ACE PROMISING PRACTICES IN VETERANS EDUCATION[1]

The American Council on Education (ACE) and the Walmart Foundation partnered to explore existing programs and initiatives supporting student veterans, promote awareness of innovative ideas and lessons learned, and disseminate insights and ideas to institutions of higher education. The following Promising Practices report aims to help colleges and universities implement or enhance programs and services.

[1] *Adopted from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Promising-Practices-in-Veterans-Education.pdf; Last Updated 2011*

Promising Practices in Veterans' Education:

Outcomes and Recommendations from the Success for Veterans Award Grants

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Promising Practices in Veterans' Education:

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This report is the result of the outcomes from the ACE and Walmart Foundation Success for Veterans Award Grants. ACE is grateful to the Walmart Foundation for its generous support.

Introduction

The recent implementation of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, more commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, expanded educational benefits for the nearly 2 million men and women who have served in the armed forces since September 11, 2001. The opportunities created by the unprecedented increase in financial aid triggered a surge in the number of service members, veterans, and their families accessing higher education across the country. With that surge came recognition of the need for increased supports and student services specific to this population to ensure the success of today's veterans in America's colleges and universities.

In response to this growing need, the Walmart Foundation and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered to explore existing programs and initiatives supporting student veterans, promote awareness of innovative ideas and lessons learned, and disseminate insights and ideas to institutions of higher education. The *Success for Veterans Award Grants* were designed to help campuses expand current programs and services for veterans that are comprehensive in scope and sensitive to the diverse needs of returning service members and to help facilitate communications and dissemination strategies to share promising practices and success stories. Because the number of veterans enrolled in higher education has been relatively low, most colleges and universities do not have well-developed programs to serve combat veterans. Some institutions, however, are on the cutting edge of developing innovative programs to serve their military and veteran students and their families. This report aims to help colleges and universities learn from the program outcomes and implement or enhance programs and services at their institution.

Selection Process

The American Council on Education (ACE) distributed grant application guidelines to qualified institutions. ACE received 248 applications from institutions of all sectors: public, private, online, two-year, and four-year institutions. In accordance with Walmart Foundation guidelines, for-profit institutions were not eligible to apply for these grants. Institutions submitted detailed plans that included the following key elements:

- Scaling up and building upon existing veteran-friendly programs and services.
- Evaluation of program success through extensive qualitative and quantitative data collection.
- Information dissemination of lessons learned and program successes to the broader higher education community.
- Sustainability of programs after the duration of the grant reporting period.

To ensure that applications were given fair consideration, ACE created a selection committee and a panel of judges to determine the grantees. All of the eligible applications first went to the selection committee, comprising six individuals of diverse professional backgrounds and personally invested in veterans' education. Using a weighted scoring sheet, the committee narrowed the applicant pool down to 30 semi-finalists. A panel of judges (former college and university presidents and chancellors) then chose the 20 final grantees.

The *Success for Veterans* grantees represent a diverse group of institutions: nine public four-year institutions, eight community colleges, two private four-year institutions, and one consortium. Equal consideration was given to ACE members and nonmembers, and grants were awarded to 17 ACE members and three ACE nonmembers.

All of the grantees commenced work on their grant-funded projects in June

Success for Veterans Award Grant Recipients

- California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (CA)
- California State University, Sacramento (CA)
- Clackamas Community College (OR)
- Colorado State University (CO)
- Empire State College, SUNY (NY)
- Fairleigh Dickinson University (NJ)
- Fresno City College (CA)
- George Mason University (VA)
- Hunter College School of Social Work, CUNY (NY)
- Lane Community College (OR)
- Los Angeles City College (CA)
- Madison Area Technical College (WI)
- Onondaga Community College (NY)
- Park University (MO)
- Ramapo College (NJ)
- Southwestern College (CA)
- Trident Technical College (SC)
- University of California, Santa Cruz (CA)
- University of Maine, Augusta (ME)
- University of Maryland University College (MD)

2009. Each of the grantees submitted three semi-annual project and financial reports to ACE. Final reports were submitted by all grantees by July 31, 2011.

In addition to receiving reports from all 20 grantees, ACE completed site visits to each institution that received a grant. Each visit was designed to assess the status of the grantee's program, understand their challenges, and review program successes.

Program Overview

Each of the grantees developed a unique work plan to address how they serve veterans enrolled at their institution. A few of the programs and services implemented by grantees include:

- Distance learning preparation module.
- Bridge courses to aid in military transfer credit process.
- Resume writing and career planning workshops.
- Professional development training programs for faculty.
- Face-to-face and online student veteran orientation programs.
- Intervention and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns.
- Integration of veterans into strategic enrollment management plans.
- Peer support and peer mentoring programs (to include student veteran organization development, formal student mentoring programs, and faculty/student mentorships).
- Outreach to local National Guard and active duty military bases; deployed and stateside service members.
- One-stop resource centers, dedicated veterans personnel, work-study placement, and employment support.
- Programs to increase institutional awareness of veterans' experiences: "student veteran panels, film screenings, discussions, theatrical performances."
- Development of community-based collaborations.
- Best practices resource binder to disseminate to other institutions.
- Professional development training programs.
- Resource guides and handbooks.
- Laptop loan program to support veterans who need access to computers.
- Partnerships with local and regional higher education institutions, VA medical centers, and employer consortiums.

The collective work of the 20 *Success for Veterans* grantees represents a wide variety of initiatives that span critical aspects of a successful college experience: enrollment, degree attainment, and career placement. Despite their different bodies of work, nearly all of the grantees implemented the following components within their programs: advisory committees, student veteran feedback, and in-kind support.

All of the institutions agreed that gaining top-level leadership support was vital to the creation and sustainment of their programs, particularly in the struggling economy. Looking forward, grantees agreed that national and local grant and foundation programs were going to largely contribute to future funding. Many institutions saw success in gaining funding by asking students to share their stories and highlight successes of their programs.

One of the most critical effects of the grants has been the development of state and community partnerships on

and off campus to support veterans programs. Grantees realized that while they may not be able to provide certain services to veterans, they can make referrals to community, state, and federal resources and organizations. Among the organizations that grantees partnered with are state and federal departments of veterans affairs, VA medical centers, veteran centers, the Wounded Warrior Project, the U.S. Department of Labor, local national guard units, and nearby active duty bases. Local non-profit organizations and community support systems were also leveraged to provide services to student veterans.

Each program found the most success after using environmental scans and surveys to determine what the student veterans felt was needed, rather than prescriptively addressing issues based on past experiences with other populations. Institutions rapidly discovered what the veterans wanted and needed to succeed was different from what they originally intended to provide. Based on these surveys, broad success programs were put in place. The goals and accomplishments of the *Success for Veterans* grantees spanned nearly every aspect of higher education; many programs enhancing multiple areas to ensure the highest rates of success.

Admissions and Financial Aid

In beginning their environmental scans and student surveys, grantees quickly discovered a need to better identify and track the veteran population on campus in order to communicate with the students and measure the success of their programs. Many higher education institutions face a number of barriers to identifying and tracking their student veteran population as this is not a traditionally followed group and it can be difficult to identify this population even when tracking methods are implemented. While many students who use their VA benefits can be tracked, not all veterans are eligible for VA benefits, including the GI Bill, and some may have exhausted all of their benefits, so simply identifying those who use VA financial aid does not accurately capture this population. Further, this method is inclusive of family members who use VA benefits, making it difficult to separate veterans who need transition assistance from more traditional students using their parents' benefits.

> "Having a tracking system in our office is very important because it really helps justify our office. We provide a number of programs and services, and being able to show outcomes in these times of deep budget cuts and [poor] economic conditions is really important. So being able to assess what's happening with our student veterans based upon their involvement with our programs and services has enabled us to justify what we are doing and show that we are having impact."
>
> -Jan Rastall, Director, Adult Learner and Veteran Services, Colorado State University

Many grantees began asking veterans to self-identify on their admissions application but discovered phrasing the question improperly can be confusing or stigmatizing, leading to veterans not identifying themselves. Grantees suggested that asking whether a student has ever served in the armed forces, rather than asking if they are a veteran, may capture a larger population, as many women or non-combat veterans

may identify more closely with this classification. Still, the question must be optional and therefore cannot guarantee an accurate assessment.

While it can be difficult for colleges to obtain data on their student veteran population, grantees agree it is critical since the data will ensure programs and services that are being implemented are truly supporting veterans and helping them achieve their post-secondary goals. The ability to define and employ tracking methods for the on-campus veteran population will help colleges demonstrate need for additional services and programs and also support fundraising efforts. Los Angeles City College (LACC) developed a robust quantitative and qualitative assessment method through their Veterans Success Institute. Data captured over the course of three years reflected increases in average GPA, successful completion and transfer rates, and improved student satisfaction rates over time. This data has allowed LACC to determine next steps and gain support needed to move forward with additional program and policy enhancements.

While quantitative data remains elusive, grantees felt qualitative data that indicates what success means to veterans can be as— if not more—informative. Veterans may define success in many ways, including academic or social success. While a high GPA or other academic success may be important for some veterans, others may be more interested in social or transitional success, such as the ability to fit in on campus and engage in the college culture with other students. Increasing student engagement is critically important to any veterans program as it can demonstrate the impact of services and help measure success. This engagement, or other qualitative measures identifying confidence and comfort, demonstrates to the grantees that their programs are effectively supporting their veterans' overall transition.

Early surveys of student veterans at many grantee institutions indicated financial aid and the processing of VA benefits was causing the largest amount of anxiety and often driving withdrawal of veterans from those institutions. Navigating GI Bill benefits processes can be confusing and frustrating, as some veterans are eligible for multiple benefits while others are eligible at lower rates. Distance learning versus residential learning affects housing payments, as does the number of credit hours a student is taking, and students were often experiencing problems with VA approval or processing speeds and systems.

In response, Madison Area Technical College (MATC) hired a veterans service coordinator to provide one-on-one GI Bill assistance to student veterans. The coordinator served as the college's subject matter expert in financial aid benefits and acted as a liaison between the students and school certifying officials. In addition to this personalized assistance, MATC hosted workshops to help students understand their benefits and explain recent changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill that affected these benefits. Additionally, the college hosted six-week checkups—after identifying this time period as the most volatile for their students— to ensure veterans had what they needed and schedule changes wouldn't affect benefits processing. This workshops and checkups made certain MATC student veterans were informed and prepared to use the GI Bill to the

best possible advantage, and decreased processing times and problems with receipt of payments. At the end of the grant period, MATC made the decision to make the coordinator a full-time position at the college to sustain these successes.

Fairleigh Dickinson University also created a Veterans Services Office and hired a full-time VA benefits counselor. In addition to providing one-on-one assistance, the university published an online handbook that includes a pre-admission checklist for veterans to follow, ensuring their preparedness for processing benefits. The counselor works with each prospective student to determine the best possible use of available benefits, including the university's discounted rates for National Guard members who are not fully GI Bill eligible and transfer scholarships for veterans not eligible for the Yellow Ribbon Program. This service has acted not only as a support for student veterans but also as a highly successful recruiting technique as prospective students have indicated high levels of comfort and confidence due to the pre-admission counseling and benefits assistance.

To assist financial aid officers and school certifying officials in processing VA benefits, Onondaga Community College (OCC) hired VA work-study students. Work-study students assist with standard administrative tasks, such as filing paperwork and answering phones, but are also able to assist new veterans in completing VA forms when applying for benefits and serve as peer mentors, helping to show new student veterans how to negotiate the various processes involved in attending college. In helping take the burden of some of this counseling off their busy administrators, OCC and other grantees are also providing student veterans a valuable on campus part-time employment opportunity.

> "I've seen almost instant rapport between a work-study vet who may have already been in school a semester or two as (s)he meets with a vet applying to school, giving the new student the benefit of their experience and continuing the habit of "watching your buddy's back" that most have developed in the service. I think our office would function totally differently if we did not have work-study students here, and not for the better, so I would say they are extremely effective."
>
> -Keith Stevenson, Coast Guard Veteran, Technical Assistant, Office of Veterans Affairs, Onondaga Community College

Student Services

To help student veterans obtain the necessary information to be successful in their transition to college and recognizing that veterans may not need the same orientation as traditional students, many institutions offered veterans the option of attending a special orientation in place of the prescribed first-year or transfer student orientation. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona accomplished this through offering an optional online version of their standard orientation that was reworked to fit the specific needs of veterans. Changing modules on time management—as many veterans have far different factors affecting their schedule—and adding modules on applying for the GI Bill benefits helped students gain the orientation to campus they needed.

> "Content that is specific to veterans isn't any different than what any new student at Cal Poly Pomona should know, but what we did was we tailored some of the messages to the veteran community. We use very veteran-specific examples throughout all the different themed modules."
>
> -Tracy Lew, Senior Coordinator, Orientation Services, Cal Poly Pomona

Institutions providing distance learning options for veterans and military students also saw benefits to separate orientations or introductory coursework. University of Maryland University College recognized an increasing need for prospective students to become familiar with online education before actual enrollment in university courses. They addressed this issue through an online orientation course that allowed prospective military and veteran students to test-drive the distance learning platform. Restricted to military and veterans only, the environment also provided this population with a collaborative space filled with their peers, increasing their confidence and success.

Additionally, other institutions began providing orientation materials specific to the population. In some cases, this consisted of a handout or checklist provided to veterans who identify themselves at orientations, or a breakout session from orientations that provided veterans with information specific to their financial aid, available on- and off-campus resources, and courses they may be interested in. Some institutions expressed frustration in getting veterans to a specific orientation, particularly if orientation isn't mandatory for new or transfer students.

Despite best efforts to ensure a smooth transition to postsecondary education, grantees cited ongoing need for transition counseling and social work services. Further, whether to provide mental health resources to student veterans has become a growing discussion within the higher education community. Again noting the need for specialized services, multiple successful approaches to providing these services were identified by grantees. In some cases, providing intake services to student veterans followed with a referral to local VA services as needed was deemed appropriate to ensuring the best trained staffs were working with the veteran population. Others chose to hire a specific counselor—in some cases also a veteran—to best identify with these students. Although institutions sometimes determined this counselor didn't see enough veterans to warrant a full-time position, they wanted trained staff readily available to student veterans. This was overcome through providing staff in-service training or sending mental health counselors already on staff to courses designed to train professionals in veterans' needs and treatment.

George Mason University (GMU) hired a new military/veteran counselor who had experience with veterans but eventually decided to fill the role with already existing staff, although the second counselor had no prior experience with the military community or combat-related stress training. The institution dedicated the necessary training to help this counselor understand these areas and be able to work effectively with the veteran population. Both methods proved successful for the university, but GMU discovered a need to increase awareness of and access to

counseling services amongst student veterans, as the resources were underutilized. This was attributed to military culture and stigma surrounding mental health counseling, a national topic of discussion. GMU believes that any institution focusing on mental health services needs to concentrate on two areas: 1) Finding and retaining qualified staff that have the necessary skills to work with this group is a challenge, and 2) it can take up to a year to develop the kind of trust necessary for veterans to open up to a counselor in order to make any positive impact.

Southwestern College was extremely successful in finding qualified staff and gaining student veterans' trust. They employed two part-time therapists with years of experience in military and VA counseling who received additional support from campus mental health psychologists. The primary role of the psychologists was to conduct one-on-one therapy sessions through approximately five hours each of clinic time weekly. In establishing these services, the therapists worked closely with college psychologists, the Disability Support Program and Services, and the Student Veterans' Organization to promote awareness and decrease stigma. A weekly group has been established for veterans uncomfortable with individual sessions. A variety of issues are shared in group discussions, using a workshop format and peer-to-peer support to address topics such as dealing with stress, handling school work, and adjusting to college life.

The therapists have been actively involved with campus life and veteran activities including Veterans' Day celebrations, information sessions, and Student Veterans Organization meetings. The visibility of the therapists at these activities and their work with various departments and groups at the college has helped student veterans become aware of the therapy sessions available to them and increased veterans' trust and acceptance of the psychologists. The number of individual appointments has doubled since September 2010, and the doctors reported numerous 'sessions' occurring outside of the office as they walked across campus or stopped for coffee with the students. While this is a non-traditional form of therapy, taking the work out of the office has greatly increased the programs' success and impact on students.

> "Unlike other populations of patients, this is really a culture. And you need to know the verbiage, you need to know the language, you need to be able to talk to them in their words, to know what it is that they're talking about…There's nothing in the world that means more to me than when I finish up talking to one of these students and they as they're on their way out they'll ask me, "Are you a vet?" It's then I know that I have really been able to nail it, that I've made that connection."
>
> -Dr. Randy Cooper, Clinical Psychologist, Southwestern College

Hunter College applied a social work methodology to assisting their veterans through pairing masters of social work interns with student veterans in outreach offices throughout the City University of New York system. Their Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education (PROVE) introduced professional-level intervention combined with the sensitivity, strengths, skills, and shared experiences of peers

to address day-to-day and long-term concerns of student veterans. Each team was placed in the veterans office on campus to provide immediate access to veterans who needed to apply for VA benefits, schedule courses, or address other issues. The PROVE model demonstrates a holistic, multipronged approach that successfully hurdled access and stigma concerns by routinely assisting with administrative tasks and noted that—contrary to many beliefs—common concerns amongst veterans are not unmanageable post-traumatic stress issues but short-term, immediate transition struggles that can be overcome with goal-oriented solutions.

> "Together, these two student groups create a learning synergy that easily and straightforwardly helps to recruit new student veterans, as well as motivate those already involved to continue attending club meetings and remain active in veteran-related events and activities."
>
> -Roger Sherwood, Associate Professor, Silberman School of Social Work, Hunter College

In addition to problems with access and stigma surrounding mental health services, institutions also struggle to communicate disability services and resources to student veterans. Empire State College (ESC) recognized reluctance to ask for help, misunderstanding of disability supports and accommodations, and unawareness of acquired injuries amongst veterans. Unlike traditional students using disability services, wounded warriors have not grown up leveraging accommodations or other disability resources and therefore don't recognize the need for or availability of such supports and services. As with mental health, military culture has been cited for driving attitudes away from help-seeking behavior, further blocking student veterans from accessing disability services.

> "The barriers for students accessing our disability services is that many of them don't even self identify right from the beginning. They don't even realize that they have a disability or they don't see themselves as disabled. The disability ratings are awfully confusing with the VA and in an academic institution the ratings don't matter. It's just that they have a disability and they need accommodations."
>
> -Linda Frank, Director, Veterans and Military Education, Empire State College

To address these concerns, ESC determined the need to present clear and accurate information written effectively for the targeted audience and delivered in multiple, accessible formats. To do this, they developed an online resource providing information to students, staff, faculty, and the surrounding community on injuries, treatments, and classroom solutions. Additionally, printed materials and workshops were leveraged to ensure information was disseminated as widely as possible. Evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive and use of available resources has increased steadily.

Academic Services

In addition to providing student support services, grantees focused on how they could enhance academic services for student veterans. Overwhelmingly, institutions believed that identifying an effective method for awarding transfer credit based on ACE credit recommendations for evaluated military training

will enhance success. Colleges and universities consistently have heard from veterans who believe their military training has not been accepted in full capacity. Veterans have voiced frustration with repeating coursework they feel they received in the military, increased time to graduation due to taking these courses (when their financial aid benefits have an expiration date), and perceived lack of recognition of their service and accomplishments.

Still, institutions struggle to award credit due to concerns about material covered, evaluation methods, and instructor qualifications. Additionally, many grantees indicated their hands were tied when credit recommendations are not complete substitutions for courses they offer or are for courses that do not fit their degree programs. To address both parties' concerns, Clackamas Community College took on the challenge of working with faculty, student veterans, and administrators to identify programs that could easily be condensed when coupled with certain military training. Through identifying military occupations that correlated with degree programs and extensively examining learning outcomes identified in ACE credit recommendations, Clackamas was able to develop 21 bridge courses to offer veteran students that filled gaps in training. This innovative curriculum combines credit transfer with traditional coursework to accelerate veterans' studies in areas such as law enforcement, business administration, mechanics, human services, English, and humanities. As a result, student veterans are finding their credits more readily accepted by the college and are leveraging the robust prior-learning assessment to finish their education ahead of their peers and before their VA financial aid benefits run out.

> "Transcribing military training for college credit requires a commitment to innovation and collaboration, and a willingness to step out and take risks."
> -Peg Caliendo, Program Manager, Clackamas Community College

Other grantees chose to use coursework to aid veterans in their transition from military to civilian life. Lane Community College developed three veteran-specific courses to act as a middle point between military structure and the collegiate setting. The courses—taught by a tenured professor and navy veteran—passed the college's formal curriculum vetting process, are assigned state-level-approved numbering and course designators, and are listed as part of the Career and Guidance offerings of Lane's Counseling Department. This allows the courses to be taken as elective credits and ultimately allows courses to be paid for by the VA. The curriculum aims to provide student veterans with tools to succeed in transition, college, and navigating VA resources.

Park University also developed courses to help their military and veteran students' transition. Offered in succession, the program consists of five courses beginning with Orientation to Learning and Life Skills, open only to veterans and taught by a veteran, followed by additional communications, English, and financial management classes taught by instructors who are familiar with military culture, concluding with integration with traditional students in a humanities course in the student's area of study. Park has experienced a 100 percent continuation rate of the veterans who complete the series

and student interviews demonstrate decreased levels of stress regarding the transition from military to college.

Another innovation in academic offerings came from a partnership between Fresno City College, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), and the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board. PG&E identified a number of concerns in retaining employees and determined veterans with the appropriate training and with ties to the geographic location of open jobs would best suit their hiring needs. The three organizations developed a curriculum, approved for credit by the college and based on projected PG&E vacancies in the Fresno area, to train veterans for jobs in the energy field and offer employment tests and interviews at PG&E to graduates of the program. Combining math and English with technical reading and writing, project management, and skill-based training, the program also incorporated physical fitness and provided soft skill training in interview and resume writing techniques. The selection process, which included recruitment, a written application, and interviews; the commitment of PG&E to the graduates; and the college's flexibility in curriculum writing created a 99 percent successful program, measured in graduation rates, passing the employment test, and gainful employment with PG&E or a competitor.

> "We have a program where, within 10 weeks, [veterans] can actually be on the first step for employment and where, by the end of three months, they will probably be employed...And they are able to get that weight of taking care of their families or taking care of their bills which they had and things of that sort off their shoulders. And it helps family life, they say, and it helps them get ahead and know that there is a career."
>
> -Pat Barr, Case Manager, Fresno County Workforce Investment Board

Additional academic services grantees created include tutoring programs, academic prep courses for students not yet college-ready, and military or veterans affairs courses offered to the general student population where student veterans can share their stories in an educational capacity, ultimately increasing awareness and understanding in the community and fostering a sense of belonging for veterans.

Campus Life

While using course offerings to create a welcoming environment was helpful for some institutions, grantees agreed that broader staff and faculty training was a vital part of their programs. This allowed staff and faculty to have a better understanding of the growing veteran population on campus, often dispelled myths and stigmas, and provided students with a sense of appreciation when training was noted. Some institutions provided staff and faculty with banners, pins, or stickers to display after completing the training so student veterans knew who they might be able to approach.

The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities developed a national training program to provide veterans service representatives, and other faculty and staff, with the tools to effectively serve veteran students. Originally planned to disseminate information within New Jersey higher education institutions, the three-day program includes modules on GI Bill benefits,

community resources, national trends, mental health, and more. The Certificate for Veteran Service Providers program has reached more than 600 professionals in 15 states.

In addition to faculty and staff training, grantees determined a plethora of approaches to positively impacting the educational environment for student veterans. Student veteran organizations, veteran lounges, and the resulting vet-to-vet support became the most vital piece of each institution's work. The University of Maine, Augusta (UMA) created a focal point of collaboration for student veterans through a lounge, student organizations, and recognition events. UMA found that a physical space provides a forum where veterans can get together to share stories, find a resource, and/or hold study groups, ultimately supporting each other's success. Operating out of their lounge is a peer mentor program, similar to military sponsorship programs, where experienced student veterans help newly enrolled veterans orient to campus and academic life and identify resources available to assist in their transition from the military. These programs increased veteran engagement and confidence, and resulted in unexpected outcomes such as community service projects led by the student veteran organization and participation in Veterans Day and other campus recognition events.

Colorado State University supplemented their lounge and student organization by starting SALUTE, National Honors Society for veterans. SALUTE is the first honor society established for student veterans and military members in two-year and four-year institutions of higher education. This unique honor society includes a four-tier system designed to encourage student veterans to strive to improve their GPAs and advance to higher tier levels in the honor society through their academic careers. There are now 36 chapters across the nation, with membership representing a diverse body of student veterans. In addition to recognizing academic accomplishment and encouraging advancement, the honors society shares best practices amongst chapters and awards merit- and need-based scholarships to inductees.

> "I have been out of the Marine Corps almost exactly two years. Still to this day I miss the camaraderie in the marines and the veterans club is that for me. It kind of fills my void, if you will."
>
> -Jessica Tobin, Marine Corps Veteran, Student, Hunter College

> "We all have good days and bad days, so we help each other out. And that's just the way we get wired when we come out of the military. We're, we're just made that way….We look for other military people to turn to."
>
> -Craig Jackson, Navy Veteran, Student, University of Maine, Augusta

Many grantees chose to use their veterans lounge as a one-stop, centralized location for veterans to learn about resources both on and off campus. Trident Technical College located their part-time veterans counselor in the Vets Center to facilitate access and collaboration. The counselor has been able to build a relationship with the veterans, which has been vital to her success in her role. Periodic emails are sent

reminding veterans to stop by and re-engage, and the counselor and other veterans in the lounge are always available to assist new student veterans in processing benefits or accessing other information. Approximately 50 veterans visit each day to check assignments, process financial aid, schedule courses, or study.

> "A peer mentor program is a natural fit for veterans. The camaraderie and connectedness of military service make the veteran-to-veteran peer mentor program flourish."
>
> -Amy Line, Project Coordinator, Military Achievement Project, University of Maine, Augusta

Similarly, University of California, Santa Cruz developed a central point of contact for their veterans through a vet-to-vet mentoring program. Budding leaders are offered the opportunity to go through professional training to become mentors for other veterans on campus. Training includes an overview of campus resources and community support so mentors are aware of professional assistance to which they can refer mentees. They also have a strong understanding of university policies and processes so they can answer questions regarding course scheduling, where to find advising, and what career transition assistance is available. Through engagement in the veterans lounge and the student veteran organization, mentors become mobile one-stops available any time.

California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State) places heavy emphasis on veteran engagement on campus. The Veterans Success Academy was created to provide intensive, summer leadership training to incoming veterans so they can leverage their military experience and training on campus during their academic career. The program provides veterans with the opportunity to develop relationships prior to setting foot on campus and gives them a mission to accomplish together, aiding in their transition from the military. During the school year, veterans hold VA work-study positions, helping fellow veterans process financial aid benefits, accompany institution leadership to state meetings and legislative hearings on veterans issues, run fund-raising efforts for future veterans programs on campus, and collaborate with the Sacramento State PRIDE Center and the Women's Resource Center (WRC) to host educational programs and break down common stereotypes across campus. Through actively engaging the student veteran population as campus leaders, programs and events are integrated to create a welcome and collaborative environment where student veterans are comfortable and can thrive.

Outcomes

Near the end of the grant period, the American Council on Education held its Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, from March 5–8th, 2011. Representatives from each institution met for three days and were able to demonstrate their programs, share success stories and discuss challenges and solutions. Participants collaborated to outline recommendations to institutions of higher education based on their combined experiences.

Additional discussions focused on the need student veterans have for career planning, training, and resources. As veterans earn their degrees, they

"What we want to focus on is their leadership and their social skills, so by immersing them with groups that they might not normally associate with, that they might not normally interact with it helps them grow. It helps their growth process out of the classroom. Because college is more than just learning in the classroom we make sure that they're getting plenty of that interaction outside of the classroom."

-Jeff Weston, Air Force Veteran, Veterans Service Center Director, California State University Sacramento

are facing a difficult labor market and need to be as well prepared as possible to obtain suitable employment. Many grantees now host résumé workshops and career fairs for veterans, and also have developed relationships with career workforce centers outside of the programs detailed for the grant.

Challenges:

- Sustainability. Issues included obtaining ongoing funding as well as figuring out how to bring key stakeholders together to gain leadership support. One possible solution was to develop advisory boards.
- Getting buy-in from the administration is critical. This must be a top-down initiative. At some schools, the presidents of the institution will sit on a military task force.
- There is no "one size fits all" model.
- Some institutions have multiple campuses, which can be a logistical and coordination challenge.
  - Some students are part-time and some full-time. Providing appropriate services to each student can be a challenge.
  - Campus cultures and academic environments are varied and fluid; it is important to coordinate and bring everyone to the table to talk to one another.
  - Space and centralization issues. Determining where student veterans spend their time may vary from campus to campus, and is important to creating a central space that is utilized by this cohort.
- Having an office or lounge is critical; more space is better. Budget reductions definitely put space in the hot seat.
- Building more faculty and academic allies, as programs will need room to grow.
- Outreach to veterans and engaging veterans in and out of the classroom—encouraging the use of services.
  - Don't just rely on face-to-face. Virtual events can be used as well (e.g., ceremonies and recognition programs, etc.)
  - How to get student veterans to self identify? Encourage them to champion programs. Involve student veterans in the conversation.
- Persistence is a challenge. Once a student starts classes, how does the institution get them to persist and advance to complete their program?
- Student development, particularly with transfer students—hone in on leadership development. Finding ways to identify those emerging student veteran leaders quickly so they can be developed is a challenge (especially in a two-year time span with transfer students).
- If veterans do not self-identify, it is difficult the funnel them into the veterans program office. Without proper guidance and education, they can exhaust VA benefits quickly.
- Stigma of the military and associated cultural challenges that go with it amongst staff and faculty is more prominent than expected.

Successes:

- Coordination and collaboration. Some institutions built a "box" around veteran-specific courses to avoid arguments between departments (i.e., math fighting with English, etc.).
- The creation of a veterans lounge.
- Partnerships are key. Look at local businesses and corporations as sustainable forces. Strong partnerships include letting businesses know that the institution will be training prospective employees.
- Use of volunteers.
- One college provides orientation following enrollment for veterans; then another orientation (or reconvening) later on as a six-week checkup.
- Make mission: education a priority. Help veterans see themselves as students first, and encourage their focus on it.
- It is advantageous to have some programs championed by students, not the administrators. Peers can guide veterans through the campus process.
- Faculty training. The more staff and faculty are aware of the unique challenges and successes for student veterans, the better they respond. While it isn't mandatory, many want to attend.

Next steps:

- Merge college and careers in a more intentional way. Build career pathways and have planning discussions early and often. Develop better assistance for military to civilian translation in résumés.
- More partnerships and alliances should be pursued (i.e., alumni associations, corporations and local businesses, retiree associations, friends groups, etc.)
- Town and gown relationships are key. Look to community members and bring them in to support students, support programming, and, ultimately, become more connected with student veterans.
- Build stronger bridges between military and civilian worlds.
- Conduct additional needs assessments throughout the process and develop a model to track outcomes.
- Sustain the programs and be sure evaluations are completed, as well as mid-course adjustments.
- Become better at translating military skills to academic credits. Figure out where those skills fit into core courses and/or general electives.
- Collect outcome data to take programs to the next level. Build measurement tools to check where successes and failures are throughout the program. Continue dissemination. Take what the institution is doing and continue to build partnerships and collaborations and create a community within a community.

Conclusion

Over the course of two years, *Success for Veterans* grantees' work impacted individuals as they received support and services on campus and off; created communities as partnerships and built awareness; and encouraged the nation as challenges and successes are shared in a continuing national discussion.

More than 82,300 service members, veterans, and their families have been impacted through direct and indirect services, accomplishing more than 100 goals set by the 20 institutions who received grants. As these success stories and promising practices continue to be shared, the number of individuals benefiting from the *Success for Veterans*

Award Grants is expected to grow exponentially.

The sweeping successes of the 20 *Success for Veterans* grantees provide encouraging examples across a broad spectrum of areas. As more veterans begin to return to higher education and postsecondary institutions increasingly focus on providing programs and policies to help them succeed, the grantees' lessons learned and promising practices should be used to continue the development of initiatives supporting this population.

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