

VETERANS SERVICES TASK FORCE REPORT

Charge

The purpose of this task force is to review current services provided to and best practice recommendations for veteran students. The task force work should include a summary of current COCC services, a review of past veteran services work, and recommend future directions. Any recommendations should address, but are not limited to student need, staffing impacts, physical space needs, budgetary impacts, regulatory considerations and liability issues. The committee is also encouraged to review and report on what type of veterans services are provided at other Oregon community colleges.

Task Force Membership

Andrew Davis, Director of Student & Campus Life: co-chair
Michael Fisher, Instructional Dean: co-chair
Kevin Multop, Director of Financial Aid: member
Keri Podell, CAP Center Academic Advisor: member
Sue Pierce, Financial Aid Specialist-Veterans: member
Lisa Bacon, Instructional Dean Support Specialist: member
Sara Henson, Faculty: member
Sky Smith, COCC Student Veteran: member

Process

The Veterans' Services Task Force convened weekly, as schedules allowed, beginning on May 16, 2016. The group met together on five occasions, and additional discussions were shared via email.

Research for the recommendations was compiled from a variety of sources, including:

Oregon Community Colleges

Portland, Clackamas, and Rogue Community Colleges served as comparator institutions for the committee as they offer a variety of services to veteran students. From the committee's perspective, Rogue has the most robust veteran services and served as a great resource both in terms of colleagues we could contact as well as services. Potential areas of impact to students and applicability for COCC include an active student veterans club, veterans resource centers as well as veterans coordinators on both campuses, and strong connections with community resources that can assist veteran students

Examples of veteran services offered on other Oregon community college campuses range from certifying veteran benefits for students (minimum threshold) up to and including:

1. Full service veteran resource centers (staff, new student orientations, advising, counseling, lounge/study area)
2. Priority registration
3. Veteran-specific grants/scholarships
4. Mentorship programs
5. Full-time staff to coordinate veteran services

The Department of Education

The US Department of Education served as a valuable guide to the task force, primarily from the research and recommendations that are available in the form of the *8 Keys to Veterans' Success*, a list of

recommendations that postsecondary institutions can implement to assist veteran students in their transition to higher education. These eight recommendations are to:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU)

Although focused primarily on private colleges and universities, APSCU released a 2013 task force report conducted on providing services for military and veteran students. This robust work offered the COCC task force strong insights as to potential services for COCC.

These sources, along with additional information from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Association of Colleges and Universities, provided the task force with a wide range of both history of how veterans students have been served in higher education as well as what we could aspire to offer students on our campus.

Review of Previous Work and Summary

In 2008, a COCC task force was convened to determine possible new services for COCC Veteran students. The task force included a small group from across campus and made several recommendations regarding possible services to offer including:

Veterans Services Office/Center: The concept of such a center was similar to an advocacy center for other student groups (Black Student Union, Native American Program, etc.). As part of a veterans center, the task force recommended:

1. Staffing the center with students who are Veterans in order to create peer-to-peer connections
2. Providing focused tutoring services
3. Career Counseling
4. Personal Counseling
5. Regular office hours for local veterans services programs

“Boots to Books” Transitions Class or Orientation Program: This course was considered a way to help students with many of the issues that non-traditional students struggle with as well as some of the unique issues facing veteran students transitioning to college.

Increase in On-Campus Mental Health Services and Disability Testing: Reports demonstrate that as high as 90% of personnel returning from Iraq or Afghanistan will have suffered from some level of traumatic

brain injury. Campuses have seen an impact on their ability to provide services and outreach to Veterans.

Faculty and Staff Training: Training for staff and faculty on working with Veteran students that may be dealing with wide ranging issues from depression to PTSD.

Deferred Payment Plan: Many Veterans will not receive their educational benefits until long after tuition and fees are due. A recommendation was made to implement a policy to help Veterans in such situations.

Ultimately, the current COCC Veterans Center was created as a result of the recommendations of the 2008 task force, but the other recommendations have yet to be implemented, including dedicated staffing and associated support services

Summary of Current Services

Currently, COCC employs one full time employee dedicated to overseeing educational benefits administered by the Department of Veteran's Affairs. The certifying official is part of COCC's Financial Aid Department and serves more than 425 veterans and/or their dependents for the 2017-2018 academic year. Primary duties include submitting student enrollments to the VA for payment, answering questions regarding the use of VA educational benefits at COCC, and maintaining accurate student and financial records in compliance with federal regulations.

Additionally, COCC has a Veteran's Center located in the Coats Campus Center which offers a small book lending library, free use of a computer and printer, a whiteboard for posting information, and a small study area and meeting table.

Historically, ASCOCC sponsors a Veterans Club, although it did not actively meet in 2015-16 due to lack of student or institutional leadership. In the fall 2016, there was an effort to restart the Veterans Club and a small group of staff from Rogue Community College joined with students and COCC staff to host a BBQ for veteran students. The BBQ attracted approximately 30 veteran students, however, little activity was seen by club members the rest of the year.

Future Goals and Recommendations

Based on the research and best practices, the task force recommends short, mid, and long- term goals that will help us best serve our veteran students. The task force considered implementation timing, available staffing to support new initiatives, budget, and a strategic approach to building upon services over time.

Additionally, the task force took into consideration the number of veteran students or dependents that currently attend COCC (approximately 425 self-identified students). COCC has two programs comparable to what the task force considered: A Native American Student Program, supporting 296 students and a Latino Student Program with 870 students (fall 2016 data).

Short Term Recommendations (0-18 months)

1. Re-designate the Veterans Center as the Veterans Lounge: The term Veterans Center may imply resources not currently offered. The Center is a great resource for our students. However, it is

not staffed by a dedicated staff that can answer questions and guide students toward resources on a regular basis (completed in spring 2017).

2. **Staffing:** In order to best provide services to veteran students, the task force recommends hiring .5 FTE position to oversee Veteran Services, housing the position within Student Life. Many of the services above will be difficult to provide without a dedicated professional staff to lead in the development and implementation. A part-time position will be able to work with students, faculty, and staff to implement the first phase of task force recommendations, provide much needed daily supports to veteran students, and fully develop an array of services to best serve our veteran population. Creating such a position allows the College to access designated resources within the Veterans Administration, including additional work study support.
3. **8 Keys to Veteran Success on Campus:** The task force recommends that COCC adopt the *8 Keys to Veteran Success* as outlined by the Department of Education. Doing so lays a valuable foundation for future services as well as communicate our campus commitment to serving veterans well.
4. **Veterans Safe Space Training Program:** Similar to the Safe Zone training provided by Multicultural Activities, the task force recommends creating a Veterans "Safe Space" training. This training provides students, faculty, and staff with an understanding of some of the unique issues facing our veteran students and gives them the tools to listen and guide toward relevant services on campus and in our community.
5. **Employee Training:** Similar to the Safe Space training, the task force recommends providing periodic opportunities to learn about best practices working with veteran students, perhaps through the existing Teaching Academy. Such a training provides faculty and staff the opportunity to learn how they can best serve veteran students, but require less time commitment than the Safe Space training.

Mid-Range Goals (18-36 months)

1. **Assemble an Advisory/Community Resource Board:** The task force recommends the creation of an advisory board that is comprised of individuals from the campus as well as community resources. There are currently a number of organizations that offer services to veterans in Central Oregon including Central Oregon Veterans Outreach and Deschutes County Veterans Services. However, there is not an organization that connects these groups and would allow for a holistic view of support services available to veteran students.
2. **Redesign websites and marketing tools to help recruit/retain veteran students:** The campus web pages are minimally updated and could be modernized to help recruit veteran students as other support services are developed on campus.

Long Term Goals

1. **Evaluate Registration Barriers to transfer veteran students with the support of college experts:** Veterans face unique barriers including the timing of receiving benefits and the need for seasonal deployments that can serve as barriers to registration. The task force recommends a

small group to specifically examine registration barriers facing veteran students and to recommend changes in policy/process.

2. Expand Veterans Lounge into more robust Veterans Center: As previously mentioned, the Veterans Lounge is a valuable resource to students. However, as other services are implemented and staff is hired to increase programming for students, it will be valuable to expand the lounge into a fully developed veterans center that could include drop in times with staff from key areas on campus and a central point of contact for veterans.

Conclusions and Budgetary Impact

The evaluation of the task force is that COCC has done a good job serving the needs of veteran students on campus to the best of its ability for the last several years. Our commitment to certifying financial benefits has been strong and we are fortunate to have been able to meet the needs of students in that regard.

However, based on best practices at other institutions and given the size of the veteran population at COCC it is the recommendation of the task force that it is worth pursuing additional services to help veteran students be as successful as possible.

Additionally, it is the recommendation of the task force that the development of veteran services would be difficult to integrate into the existing campus staff structure as most staff do not have the capacity for the volume of work required. A .5 FTE Veterans Coordinator is estimated to cost \$45,000 annually.