline reads 'Finish your degree with College Credit for Heroes!'. Below this, it states that previous working and life experience can be converted into up to 30 hours of college credit for non-collegiate training and/or 24 hours of work-life learning. A bulleted list identifies eligible individuals: veterans, service members, working adults, those with some college, and those with military training or workforce certifications. The ad also mentions a partnership with Texas State University's Prior Learning Assessment to help veterans, service members, and working adults earn a bachelor's degree. A second bulleted list lists career opportunities in fields such as athletics, healthcare administration, business, information technology, criminal justice, engineering technology, geographic information systems, and social services. Enrollment is available in San Marcos and Round Rock, with a link to owls.txstate.edu/resources/College-Credit-for-Heroes. The ad is part of the Texas State University System and includes a disclaimer about non-discrimination.

Figure 1 Community Impact Newspaper Campaign.

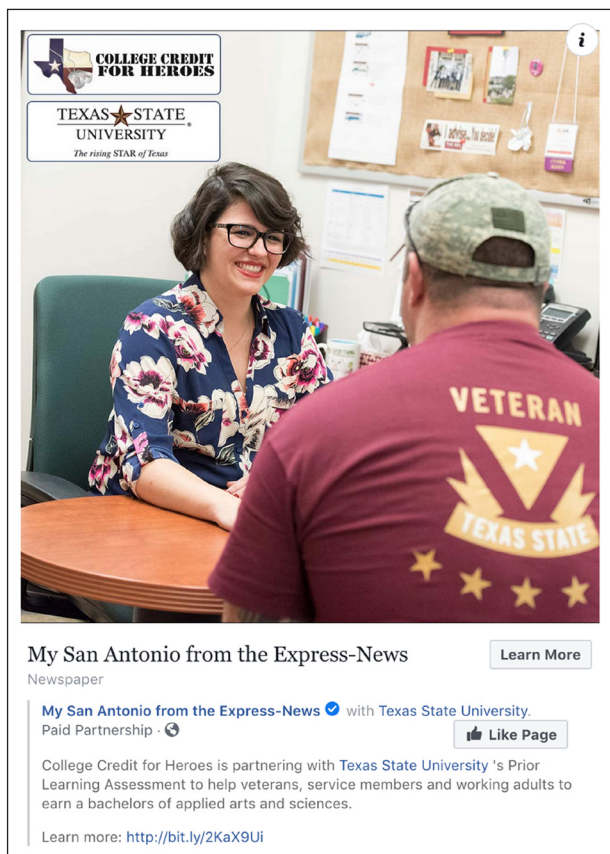


Figure 2 My San Antonio Express-News Social Media Ad.

who lived in 11 different Texas counties (see Table 1). The SVSMs’ average age was 41 and ranged from 25 to 60. Ethnicity was predominately Black, Hispanic, and White. Nineteen SVSMs earned PLA credit awards ranging from 3–18 hours. Fifty-three SVSMs completed a capstone project and earned their bachelors within 2–4 semesters.

Curriculum Development

The TWC-CCH initiative helped SVSMs have more access to the PLA and capstone by providing financial support. Along with the access to the PLA and capstone courses, the grants supported the development of 5 new 8-week online courses: Leadership in OWLS, Organizational Development, Trends and Issues in OWLS, STEM Literacy, and Life Planning. From fall 2017 through fall 2020, 84% of the students who graduated from OWLS earned PLA credit. There have been 1,374 students enrolled in the courses during this time period (see Table 2).

PLA AND CAPSTONE STIPENDS

Funding for PLA was initially in the form of a \$650 scholarship applied to the student’s financial aid. BC-PLA was used to accelerate SVSM’s ability to earn college credit for workforce learning, up to 24 credit hours for work-life learning, and up to 30 hours for noncollegiate training. The SVSM would first complete a portfolio that provided documentation of their

ETHNICITY (n = 62)	N	%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	<1%
Asian	2	<1%
Black or African American	11	17%
Hispanic or Latino	13	20%
White	35	56%
AGE (n = 59)	N	%
25–29	7	11%
30–34	11	19%
35–39	7	12%
40–44	10	17%
45–49	10	17%
50–54	8	14%
55–59	6	10%
COUNTY OF RESIDENCE OF SVSM (n = 58)	N	%
Bastrop	1	<1%
Bexar	2	<1%
Caldwell	1	<1%
Comal	5	<1%
DeWitt	1	<1%
Guadalupe	1	<1%
Hays	14	24%
Montgomery	1	<1%
Tarrant	1	<1%
Travis	11	19%
Williamson	20	34%

Table 1 Demographics: Ethnicity, Age, County.

STREAMLINED COURSES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE ENROLLED
Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)	355
Capstone	457
New Courses	
Leadership	123
Organizational Development	109
Trends and Issues in the Workplace	122
STEM Literacy	83
Life Planning	125
Total number of students	1,374

Table 2 Streamlined and New Courses.

background by completing competency statements based on a *Job Task Analysis* (Sherron et al., 2021). The *Portfolio* experience not only validated the students’ knowledge but also fostered self-esteem and confidence (Cherrstrom et al., 2021). Capstone students were required to complete 180 internship hours and received a \$2,700 stipend (\$15 per hour). After fall 2017, the capstone course was streamlined to require 120 internship hours and stipends were reduced to \$1,800. As shown in Table 3 (below) 19

SVSMs earned PLA credits ranging from 3–18 hours, 53 completed a capstone course/internship, and 9 received funding for completing both OCED 4111 PLA & 4360/61 Capstone courses/internships. A sample list of occupations submitted by SVSMS for PLA credit (O*NET, 2020a; 2020b) is reflected in Table 4.

PLA/CAPSTONE/ PLA&CAPSTONE	NUMBER OF SVSM	PERCENT
OCED 4111 Prior Learning Assessment	19	30 %
OCED 4360/ 61 Capstone	53	84 %
OCED 4111 & 4360/61	9	14 %
SEMESTER	NUMBER OF PLA	NUMBER OF CAPSTONE
Summer 2017	2	5
Fall 2017	1	4
Spring 2018	0	3
Summer 2018	0	0
Fall 2018	2	7
Spring 2019	4	10
Summer 2019	2	5
Fall 2019	3	6
Spring 2020	3	5
Summer 2020	1	1
Fall 2020	1	7
<i>Total</i>	19	53

Table 3 PLA and Capstone.

O*NET #	OCCUPATIONAL TITLE
29-2052.00	Pharmacy Technicians
29-2053.00	Psychiatric Technicians
19-3099.01	Transportation Planners
49-9051.00	Electrical Power-Line Installers and Repairers
55-3014.00	Artillery and Missile Crew Members
33-3051.03	Sherriff and Deputy Sherriff
51-9061.00	Inspectors, Testers, Sorters, Samplers, and Weighers
47-2152.02	Plumbers
33-3051.01	Police Patrol Officers
29-2055.00	Surgical Technologists
11-1021.00	General and Operations Managers
33-3021.05	Immigration and Customs Inspectors
11-1021.00	General and Operations Managers
47-5031.00	Explosives Workers, Ordnance Handling Experts, and Blasters
49-2094.00	Electrical and Electronics Repairers, Commercial and Industrial Equipment

Table 4 Sample of the Occupations Submitted for PLA credit.

The capstone required students to complete a 120-hour project with a tangible product. Table 5 lists the Capstone projects that were completed at various locations, such as medical centers, educational institutions, and law enforcement agencies. Fifty-three SVSMs completed a capstone project and earned a degree within 2–4 semesters.

PARTICIPANT EVALUATION RESULTS

Twenty-five out of 53 SVSMs who graduated responded to an evaluation survey about the PLA, capstone project, BAAS degree completion, and the impact on their career after receiving their degree. Six reported they received a raise because they completed their degree. Eight reported they obtained a job because they completed their degree. Five received a promotion because they completed their degrees. Themes of career advancement, personal reflection, high satisfaction in the OWLS program, and gratitude were identified, as demonstrated in the following examples:

- “It was a challenging experience but pleased with the outcome. I gained 18 hours of credit.”
- “I feel that this course forced me to dig into my past and pull out process and procedure that I have not experienced in years. Now that I look back, I feel good at pulling those memories back.”

SVSMs were asked about their level of satisfaction with the university, the department, and the veteran services at the university. A 10-point scale was used to measure satisfaction with 1 = no satisfaction and 10 = completely satisfied. Average ratings were above 8.0, with veteran services having the highest rating at 8.8, Texas State University following at 8.6, and the department with an 8.3 satisfaction rating. The results indicated a high level of satisfaction with veteran services, the university, and the department.

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION STATEMENT

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) required the reporting of individual participant data for all WIOA-funded programs. TWC-CCH was required to share program data with the Department of Labor and their contractors for the administration and enforcement of laws, including verifying eligibility for public assistance, supporting law enforcement activities, and other purposes permitted by law. This project was approved by the university research office and IRB. Data was reported with an encrypted and secure transfer portal provided by the state.

CAPSTONE PROJECT	LOCATION
Veteran Student Guide Book for Texas State University	Veterans Affairs
Providing At-Risk Kids with Constructive Alternatives Skills	Taylor ISD
Ten best practices for surgical technologists	St. David's South Austin Medical Center
How to reduce churn within the first ninety by developing a 5-stage model for a W.P. Engine	W.P. Engine
Five Training Modules to Assist in the Training of Candidates for State Licensure, Business Enterprises of Texas	Crisis Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC)
Diabetic Evaluation Score Sheet Handout	Resolute Health Hospital
ACTION Manual for Relapse Prevention	The Right Step
Adult Education Decision Tree Diagram	Austin Community College: Highland Campus
ActivTrax Health and Wellness Product Training Integration	Schertz Family YMCA
Student tracking system for target skills and behavior for accessible monitoring	Forest North Elementary School
Accessing a crew's physical fitness standards aboard a Coast Guard Cutter	Coast Guard Sector/Air Station Corpus Christi
Veterans Helping Veterans: Increase Use to Increase Benefit	American Legion Post 447
Global Training Initiative	National Oilwell Varco (NOV)
Applying Professional and Ethical Standards to Achieve College Success: A Guideline for Respiratory Care Students	Lone Star College System – Kingwood Campus
Recruiting and Retaining Women in Law Enforcement	Travis County Sherriff's Office

Table 5 Example of Capstone Projects.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE, PUBLIC POLICY, OR FUTURE RESEARCH

This article overviews what we learned from implementing state-funded grant initiatives for veterans and service members (SVSMs) at Texas State University across 3 years. Data for SVSMs who did not participate in the CCH program were not collected. This section discusses the results then offers insight for clinical practice, BC-PLA, and future project direction.

First, outreach activities were costly but vital in creating awareness and participation. We were able to exceed the proposed number of SVSMs served. This was a direct result of streamlining the capstone project from 180 hours to 120 hours. The reduction in hours allowed us to onboard an additional 23 SVSMs. We were not surprised to learn that the majority of the SVSMs lived in Williamson County, which is driving distance to Ft. Hood, and conveniently located to our north campus. Hays and Travis counties were the next two areas that SVSMs resided. Our main campus is located in Hays County and one can easily drive from Travis County to the main campus. However, our program is 100% online and can be completed anywhere in the world.

Second, BC-PLA is a unique innovative learning experience that validates a person's experience and training for college credit (Sherron et al., 2021). Our BC-PLA program is both a formative and summative process in which learners create a competency portfolio to document their skills, knowledge, cognitive processes, and tools and technology used. BC-PLA allowed SVSMs to demonstrate

learning for which there was no standardized exam and earn block credit awards. BC-PLA is a powerful recruitment incentive and was the number one reason why many students choose the department. BC-PLA is an effective way to bridge the gap between work life and non-collegiate experiential learning experiences for collegiate credit. BC-PLA offered SVSMs with significant knowledge and skills to gain sufficient an appreciable amount of college credit. We expected more SVSMs to need BC-PLA to accelerate their degree; however, the majority did not need to participate in BC-PLA because we were able to credential a significant number of military trainings towards their degree. Nonetheless, scholarships were provided to those SVSMs who enrolled in the BC-PLA course. In general, students were grateful for the funding and found the experience to be challenging and rewarding.

Third, capstone projects are a unique learning experience where SVSMs lead a 120-hour professional project for an organization. Student projects were diverse and represented many different industries. The capstone project facilitated a professional experience, references, and entry to the civilian workplace. We were fortunate to pay our SVSMs a stipend from the grant for their capstone project. Typically, student capstone projects are not funded. Therefore, SVSMs were surprised and grateful for the stipend. In one particular case, the stipend was considered a "Godsent" as it paid rent and the student was not evicted. Further, many SVSMs indicated in a survey that they received a promotion or a new job because of their degree.

Funding from TWC-CCH provided SVSMs a unique opportunity to complete their education. The TWC-CCH incentives helped to recognize, value, and award SVSMs transitioning into civilian life and higher education. As a department, we were fortunate to obtain funding for the development of new relevant accelerated courses as well as pay the cost of BC-PLA and fund capstone projects for SVSMs. Unfortunately, this practice is not sustainable because of the nature of grant funding; it comes to an end. But the funds did advance our department by funding the development of new online accelerated courses and streamlining our PLA and capstone courses.

Fourth, our next step is to explore a competency based education (CBE) model with both direct and indirect assessment. We are collaborating with the Texas Greater Foundation Texas Competency-Based Education (CBE) Design Collaboratory to learn and design a CBE model. This modality will offer more flexibility and another opportunity to accelerate degree completion. In addition, we will be writing a new grant to create an online system in which SVSMs can upload their joint service transcript to learn how many transferable credit hours are approved coupled with a degree plan and estimated time of degree completion. This system will provide real-time answers to the questions all students want to know: *How fast can I graduate or When will I graduate?*

Lastly, we encourage readers to explore grant opportunities available to them at their state and federal workforce and labor commissions, Veteran Affairs departments, and/or higher education coordinating boards. Asking themselves *What do SVSMs need, and, how can their next grant proposal support this student population?* Search for grant opportunities in the United States at <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html>.

DISCLAIMER

The views, statements, and opinions presented in this article are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Texas State University

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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