

Veterans Resource Center Project

High Tech Center Training Unit
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In coordination with the Chancellor's Office
of the California Community Colleges
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A brief window into the project

Greg, a fire captain who experienced a brain hemorrhage while on duty, has since regained his abilities. During the rehabilitation process, he commented on the frustration in navigating the voicemail of companies:

They say, "If you want sales, press 1, if you want account information, press 2, if you want Human Resources, press 3, etc." They should simply start out by saying, "If you've had a brain injury, press 1."

When veterans return from combat, they need an entry point into the academic world, one that is equivalent to pressing 1. What we are proposing is to establish such an entry point on campuses in the California Community College system: a Veterans Resource Center, or VRC.

A returning vet should be able to step onto a college campus and ask, "Where's your VRC?" Staffed by vets—and focused on services to promote academics, camaraderie, and wellness—referral to resources flow from there.

Overview: The Need

The California Community College system has begun to serve veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). It is estimated that 16,000 of the 21,000 veterans and their dependents using the GI Bill at California postsecondary institutions are enrolled at a community college.¹ Further, enrollment of veterans is expected to increase dramatically in the near future.

Returning veterans arrive on campus as an at-risk population for three primary reasons:

- The academic world poses considerable challenges, as most individuals returning from military service have not attended formal, traditional academic programs for several years (i.e., high school, prior college).
- A significant number of veterans can be described as "nontraditional" learners.²

¹ <http://www.cccco.edu/ChancellorsOffice/Divisions/StudentServices/TroopstoCollege/tabid/660/Default.aspx>

² When taking a learning styles survey, the majority of veterans surveyed at Butte College indicate a preference for Visual Graphic & Kinesthetic learning styles. Traditional learners (and traditional classrooms) tend to favor Visual Written & Auditory learning styles.

- Many OEF and OIF veterans return with a traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other disabilities that pose substantial barriers to academic success.

Population

“I’d rather go to war than college.”³ This statement by a returning veteran captures the essence of many individuals who re-enter civilian and academic life. Typically, these are individuals for whom academic success has not come easily; this is a growing underserved population at the postsecondary level.

Not only are veteran students underserved in terms of targeted support services, a significant number are at risk academically. The current estimate is that approximately 10,000 OEF & OIF veterans have sustained a brain injury.⁴ According to the Pentagon, approximately 30% of veterans will have PTSD; 40,000 OEF & OIF veterans have already been diagnosed with PTSD.⁵

What are the effects of TBI and PTSD on academic performance? Traumatic brain injury can profoundly affect such cognitive skills as attention, working memory, information processing speed, long-term retention, sequencing, and judgment/decision making. PTSD can create significant difficulties in the following three areas:

- Re-experiencing trauma (e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts)
- Arousal (e.g., hypervigilance, irritability, attention deficits)
- Avoidance (e.g., detachment, social withdrawal)⁶

Whether TBI and PTSD occur separately or together, these difficulties can pose considerable barriers to academic success. *Veteran students are dedicated, but they are vulnerable.*

The beauty of the community college is that it offers a second chance: it represents the open door. Because community college instructors do not carry the pressures to publish or conduct research, their full focus is on teaching. These qualities provide an environment that optimizes chances for academic success, particularly for students who are underserved or at risk; approximately 50% of students in the California Community College system assess into developmental-level classes in English, Reading, or Math.⁷ In addition, the community college offers a broad range of vocational and transfer opportunities.

Veterans Resource Center Project

To meet the needs of these deserving individuals, the High Tech Center Training Unit (HTCTU) at De Anza College—in coordination with the Chancellor’s Office of the California

³ The Road Home Conference, Sierra College, September 2007.

⁴ Harriet Zeiner, Ph.D., Presentation at Brain Injury Coalition Conference, Chico, CA, March 2008.

⁵ San Francisco Chronicle, July 27, 2008, p. A14.

⁶ David Shaffer, LCSW, VA Center, Chico, November 2009.

⁷ Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2004.

Community Colleges—proposes establishing a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) on approximately twelve community college campuses, patterned after the VRC at Butte College.

An application will be available to all colleges in the California Community College system. There will be no direct cost involved to the individual campus; indirect costs will consist of providing physical space, limited equipment, and staff time.

Established in Spring 2008, the Butte College VRC provides a central entry point for veterans and their families as they navigate the civilian and academic worlds.⁸ *Staffed by veterans*, the overall goal is to deliver tangible tools and services to optimize academic success.⁹ This effort involved collaboration between the following offices: Veterans Services, Financial Aid, Disabled Student Programs & Services (DSPS), Counseling, and Student Health Center.

At the recent Road Home Conference,¹⁰ the VRC was cited as a standout program for meeting the needs of returning veterans. Feedback from veteran students motivates the HTCTU to share this model with other community colleges in California:

The hardest part of transitioning to civilian life from the military has been the lack of camaraderie in the civilian world. The great people I served with have now gone their separate ways. Having the VRC on campus has returned to me access to a circle of friends I feel I can be open with, rely on, and turn to in times of crisis. I can honestly say the VRC is sometimes the only thing that saves me from “burning out” on school and keeps me coming back. (Mike O, USMC, Infantry. Two tours in Iraq.)

Participating colleges and the HTCTU will share in providing the central elements (refer to tables, pp. 5-6). The VRC pilot sites will represent different geographic regions (Northern, Central, Southern California) with distinct characteristics (rural and urban). These centers will serve as demonstration projects, modeling a gateway system that eases the transition and promotes academic success for returning veteran students.

What are the fundamental components of a Veterans Resource Center? Although this is vital, a VRC provides services beyond a veterans lounge or clubhouse. The three primary components are:

- Academics
- Camaraderie
- Wellness

Specific services will include:

- Access to computers & assistance in the use of assistive technologies, *including specialized software for nontraditional learners*
- Academic counseling
- Peer support, mentoring
- Financial aid information & application assistance
- Referral to on- and off-campus resources (e.g., DSPS, local VA center)

⁸ <http://www.butte.edu/services/veterans/vrc.html>

⁹ *Retain veterans with a campus resource center*. Enrollment Management Report, A. Wiley Company, Vol. 13, Issue 2.

¹⁰ The Road Home Conference, American River College, September 2008.

Academics. The VRC will offer a range of tools and strategies that provide scaffolding to optimize academic success. Veteran students will be able to take the Learning Styles Profile, a brief questionnaire that generates an individual's learning profile. The results (1) equip students with insights about their strongest two learning modes and (2) drive referral to specific tools and strategies.

Two academic support tools in particular will be available:

- To aid retention for the significant reading required at the postsecondary level, the *Kurzweil 3000*¹¹ allows the user to scan text and have it read aloud. This provides dual representation in the brain, boosting retention. In general, if students listen to lecture, they will retain approximately 20%. If they read a chapter, retention is approximately 30%. If they *combine* these input modes—hearing and seeing—retention increases to approximately 50%.
- For nontraditional learners, *Inspiration*¹² is a program that allows the user to organize thinking in graphic format. Once the material is organized, it is converted to outline form, giving the student a tangible framework to, for example, write a paper.

Because the HTCTU has been providing trainings in assistive technologies since 1987, it is positioned to serve as the central facility for ensuring quality, practical, hands-on trainings to project participants. Its accessible website can host the Learning Styles Profile as well as provide strategies/resources concerning TBI, PTSD, and other disabilities.

Camaraderie. At its core, the VRC project is based on *having veterans provide services directly to fellow veterans*. As noted by Thomas Church, “peer counseling programs use the camaraderie and trust that veterans experience with their peers. Peer counseling programs utilize the military traditions of shared values and experiences and provide a bridge that allows veterans access to more traditional DS offices on campus for students.”¹³ The VRC project is also founded on *collaboration*, drawing on a range of campus resources. Primary among these will be a close collaboration between two offices: Veterans Services and DSPS. The HTCTU and on-site DSPS specialist will provide training as needed to the VRC staff; *these individuals will then work directly with veteran students*.

Wellness. In the VRC, services will include referral to such on- and off-campus resources as the Student Health Clinic. In addition, VRC staff will provide consultation to college faculty and staff regarding issues specific to returning veterans and their family members.

Outcomes

Project goals will be simple and measurable. The HTCTU will:

- Conduct a survey of current status re: what the CCCs are currently seeing & providing
- Identify approximately twelve Veterans Resource Center project sites

¹¹ Cambium Learning Technologies. www.cambiumlearningtechnologies.com

¹² Inspiration Software, Inc. www.inspiration.com

¹³ Thomas Church. *Returning Veterans on Campus with War Related Injuries and the Long Road Back Home*, Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2009.

- Together with participating colleges, establish a Veterans Resource Center (designated as such for uniformity) and track the number of veteran students using the VRCs, referrals to on- and off-campus resources, and trainings provided through the HTCTU.

Summary

The Veterans Resource Center project grows from a proven model, one that provides tangible services that form scaffolding for veteran students as they navigate the academic and civilian worlds. *This project is great in terms of return, but lean in terms of cost; it can be easily replicated throughout the California Community College (CCC) system (N=110) and nationally.*

Central Elements: Pilot Sites

Veterans Resource Center

Item	Provided by Participating College
Time commitment	Two-year commitment (4 continuous semesters or the equivalent)
Dedicated space	Accessible space (minimum 400 sq. ft.), designated as Veterans Resource Center (w. separate entry)
Equipment	
	2 scanners
	2 printers
Furnishings	
	Study area
	Couch, chairs
	Coffee table
	Small refrigerator & microwave
	Coffee urn
	TV & DVD player (optional)
Staff	
	Staffing combination to cover a minimum of 25 hours/week in VRC, with 70% of coverage by veterans. Suggested staff options: Veteran students (Work-Study), Veterans Services, DSPS, Financial Aid, academic counselor, faculty.
	Academic Counselor works 4 hours/week in VRC
Collaboration	
	Support from campus administration
	HTC specialist on staff (Assistive Technology or Alternate Media)
	Establish Veterans Task Force
	Establish referral network

Item	Provided by Participating College
Training	
	Staff participates in training on computer programs, learning styles
	Staff provides consultation to campus re: issues specific to veteran students and their families
Data collection	
	Track number of veteran students served
	Track referral to on- and off-campus resources
	Submit above data at end of each term for 2 years

Central Elements: High Tech Center Training Unit

Veterans Resource Center

Item	Provided by High Tech Center Training Unit
Time commitment	Two-year commitment of providing trainings
Equipment	
(Campus will keep equipment.)	2 computers & 2 monitors, depending on college needs
Software	
<i>(2 copies of each)</i>	Windows OS (Windows 7 Professional)
	Microsoft Office Suite (Office 2007)
Assistive Technology Tools*	
<i>(2 copies of each)</i>	
Text-to-speech tools	Kurzweil 3000 Professional (v. 11 or 12)
	Kurzweil 1000 (v. 11 or 12)
	NaturalReader (v. 9)
	TextAloud (v. 2.0)
	EasyReader (v. 5.1)
Concept mapping	Inspiration (v. 9)
Screen reader	JAWS (v. 11)
Screen magnification	ZoomText Magnifier/Reader (v. 9)
Training	
	Provide off-site trainings at High Tech Center Training Unit, De Anza College, Cupertino, CA
	Provide on-site trainings at each pilot site to Campus DSPTS individuals (Assistive Technology and/or Alternate Media Specialist) and identified VRC staff

Item	Provided by High Tech Center Training Unit
	Provide regional trainings, hosted at VRC sites, for all CCCs interested in learning more about veteran's issues at the CCCs
Data collection	
	Provide the tool to track services
	Provide necessary report forms
	Write & submit report at end of each term for 2 years

*Please note: Dragon NaturallySpeaking is purposely not included in the software package; speech recognition software training will be provided to returning veterans as needed through campus DSPS office. Also, software will be upgraded for the two years of this pilot project.