

Supporting Veteran Students in the California Community Colleges

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California is home to over two million veterans (CCCCO 2016a), nine percent of veterans across the United States (ICVC 2012), which is a greater proportion of veterans than living in any other state (CCCCO 2016a).

Surveys consistently find that “the opportunity to get a college education along with the funds to pay for it” is one of the primary reasons service members enter the military (Snead and Baridon 2016, Gonzalez et al 2015). In fact, recent years have seen the value of educational benefits via the military expand, as the Post-9/11 GI Bill marked the greatest increase in veterans’ educational benefits since their origin in 1944 (Gonzalez et al 2015).

Despite this, many returning veterans do not attend college, which may help to explain some troubling trends in employment: “Many military veterans are having trouble entering the civilian labor market. While older veterans typically earn more and have similar employment rates as non-veterans in their same age group, that’s not true for younger veterans. In 2013, the unemployment rate for young veterans aged 25-34 was 9.1 percent, compared to 7.4 for non-veterans in the same age group” (Rothwell 2014).

Education may play a particular role in explaining these disparities—and thus may serve as a particular lever in ameliorating them: “Veterans under 30 are much less educated than their peers. Data from the 2012 American Community Survey show that just 30 percent of those aged 25 to 30 have completed an associate’s degree or higher, compared to 44 percent of their non-veteran peers. By contrast, older veterans have much higher rates of degree completion and only a small gap with their non-veteran peers” (Rothwell 2014). These differences in educational attainment help to explain higher unemployment rates among young veterans, which underscores the real importance of serving today’s veteran students well.

Community colleges offer a particularly good fit for many veterans pursuing higher education. They provide education at a far lower cost than four-year colleges, and they offer a diverse range of courses and certifications that fall under the GI Bill (Boyington 2015). For veterans striving for Bachelor's Degrees and beyond, community colleges can also bridge the gap between veterans' educational history and eligibility criteria for the University of California or California State University systems (CCCCO 2016a).

Community colleges may also offer social benefits to veteran students compared to other colleges, as they tend to have more campus services designed specifically for veterans, and have a higher proportion of students who (like many veterans) are over the age of 25 and attend school part time while also working or raising a family (Boyington 2015). This may create a more relatable college environment than schools with more traditional student bodies made up of younger, full time students (ibid).

Illustrating the academic, economic and social fit many veterans find at community college, recent data show that over 44,000 veterans attended a California Community College in 2010-11, a number ever-rising as those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan return home (CCCCO 2016a). However, a piece published by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of veteran students in more and better ways:

“Veterans must adjust to civilian life and manage a host of social and health issues, while they attempt to adapt to life on a college campus. Although the campuses can provide the education that veterans need, some veterans are finding it challenging and confusing to utilize their well-earned educational benefits, and even more difficult to find and access the support services they need. Although many community colleges are making noteworthy efforts to address the personal, social, and educational needs of returning veterans, there is an inconsistency in the

level of support throughout the system that can only be addressed by system-wide initiatives and a significant infusion of additional public or private resources” (Scott 2011).

Therefore, to better understand the needs of veteran students and how they may best be met by the California Community Colleges, the following pages present:

Research on best meeting the needs of veteran students (below)

A summary of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (page 17)

Efforts to serve veterans within the California Community Colleges (page 19)

Meeting the Needs of Veteran Students

While the value of higher education for returning service members is clear, veterans face some unique challenges in attending college. Having a long-term plan in place even before exiting the military may help service members better plan for the entirety of their careers. As Angevine (2016) notes, there are strong arguments for planning the transition from service to civilian life early and throughout military service, as most military members serve for only a matter of years, after which they will spend the vast majority of their career in the domestic economy. Likewise, as Molina and Morse (2015) write, “military-connected college students are often benchmarked against measures of success (e.g., three-year attainment rates for associate degree programs and six-year graduation rates for bachelor’s degree programs) that may not sufficiently reflect their enrollment behaviors and diverse educational aspirations...Success may be a long-term process for military-connected undergraduates.” Thus, planning for college early and providing adequate time to reach educational and career goals may be of particular importance for veteran students.

A recent study from the RAND Corporation, commissioned by the American Council on Education, provides some nuanced insight into obstacles encountered by veterans under the new GI Bill (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010). The research team conducted administrator interviews and convened focus groups at a diversity of colleges, including two-year and four-year public institutions and for-profit and nonprofit private institutions. Their data collection spanned three states (Arizona, Ohio, and Virginia), and a concurrent survey was conducted among enrolled students to learn more about the perceptions and experiences of students eligible for the new GI Bill (ibid). The authors write:

“When asked about their experiences transitioning from military service to student life, a small subset of focus group participants described relatively smooth transitions, reporting that the military had instilled in them the focus, discipline, and drive they needed to succeed academically. However, a majority of focus group participants and survey respondents described several challenges they faced in adapting to student life. The key challenges they reported included:

- Meeting academic expectations that were different from what they had encountered in the military.
- Balancing academic requirements with other responsibilities, including supporting their families.
- Relating to non-veteran peers, and particularly to students who had recently graduated from high school.
- Managing service-connected injuries, including bodily injuries, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

To overcome these challenges, both survey respondents and focus group participants said they had turned to various sources of support. The most helpful of these was reported to be support from fellow veterans.”

(Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

Veterans also noted several more specific gaps that could be filled by colleges (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010). One was a need for clearer communication about educational programs and support available to them (ibid). Also noted was that “not all colleges have Veterans Service Centers that act as ‘one-stop shops’ to connect veterans with a variety of services. Colleges are often lacking a standardized method to identify and assess veterans with combat-related learning disabilities. Some schools do not have veteran-specific counseling on campus” (ibid). Additionally, “because of a lack of standard in equating [military] experience to college education, veterans often cannot obtain jobs or satisfy college course requirements they have satisfied on a practical level” (ibid).

The RAND Corporation study also highlights college characteristics veterans emphasized as particularly *valuable* to their educational success, including (bolding added for emphasis):

“Classes that meet on **evenings and weekends** and focus on **career-relevant skills**” were greatly valued (Steele 2012).

“Students we spoke with at for-profit institutions liked that many classes were available both **face-to-face and online**” (Steele 2012).

“Some for-profit colleges offered **multiple locations** across the country. That appealed to students who thought they might relocate to other states during their academic studies” (Steele 2012).

“Also critically important to GI Bill users was **access to the courses required** for their degrees. Being shut out of oversubscribed courses was a frequent complaint among focus group participants at public two- and four-year colleges” (Steele 2012).

“**Veterans program administrators** were also described as an important source of support for helping students use their GI Bill benefits and find the resources they needed on campus” (Steele 2010).

Indeed, turning to some more specific recommendations with particular regard to what *administrators* can do, interviews with veterans program administrators and focus group discussions led to all of the following recommendations for administrators (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010; bolding added for emphasis):

“Prompting prospective students to **indicate their veteran status** when they first request information or apply to the institution” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Providing resources to ensure that veterans program administrators—and particularly school certifying officials—have **adequate training and support**” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Ensuring that staff in other institutional administrative offices, such as student accounts and financial aid, also are **familiar with the terms of the new GI Bill**” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Providing **disability and mental health staff** who understand veterans’ issues” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Establishing **consistent credit transfer guidelines** and transparency about those guidelines” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Offering an **information session for veterans** as part of the institution’s annual student orientation, and holding additional veterans’ information sessions throughout the year” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

“Encouraging students’ efforts to **build a student veterans organization** on campus” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley 2010).

In fact, the value of **facilitating strong relationships among veteran students** is a theme that arises repeatedly in this literature: “The key to a good program that serves vets is an optimal environment where they are advised and surrounded by peers who are their counselors as well as their cohort” (ICVC 2012). Building on this, colleges can “leverage student leadership, particularly veterans who have already gone through a college or other higher education program and are familiar with the system. Encourage these student leaders to become peer counselors, join student organizations, contribute to work study programs, represent the needs of vets in student government, and become mentors to new students” (ICVC 2012).

Likewise, analyzing data “from the 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an annual survey of students enrolled in four-year universities, to assess how student veterans/service members perceive their integration on campus,” one study (Kim and Cole 2013) found that “forming good relationships with others is an important way to successfully engage in campus life and academics. While student veterans/service members are more likely than nonveteran and civilian students to state that they have a friendly and supportive relationship with faculty and staff, the reverse is true of their relationship with other students” (Kim and Cole 2013). This speaks highly of college faculty and staff’s efforts to connect with veteran students, but suggests a continuing need to facilitate student connections.

Some additional research notes that writing teachers “are often the first point of contact for veteran students” as “one semester of first-year writing is almost universally required at U.S. colleges and universities, the first-year writing classroom (which typically requires close peer-to-peer interaction and conferencing with faculty) is likely to be a

place where veteran status is disclosed” (Hart and Thompson 2013). Based on this fact, Hart and Thompson (2013) undertook a study of how writing faculty might best meet the needs of veteran students. Their recommendations “are intended primarily for faculty in schools with high veteran populations, in schools that are actively recruiting veterans and service members, or schools that are located in areas with high military and veteran populations.” However, in reading their findings it seems that many aspects are relevant more broadly—including for faculty of other subjects and on campuses serving somewhat fewer veteran students. Among many recommendations, they suggest each of the following:

Classroom Assignments

“We recommend that instructors consider a veteran audience when crafting assignments. This is not to suggest that assignments have in mind only veterans as an audience, but much like an instructor might be sensitive to differences in race, gender, and religious background in crafting assignments, we recommend similar attention to military service. We particularly recommend that instructors who craft personal essay assignments provide options for student writers. While many student veterans may seek opportunities to discuss their service, others may need to have space to reinvent themselves as students, as civilians, or as members of a new community” (Hart and Thompson 2013).

Syllabus Statement

“We recommend that instructors include a brief statement on their syllabus that, at the very least, points veterans to the campus VRC or certifying official and communicates the classroom as a safe place” (Hart and Thompson 2013).

Foster Interaction with Veterans Resource Centers

“VRCs can provide significant resources to assist faculty. Some VRCs can provide training for faculty. Some can even provide intensive training modeled after ‘safe zone’ training, which provides faculty members with visible signs

(such as stickers for office doors) of completed training so that veterans can recognize faculty who are conversant with their lives as veterans. Most VRCs provide services to help students negotiate their transition from military service to college and therefore represent a powerful resource in helping faculty to encourage veterans' growth as students. VRCs may provide tutoring services or counselors, and they help student veterans negotiate the complexities of the GI Bill. In short, not unlike Women's Centers or LGBT Centers on a campus, VRCs are centers of advocacy and support, and faculty can help all students in their classes by collaborating with the VRCs on their campuses" (Hart and Thompson 2013).

Characteristics of exemplary VRCs are discussed in the final section of this paper.

Another key consideration in serving veteran students is that while meeting the needs of veterans who suffer a traumatic transition in the wake of their military service is absolutely vital, it is also valuable to acknowledge that **many veterans have not engaged in combat but nevertheless face challenges in transitioning to college**. As Hart and Thompson (2013) describe at length (bolding added for emphasis):

"Campus trainings about student veterans tend to be based on a deficit model. Most examples of campus trainings that we saw were focused on the "signature wounds" of the current wars (i.e. Traumatic Brain Injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, TBI and PTSD)¹ and the challenges student veterans face in making the transition from service to college. The

¹ "Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) may happen from a blow or jolt to the head or an object penetrating the brain. When the brain is injured, the person can experience a change in consciousness that can range from becoming disoriented and confused" to something as severe as a coma; learn more at www.polytrauma.va.gov/understanding-tbi. In turn, "Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can occur after someone goes through a traumatic event like combat, assault, or disaster. Most people have some stress reactions after a trauma. If the reactions don't go away over time" or more severely disrupts one's life it may be diagnosed as PTSD; learn more at www.ptsd.va.gov.

trainings are typically devoted to the transition from *combat* to college. While such trainings are valuable, they suggest an image of student veterans that is not in keeping with our findings. Most veterans have not directly experienced combat, and while the legacies of war may resonate deeply with all veterans, combat experience is not a universally shared experience among service members. Further, most faculty report high achievement among veterans, as well as a high sense of initiative, professionalism, and leadership. **Trainings that focus on the deficits of student veterans likely perpetuate already established stereotypes** of the “veteran,” often calling on the simplistic narratives of veterans as heroes or as wounded warriors, and they rarely acknowledge the complex histories of medical traumas such as TBI and PTSD. In other words, they fail to engage in the nuances of military service, wars, careers, and disabilities in favor of, interestingly, a briefing model whose effect is to perpetuate one- dimensional narratives about what it means to be a “veteran.” Further, the trainings generally fail to make connections between veterans and other student groups. For instance, many of the **transition issues that are reported by veterans parallel in significant ways the transition many nontraditional students face** when making the move from careers back to college, suggesting the possibility that some of the transitional issues are less about their status as veterans and more about their status as adult learners. While we recognize the need for institutions to address trauma within their student bodies, we are concerned that doing so in isolation may foster an atmosphere contrary to the stated goal of improving campus cultures for veterans” (Hart and Thompson 2013).

Building on all of the above recommendations, a resource called the “**Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions**” (TVFI, see <https://vetfriendlytoolkit.acenet.edu>)

provides detailed information on how to create an educational program that supports veterans. To provide a bit more background:

“Created by the American Council on Education (ACE), this online resource is designed to help institutions of higher education build effective programs for veteran students and share information. It highlights a variety of best practices including veterans-specific orientation offerings, on-campus veterans service centers, prospective student outreach efforts, faculty training, and counseling and psychological services for veteran students. It also includes video clips, profiles of student veterans programs across the U.S., and a searchable database of tools and resources” (TVFI).

The Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions highlights several factors that can make a particular difference in supporting veterans in pursuing higher education. The following recommendations quote from their website—and there is much more available on the website itself.

Central Point of Contact

A single point of contact for veterans on campus “reduces confusion and time spent searching for relevant information. Veterans value the trust that is built through hands-on, in-person assistance from a single source knowledgeable about all of the facets of their education... This access point can also include a clear and comprehensive website that explains an institution's entire veteran initiative and how to access the services provided on and off campus. These two pieces can provide a personalized roadmap... for veterans to navigate smoothly through higher education. The school's VA certifying official could be the best central point of contact you have.”

Related, “it is important to note that communicating with student veterans will require a multi-pronged approach. While 21st century technology is effective and most student veterans are tech-savvy, word of mouth continues to be the way most will successfully

receive and process information. While on active duty, it is not typical for a service member to check email or text messages on a computer or PDA to manage their schedule. They are told where to be and when – and they are expected to remember that information. It may take student veterans some time to adjust to a culture where so much information is disseminated without the spoken word” (TVFI).

Veteran Specific Space

“This might include the creation of a veterans center, office or lounge that becomes a centralized location for the school certifying official, student veterans organizations, veterans recruiting and outreach activities, as well as other information or student services you choose to provide (e.g., tutoring, academic advising, career counseling, peer mentor programs, disability support services, etc). A veteran lounge might provide a study area with computers and would offer student veterans one convenient location where they can spend time, interact with peers, find the answers to their questions, and feel comfortable. This space could also be the prime location for VA Work-Study students to be positioned. Natural peer mentorship tends to develop in these locations, which is a win-win for both students and administrators” (TVFI).

Veteran-Specific Courses

“To help ensure student veterans get off on the right foot when beginning the college experience, many schools are beginning to offer courses and programs specifically designed for veterans. Coursework can range anywhere from a one credit ‘introduction to the college experience’ (where issues such as transition, leveraging benefits, and disability issues are discussed) to general requirement classes such as government/history, English, and math. Service members who attend college after leaving the military often report difficulty interacting with people who don’t understand their experiences. Veteran-only classes help military students become well acclimated to college life and deal with the ‘culture shock’ many experience on campus” (TVFI).

Staff and Faculty Training

Trainings can “offer faculty a better understanding of military culture,² which can go a long way toward ensuring military students perform to the best of their ability. Veteran students face many of the same challenges as adult or non-traditional students: They are older and more mature, many are tending to the needs of a family, and some are commuting long distances to complete their education. Military students, however, also bring with them a structure, sense of discipline, and work ethic that typically far exceeds faculty expectations” (TVFI).

Opening Lines of Communication

“It is vital that veteran students become aware that faculty members understand their needs. Veteran friendly institutions can help foster better communication between student veterans and their instructors by passing along the following tips to faculty:

- Encourage veteran students to contact you if they encounter circumstances that may impact their performance in a particular course. This can be accomplished by simply adding a statement to your course syllabus.
- Veteran students may request seating preferences (back of the room, for example). Do not misunderstand this request – just understand that they are often more comfortable facing a group.
- Understand that some veterans may be initially hesitant to actively participate in class discussions. Allow each to build his/her own level of trust with you and other students.
- Expect the same classroom responsibilities and performance, but accommodate absences related to VA appointments or Reserve-duty commitments.
- Take the time to explain course assignments and institutional policies to all students (and do not single out student veterans). Military students will be used to following orders and directions. Learn about combat-related disabilities, such as

² va.gov offers materials providing insight into military culture via the website www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/military

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) but do not assume that all student veterans deal with the symptoms of these injuries.

- Structure your course with the spirit of universal design and teach using multiple methods to account for students who have different experiences, learning preferences and capabilities.
- Most importantly, avoid expressing personal sentiments related to war or military personnel that could alienate or embarrass student veterans. All veterans deserve recognition and appreciation for their service regardless of our personal opinions.

[Also] most importantly, faculty should know where resources are on campus so that they can better direct student veterans needing assistance” (TVFI).

Admission, Readmission, and Transfer Considerations

“Because of their service, many veterans are launching formal higher education pursuits from a different time and place in life, when compared to their peers. As a result, they may not have current college entrance exam scores, or their scores may simply not reflect their level of readiness for higher education, especially after receiving top-notch, rigorous and formal military training... [Further,] it is likely that all military credits will not transfer. Therefore, it is highly recommended that you clearly communicate, in writing, these reasons to the student veteran” (TVFI).

Excused Absence (Withdrawal)

“Many student veterans are continuing to fulfill service obligations either in the Reserve or National Guard... Faculty should be familiar with excused absence policies as well as appropriate campus offices to engage should a situation arise” (TVFI)

Accommodations

“Many veterans returning to or entering college for the first time will have no idea how a newly acquired injury (physical or psychological health-related) may impact their learning, especially if no previous learning difficulties had been present prior to their military experience. Additionally, a veteran may be discharged from the military without

realizing that she or he may experience a significant learning or memory-related impairment... Consider including a statement on every course syllabus inviting students to meet with you confidentially should a need for academic adjustments or accommodations be necessary” (TVFI)

Funding

There are “steps you can take to be sure you are positioning your institution to be at the ready when a funding opportunity [to support your veteran students] presents itself. Track your student veterans’ admissions, retention, grade point averages, graduation rates, etc. The statistics you keep will become key to making a case for funding and support with internal and external partners. Keep current on state and national public and private grants for veterans programming and subscribe to updates from government entities with funding opportunities. Be sure community members, local veteran service organizations, as well as business and industry know you exist. Business and industry will view you as a worthy partner when you demonstrate an understanding of the needs of their current and future work force. To the extent possible, get involved with local Chambers of Commerce, civic organizations, and small business development centers. You may find a direct correlation between your proactive networking/connections to the community and potential funding opportunities” (TVFI).

Tracking Veterans

“Getting student veterans to identify themselves can be tricky, yet it is difficult to serve this population's specific needs if you don’t know which of your applicants or enrolled students are actually veterans.” Note that “not all veterans of the armed forces identify themselves as ‘veterans’ (particularly women, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who may not have experienced combat). Asking ‘Have you ever served in the United States Armed Forces?’ rather than ‘Are you a veteran?’ may have a large impact on the number and accuracy of responses you receive...It is important to let the student veteran know why you are collecting information on veteran status. Explaining that this will help keep the student in the loop with regard to veterans-only events, updates to the

Post-9/11 GI Bill, and other benefits will demonstrate your commitment to communication” (TVFI).

Top-Down Support

Top-down support “makes things happen more efficiently and effectively...

Demonstrating high-level support for veterans and the policies aimed at helping them connect and succeed will encourage participation and trust from staff, faculty, and the veterans themselves. High-level administrators implementing a veteran task force might be one way to actualize and demonstrate top-down support... Critically important is to include current student veterans on the task force and not rely on published material or veterans' opinions from other institutions” (TVFI).

Career Services

“Transitioning service members and veterans need education in benefits (availability and access), resume writing assistance, interviewing skills, and job search assistance... Most veterans will need some level of assistance learning how to translate their military experience into language that will be understood by human resource specialists... Bringing in local employers to help veterans practice how to present themselves and their abilities/skill sets in an interview, offer networking/interviewing workshops, and help veterans connect with the resources in the community to help expose them to mentors and potential internships” are also valuable recommendations (TVFI).

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As the above sources make clear, veterans face a host of unique challenges at college, and a valuable literature informs how colleges can best meet their needs. The present paper now offers a brief summary of one of the greatest benefits already available to veteran students, the Post-9/11 GI Bill. It then turns to the many efforts to serve veteran students already underway within the California Community Colleges—efforts that may inspire other campuses to meet the needs of their veteran populations in new and better ways.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 GI Bill represents the greatest increase in veterans' educational benefits since their origin in 1944 (Gonzalez et al 2015). It benefits those who served in the military on active duty after September 10, 2001, including those who “served at least 90 aggregate days on active duty” or were “honorably discharged from active duty for a service-connected disability after serving 30 continuous days” (learn more at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill).

Benefits include:

- Tuition and fee payment for colleges, universities, trade schools, apprenticeships, flight schools, and on-the-job training
- Funds for tutorial assistance, licensing such as attorney or cosmetology licensing, and certification tests such as the SAT or LSAT
- A monthly housing allowance
- A stipend for books and supplies

Service members may generally receive up to 36 months of entitlement for up to 15 years after their last period of active duty (of ≥ 90 consecutive days). Entitlements may also be passed to service members' spouses or dependents if they are members of the uniformed services and (typically) agree to service at least four more years at the time of the benefits transfer.

Notably, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is not the only educational benefit available to service members; the Department of Veterans Affairs also supports service members' educations via the Yellow Ribbon Program, Montgomery GI Bill, Reserve Educational Assistance Program, and Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program. More information on each of these is available at http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/comparison_chart.asp. Applying for one benefit can

impact eligibility for another, so the decision to draw benefits should be well informed (e.g., visit http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/comparison_tool).

Choosing an educational path and determining available resources can be complex. The GI Comparison Tool (<https://www.vets.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool>) helps service members compare educational programs and estimated benefits, and the VA’s resource “Factors to Consider When Choosing a School” (www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/docs/factsheets/Choosing_a_School.pdf) provides further guidance to service members in defining their educational path. Additional resources for selecting a school are available at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/school_decision and www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/school_locator. Information specifically on how to apply for benefits, and a link to the online application, are available at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/apply. Learn a great deal more about VA educational benefits at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.

Efforts to Serve Veterans in the California Community Colleges

In addition to providing numerous programs eligible for GI Bill benefits, the California Community Colleges offer multiple programs to support their veteran students. Many such programs deserve wider implementation to better meet the needs of veteran students across the state—and these efforts may also inspire yet new approaches to meeting veteran students’ needs.

To begin, every California Community College campus has a person designated to verify veterans’ education benefits, often found in the financial aid office (Scott 2011). The Chancellor’s Office has also developed a “support and communication infrastructure for veterans program coordinators,” which includes all of the following:

Regional Representation Structure

The Chancellor’s Office holds regular meetings for regional representatives “to better identify student veteran needs across the system and encourage the exchange of innovative ideas and effective practices for serving them” (ibid).

System Wide Email list

An internal email list among all one-hundred-twelve campuses allows for communication of “information and strategies related to serving student veterans” (ibid).

Veterans Web Page

The Chancellor’s Office’s new veterans Web page, redesigned with input from regional representatives, provides “information about model programs and GI bill benefits, as well as links to other useful resources” (ibid).

Multiple California Community Colleges also host **Veterans Resource Centers (VRC)** where “student veterans can interact with one another and obtain information and services. Feedback from these colleges indicates that having a VRC lends meaningful support to student veterans transitioning from a military culture to a college culture” (Scott 2011).

The Cerritos College VRC “provides an excellent example, as a ‘one-stop’ center offering services and support for returning veteran students, including access to transitional health care, mental wellness counseling, tutoring, computer stations and computer learning assistance services, scholarships, help with employment seeking and resume writing, access to a veterans club, a veteran orientation each semester, an annual Military Ball, and access to housing, food, book purchase, and legal support. As one veteran student using the center put it, it is a ‘place of healing.’” (CCCCO 2016b).

Likewise, Butte College’s VRC provides veterans with information about educational benefits such as CAL-Vet fee waivers and work-study opportunities; information on financial aid and assistance with applications; referrals to academic counseling and disabled student services; information about local services for veterans; peer support alongside peer mentoring and textbook exchanges; a lounge with couches, coffee, internet access, movies, study tables, and a communal television; free printing, copying, and faxing; information about disabled veterans compensation; and referrals to on-campus mental health services (Scott 2011). “The Butte College VRC staff also assists veterans in their daily life by serving as liaisons to connect veterans with existing community services and help with various issues, including health and mental health issues such as traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse” (Scott 2011).

In fact, using the Butte College VRC as a model, the Chancellor’s Office has partnered with De Anza College’s High Tech Training Unit to offer “free hardware, software and on-site training in assistive technology to colleges willing to make a commitment to

promoting academics, camaraderie, and wellness; provide a dedicated space for student veterans to gather, and office coordinated services to veterans through the establishment of internal teams comprised of campus partners such as financial aid, counseling, DSP&S [i.e., Disabled Students Programs and Services] and others” (Scott 2011).

Colleges building VRCs are encouraged to emphasize *academics* by “providing students with tools, strategies and insights that optimize academic success” (Scott 2011). They are encouraged to support *camaraderie* by “providing services and counseling directly through fellow veterans, building upon the military traditions of shared values and experiences” (ibid). Furthermore, by facilitating peer assistance VRCs may “provide a bridge to a wide range of campus services” utilized by other veterans, stretching well beyond the official services linked to the VRC (ibid). Lastly, they are encouraged to build *wellness* by “providing referrals to on- and off-campus resources, such as the student health clinic and providing consultation to college faculty and staff regarding issues specific to returning veterans and their family members” (ibid).

In order to best support students’ academics, camaraderie, and wellness, VRCs are encouraged to provide “academic counseling and tutoring,” “peer support and mentoring,” “access to computers and assistance in the use of assistive technologies, including specialized software for those suffering the effects of traumatic brain injury,” “financial and veterans benefit information and application assistance,” and referral to “on- and off-campus resources (e.g., Disabled Students Programs and Services, local VA center, etc.)” (Scott 2011).

Beyond the California Community College’s VRCs, there are additional programs being offered at specific colleges, including all of the following:

Boots to Books

This “is a course for veterans and active duty military, particularly those returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, and their friends and families” and other supporters (Scott 2011).

Citrus college offers a “Boots to Books” program, which was “developed to help student veterans succeed in academics, work, family and other social settings and covers interpersonal skills and techniques for managing transition issues. One topic of particular importance is how to manage stress with a focus on post-traumatic stress disorder” (Scott 2011). The program is diverse, including “classes, counseling, financial assistance, a book fund and a Veteran’s Center where Veterans will be able to study, socialize and exchange information” (CCCCO 2016b).

Sierra College also offers a Boots to Books course, which is “paired with a remedial English course during the same term so that students take both courses simultaneously” (Scott 2011).

“Road Home” Events

Multiple California Community Colleges have hosted “Road Home” events “aimed at fostering collaboration amongst academic faculty and staff, counselors, disabled student programs and services staff, veteran program coordinators, veteran resource program staff, student veteran organizations and members of the community. The goal is to increase awareness regarding the unique issues faced by veterans that are transitioning to civilian and college life, leading to the creation of a more supportive educational environment (CCCCO 2016b). ‘Road Home’ events have included educational speakers and panel discussions as well as networking opportunities” (CCCCO 2016b). They have also included “student veterans as speakers to share their own first-hand experiences and thoughts about

transitioning to campus life” (Scott 2011).

Troops to College Program

This program marks a broad partnership among the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, the University of California and California State University Systems, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Office of the Secretary of Education, and the Labor and Workforce Development Agency, among others. The program provides “active duty service members and eligible veterans information, enrollment guidance and assistance about attending California’s public higher education institutions” (Scott 2011).

Veterans Clubs

Veterans Clubs provide peer support and community to veteran students, and many California Community Colleges have clubs connected with the Student Veterans of America (SVA, founded in 2008), which is “a coalition of student veterans groups on college campuses across the United States. These groups coordinate campus activities, provide pre-professional networking and generally provide support for student veterans in higher education” (Scott 2011).

“Honor a Hero, Hire a Vet” Job and Resource Fairs

These events “inform veterans of employment opportunities, as well as available career technical education and workforce training opportunities” (Scott 2011).

Aims include learning about educational and employment opportunities, gaining assistance with CalVet financing, meeting and even interviewing with potential employers, and gathering information about benefits, training, and career opportunities (ibid).

Welcome Home: Creating a Campus Community of Wellness for Returning Veterans

A Zellerbach Family Foundation Project, this faculty and staff training raises awareness of “the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression so that faculty and staff can better recognize and respond to these conditions” (Scott 2011).

Saddleback College Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) Program

In order to support active duty service members, veterans, and their families, this program’s primary aim is “a smooth transition from orientation to graduation” (Scott 2011). The program offers counseling, fee and tuition waivers, work-study opportunities, distance learning, child development center services, accommodations for veterans with disabilities, and access to a healthcare center (ibid).

Sierra College Veteran Help Center

Created in combination by the Sierra College Veterans Office and the Sierra College Veteran Student Alliance, this center provides “a safe and welcoming place for veterans and their dependents to receive support, information, and camaraderie, including space where vets can work on their homework, unwind, or just interact with fellow veterans” (Scott 2011). The center offers information on financial aid (e.g., GI Bill benefits, VA benefits, veteran scholarships, and emergency loans), employment, and campus navigation including campus tours, help with registration, and access to specialized programs and computers (ibid). The center also offers access to multiple peer-support systems, including vet-to-vet tutoring and study groups, a buddy sponsorship program for new veterans,

information about local veterans organizations, access to the campus Veteran Student Alliance Club, and “on campus appointments with a veterans county service officer to assist in completing VA disability claims and assist with applying for VA health benefits” (ibid).

This represents a range of efforts across the California Community Colleges, and there are yet additional resources available to veterans pursuing a college education in California, including all of the following:

California Community College campuses offer “free educational assessments with pre-enrollment evaluation of credits as well as a variety of programs that support veterans seeking an education including Disabled Student Services and priority admission” (ICVC 2012).

“CalVet offers educational fee waivers for the spouse and children of disabled veterans with any level of disability rating” (see <http://www.calvet.ca.gov/VetServices/Education.aspx>) (ICVC 2012).

Community information that may be valuable to veterans seeking higher education can be available via 2-1-1 community phone services (see www.ca.gov/211directory.html) and/or 3-1-1 non-emergency city services (see www.ca.gov/311directory.html) (ICVC 2012).

The VA offers apprenticeship programs for veterans (see http://www.gibill.va.gov/resources/education_resources/programs/on_the_job_apprenticeship_training.html) (ICVC 2012).

“County Veteran Service Officers are available throughout California to provide veterans with assistance applying for benefits (see

<http://www.cacvso.org/page/2011-1-22-13-52-31/>) (ICVC 2012).

The Employment Development Department provides services for veterans, including “a 24-hour priority review of job listings before releasing them to the general public (see http://www.edd.ca.gov/jobs_and_training/services_for_veterans.htm) (ICVC 2012).

Programs and initiatives “aimed at increasing the number of Californians engaged in service and volunteering” are listed on the website California Volunteers (see <http://www.californiavolunteers.org/index.php>) (ICVC 2012).

The program Helmets to Hardhats, offered by the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC), helps veterans find careers in construction (see <https://recruiter.helmetstohardhats.org/login.aspx>) (ICVC 2012).

“VetSuccess is a vocational rehabilitation program assisting veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find and keep suitable jobs (see <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/>) (ICVC 2012).

Thus, the California Community Colleges already strive to meet the needs of veteran students in numerous ways, and research suggests additional ways in which colleges could best serve veteran students. In closing, consider a statement from the American Association of Community Colleges, which indicates the degree of effort being made across the country:

“Nearly four out of five [American] community colleges have indicated that they already have in place or are in the process of implementing programs and services specifically designed for servicemembers and veterans... These include professional development for faculty and staff to

help them better serve veterans, increasing the number of services for these students, and establishing Web pages specifically tailored to veterans. Many institutions, particularly those with larger veteran populations, are establishing dedicated veterans centers on campus where veterans have the opportunity to congregate and receive tutoring and other services” (AACC 2013).

Striving to meet the needs of the nation’s returning service members is vital. Given the clear dedication of so many to this cause, and the expanding literature on how best to support veteran students, a great deal more is surely yet to come.

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