

Retain veterans with a campus resource center

PHOENIX — Dan Torres remembers how isolated he felt when he was discharged from the military and enrolled in college.

But now student veterans at Butte College in California have their own space to enjoy the company of others who understand what they've experienced. They also know where to go to learn about services available to them.

Torres, Butte's financial aid assistant and veterans certifying official, helped create the Veterans Resource Center on campus. He spoke at the American Association of Community Colleges' annual convention. Other presenters included Karen Micalizio, director of financial aid and veterans services; Mike Olsen, a Butte student and VRC staff member; and Gabriel Wren, a student.

"This is the best thing that's happened to me, next to the Marine Corps and my wife — the VRC," Olsen said.

Butte has two campuses. But Wren said he's not interested in attending class at the campus that doesn't have the VRC. If enrolling student veterans is a priority for your institution, a resource center can help retain them.

Coming up on its first anniversary, the VRC has already become so popular that it is moving to a larger space this summer.

When veterans are discharged, they are so used to having someone tell them what to do and when to do it that filling out forms and negotiating college can be a challenge. Also, many have post-traumatic stress syndrome or traumatic brain injuries, so they need a place to decompress, the speakers said.

Besides providing space and companionship, the VRC offers computer equipment, free Internet and monthly seminars about services on campus.

Education about financial aid has raised the percentage of veterans who applied from 25 percent to 75 percent, Torres said.

Disabled student services and veterans services worked together to create the center. Computers and furniture were donated. ■

Include critical features in a veterans resource center

If you create a veterans resource center on your campus, be sure to include key components. Dan Torres, financial aid assistant and veterans certifying official at Butte College in California, said they include:

➤ **A friendly space.** At Butte, the center is fairly small, but it provides veterans with a space that's their own. They can post photos of their time in the military and relax around others who understand their experiences.

➤ **A friendly staff.** Staff members should be veterans because they have credibility with veterans who use the center, Torres said.

➤ **An academic counselor.** The GI Bill will pay for classes only if they are required. Before Butte assigned a counselor specifically to veterans, these students frequently got bad advice. Torres reviewed their registrations, and if they had registered for courses that were not covered, he helped them revise their schedules. Now the advisor makes sure they understand what will be paid for before they register.

➤ **A home-like atmosphere.** "People are in the center because they feel so much at home," Torres said. "They know it's their own place," he added. Because the students are so comfortable, they donate items such as DVD players and flags. ■