



Massachusetts Student Veteran Advisory Board

Annual Report • 2013



Primary Authors: David Vacchi – dvacchi@acad.umass.edu
Erik DeGiorgi – erik.degiorgi@state.ma.us

Contributors: Michael A. Trudeau
Janine Wert
Diane O'Hearn

Editor: Elizabeth Mullins M.A., M.A.T.



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2013: A Strong Beginning

It was less than a year ago that I was given the honor and responsibility of creating a Student Veteran Advisory Board and determining how the Commonwealth could best support veterans' education. In that short time, we have assembled a Board of dedicated student veterans who are passionate about serving their peers. We have canvassed our state and listened to student veterans, learning about both the successes and challenges they are having negotiating higher education. We have engaged faculty and administrators at several institutions, and discussed their desires and challenges with supporting veterans. We have developed partnerships between government organizations and NGOs, including our own MA Department of Veteran Services, the MA Department of Higher Education, and the Student Veterans of America. We have built a network of dozens of other individuals and organizations dedicated to supporting student veterans both in our state and across the nation.

What I observed on our listening tour was very encouraging. I saw many cases of student veterans self-organizing and creating student vet organizations on campus. I saw colleges and universities stepping up and offering tremendous support for their veterans. I also met countless individuals who believed in the importance of educating our veterans and were willing to contribute whatever they could to the cause.

There is much to be proud of, but there is also much work to be done. Programs, services, and student veteran organizations on campus primarily operate independently rather than collaboratively. Finding the veterans who need the most support – those that are not already part of any program or network – is very difficult. There is tremendous inconsistency in the level of support veterans receive campus to campus, and even department to department in larger universities.

Luckily we veterans are a group that is used to facing challenges head on. For over a decade we have been serving on multiple fronts, answering our country's call to duty. That dedication to duty and devotion to service does not end once we leave the military. Our core values remain with us, and I am constantly seeing veterans across the state applying them in the classroom.

What keeps me committed to this cause is that every time I visit a school and interact with student veterans, I am being introduced to our next generation of leaders. The future teachers, business owners, civil servants, and community leaders are the present generation of veterans in the classroom; and as over a decade of conflict continues to wind down, it is now time for us to fulfill *our* duty to support them and ensure their success in higher education.

Erik DeGiorgi
Coordinator
USMC 01-05



2013 Student Veteran Advisory Board Overview

The Massachusetts Student Veteran Advisory Board (SVAB), a sub-committee of the Governor's Advisory Council on Veteran Services, works to develop and implement programs and infrastructure to support the greater student veteran population across the Commonwealth. The Board, comprised of student veterans and higher education faculty, is dedicated to making the transition from military to student life seamless for service-members returning to Massachusetts. By helping student veterans to self-organize, schools to understand and meet the unique needs of incoming veterans, and government and private organizations to build tools that support the transition from military service to academic life to the workforce, we aim to make Massachusetts the gold standard for our nation when it comes to educating veterans.

Erik DeGiorgi – Coordinator

Erik DeGiorgi grew up on Boston's South Shore before joining the Marine Corps in 2001. During his four year enlistment, Erik served as a ceremonial guard at Marine Barracks 8th and I, trained with Thai and Korean special forces, attended small unit leadership school in Okinawa, Japan, and was a patrol leader on dozens of extended missions in remote parts of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush.

After returning to the US, Erik co-founded MediaVue Systems, a computer hardware manufacturer that services the digital advertising and information industry. Since its founding in 2007, mediaVue has deployed product in over 50 countries and developed a customer base that includes Uniqlo, Marks & Spencer, Panasonic, NEC, Disney, Massport and WGBH.

While pursuing his bachelor's degree, Erik studied at Lesley University, The Art Institute of Boston, and MIT. Erik developed an interdisciplinary course-load with a focus on systems design. Recently, Erik was one of 15 emerging leaders chosen by the Small Business Administration for a seven month intensive MBA program hosted by Harvard Business School.

In his personal life, Erik has spent several years as a mentor in high school engineering and robotics programs, including F.I.R.S.T. and Battlebots IQ. Erik is also a member of OrigaMIT, the MIT origami club and an avid board gamer and science fiction fan. It is a combination of Erik's focus on engineering, design, and entrepreneurship as well as a strong commitment to egalitarianism that led Erik to co-found semper fiber in 2012. Semper Fiber's mission is to stimulate the next generation of young innovators and catalyze the creation of social, cultural, and economic capital.

David Vacchi – Public Chair

David Vacchi retired from the US Army as a lieutenant colonel in 2009 after a 20-year active duty career. Commissioned in 1988 from Purdue University with a degree in leadership, David served in a myriad of leadership positions culminating as the commander of the Army ROTC program at UMass-Amherst then as the Director of Fires for the Eighth United States Army in Korea. Among his unique positions during his career are service as the US Embassy Liaison Officer for a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) response task force in Kuwait City from 2002-2003 and as the operations officer for a task force located in the north Baghdad suburbs in the Sunni Triangle during the first year of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

David's awards and decorations include the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star among numerous other awards. David recently completed coursework for a doctorate in Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Massachusetts Amherst where his research focus is on the college experiences of student veterans. His recent research includes explorations of factors of veteran-friendliness on campus and the factors that affect student veteran successful degree attainment. David serves as the national



Research and Publications representative for the Veterans Knowledge Community of NASPA (Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education). David is among the nation's leaders in student veteran research and theory, and had several academic publications forthcoming. Upon completion of his dissertation in May 2014, David plans to enter the professoriate and continue his research on student veterans. David lives in Belchertown with his wife of 20 years, Susan, and their two children, Ella and Brian.

Joe Goodwin – Private Chair

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, having just graduated from Harvard College, Joe enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant combat arms officer and joined the 1st Armored Division in Iraq. He spent more than a year leading a platoon of 30 soldiers patrolling the streets of Baghdad, rebuilding the country's infrastructure and working to contain growing violence. Joe received a Bronze Star for his exemplary performance in combat.

Upon returning from Iraq, Joe began a job with General Electric Co.'s steam and wind turbine divisions, working as a leader on both the factory floor and on the finance and strategic side to build renewable, clean energy technology. In 2008, Joe was recalled to serve in Afghanistan where he spent a year serving as a special advisor to the NATO Director of Strategic Communications. In that role, Joe's duties included investigating civilian casualties, helping the Army compensate victims and their families, and crafting solutions to avert future tragedies. After returning from Afghanistan, Joe enrolled at Suffolk University Law School and then transferred to Harvard Law School. Joe is recently married to Victoria Bonney. His father, Richard, was advisor to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and his mother, Doris, is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and presidential historian.

Diane O'Hearn

For over 25 years, Diane has worked in higher education both in the classroom and in administrative roles at institutions such as UMass/Amherst, Harvard University, Holyoke Community College, UC Berkeley, Patten University, Ohlone College and Greenfield Community College. Diane earned both her Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Master's degree in Human Resource Development from American International College and is currently a tenured Academic Coordinator at Greenfield Community College (GCC).

In 2009, Diane was instrumental in launching the GCC student veteran network. The organization, more commonly referred to as VetNet, has promoted student veteran awareness and best practices on campus and throughout the community. Today, GCC has an active veterans' center that represents a cornerstone for the advancement of student veteran access and success on campus.

Diane's ongoing commitment to veterans' education and training is inspired by the increasing number of students who choose to pursue their education after having served in the United States armed forces. Working to build a culture that recognizes the leadership that student veterans bring to campus, Diane actively supports the greater GCC community as it develops a comprehensive Veterans Center and helps promote a seamless transition for student veterans from active service to civilian life as a college student.

Pam Dehollander

Pamela DeHollander's military service began with her selection as the Delayed Entry Program Leader while awaiting entry into basic training. During her Navy career, she deployed to the Arabian Gulf twice, earned both her Air Warfare and Surface Warfare pins, was meritoriously promoted, led several special project teams and home ported the USS Ronald Reagan to San Diego, CA. Throughout her 8 year career, Pamela garnered several Sailor of the Quarter and Year awards at multiple commands.



Currently, Pamela attends UMass Lowell and is pursuing her undergraduate degree in Business Administration. She expects to continue on to a career in corporate communications or the political arena. Pamela serves within the veterans' community at UMass Lowell as an officer of the Student Veteran Organization. This past year, she represented the university at the Annual Student Veteran Association conference in Orlando, Florida, initiated steps to establish a national veteran fraternity chapter at UMass Lowell. She will also present at the 2013 National Conference for College Women Student Leaders on Leading as a Woman: Lessons Earned in the Military.

Her selection to the Massachusetts Student Advisory Board enables Pamela to ensure that student veteran voices are heard in the Commonwealth and she welcomes the opportunity to continue her leadership commitment to veteran issues.

Michael A. Trudeau

Michael Trudeau enlisted in the U.S. Navy Submarine Force in 2004. After completing the rigorous Enlisted Submarine School in New London, CT, Trudeau was stationed to the USS Columbus (SSN-762). Columbus was in Bremerton WA at the time for a dry dock period but then moved to Pearl Harbor, HI in 2006. Columbus then went on a Western Pacific Deployment with port calls in Okinawa, Tokyo, Nagasaki, Saipan, and Guam. In 2009 the Columbus received the coveted Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy, the Battle Excellence award, and the Damage Control Excellence Award just prior to Michael Trudeau's departure from the Navy.

After coming home, Trudeau enrolled at Bunker Hill Community College for one year utilizing his post 9-11 G.I. Bill. He then transferred to Northeastern University to study Political Science, International Affairs, and Economics and partake in the Universities CO-OP program. On CO-OP Trudeau had the opportunity to be a Research Assistant at the Kostas Institute for Homeland Security. Trudeau Graduated in 2013

Trudeau became involved in the Student Veteran Organization where he acted as Secretary until he assumed the position on President in May 2012. As a result of his leadership, Trudeau and his officers were invited to the Student Veterans of America National Conference to present their 'Business Plan'. As a result the SVA awarded the Student Veterans Organization at Northeastern University, 'Chapter of the Year' out of 700 chapter nationally. Trudeau was also asked to be a Board Member of the MA Student Veteran Advisory Board where he has been an active member since September 2012 where he continues to advocate for veterans issues.



Student Veteran Advisory Board Establishment & Goals

In 2012, the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans' Services and Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services commissioned the Student Veteran Advisory Board to explore the experiences of student veterans across the Commonwealth. The idea was to establish a cohort of veterans who could interact with and learn directly from their student veteran peers about their successes and challenges. Our initial goals for the first year were:

- Establish a board of student veterans that represented the broader student veteran population enrolled in both public and private institutions of higher learning across the Commonwealth.
- Understand the experiences of student veterans in Massachusetts through an ongoing series of listening tour/focus groups to ensure that the perspectives of student veterans guide policy and program development.
- Identify ways in which the Commonwealth can facilitate the successful college endeavors of student veterans through programs, policies, and initiatives focused on creating synergy at the state level, rather than performing functions intended for the VA or academic institutions.
- Generate an annual report that illustrates findings from the listening tour and offers recommendations to policy makers regarding how the Commonwealth can support veteran education.
- Organize and host an event focused on veteran education that brings together service providers and schools.

The first year was an aggressive step forward in leveraging resources from the Commonwealth to support student veterans. In addition to conducting our first listening tour, several goals and programmatic events were planned at the state level. The first state sponsored veteran education symposium, the Student Veteran Appreciation Day (SVAD) was organized and held on May 11th 2013. The SVAD combined an exhibition hall, where public and private service providers, along with schools from across the Commonwealth connected with prospective and current student veterans. Workshops were held that focused on arming student veterans with the knowledge they needed to succeed in higher education.

This year the MA Department of Veteran Services strengthened its relationship with the MA Department of Higher Education in order to collaborate on the shared cause of veteran education. The SVAB also established a relationship with the Student Veterans of America (SVA), and have agreed to collaborate on the matters of tracking veteran graduation and establishing best practices at schools.

The 2013-14 academic year will solidify the SVAB as an action and results-oriented organization intended to enhance the success of student veterans across the Commonwealth. Data collection through a listening tour will continue to maintain open dialogue and a diversity of feedback from new campuses. Strengthening infrastructure and developing Commonwealth programs and services to help institutions meet their goals of helping student veterans will begin. By the end of this academic year, the Commonwealth endeavors to be positioned to implement numerous programs intended to support the efforts of all campuses as they build and sustain programs for student veterans. By the year 2015, Massachusetts aspires to be the recognized national leader on veteran education initiatives.

By the year 2023, Massachusetts aspires to be the national leader in research and best practices for student veterans in higher education. We must anticipate a new era of student that may mirror the



period between 1980 and 2008. We must ensure we do not repeat the near-total oversight of student veteran research and scholarly literature during these years. Having the foresight to continue to track the performance and experiences of student veterans in higher education will bridge the intellectual gap in ways that higher education failed to do so between 1975 and 2008. Documenting best practices and preserving veterans' services staff and spaces, where practical will be critical to the sustainability of future programs and supporting future generations of student veterans within the Commonwealth. The result of having this foresight will be an easier start up when an inevitable future surge of student veterans begins after the next major military conflict, which occurs every twenty to thirty years in our nation's history.



2013 Recommendation Summary

1. Establish a veteran-specific support staff position at each state institution of higher learning, separate from the person employed, or partially employed, by the VA for benefits certification.
2. Help public institutions create office space for one-on-one counseling of student veterans and a lounge for student veterans to connect with each other informally.
3. Develop recommendations for first-year veteran cohort seminars and establish criteria for attendance.
4. In collaboration with the Department of Higher Education, work to “break the code”, with reasonable practices for transferring credit and awarding prior learning credit for military experience so that our student veterans receive a reliable assessment of prior learning before making a decision to attend one of our state institutions.
5. Develop means to match veterans with needed services on campus, including a web-based community for veterans to interact with other student veterans confidentially. Design professional development tools for university members to support veterans in their need for specialized services.
6. Develop or adopt a standard for what programs and services most benefit student veterans on campus. Work to create an online or public facing “*Consumer Reports style*” overview of which services and programs are available at which school as opposed to specious veteran-friendly rankings.
7. Develop a web-based professional development program to provide basic information for faculty, staff, and administrators to understand and to support the success of student veterans effectively.
8. Develop and maintain a series of webinars, to be conducted each year on basic and advanced certifying official duties.



Complete Empirical Observations and Recommendations from 2012-2013 Listening Tour

The 2012-2013 Listening Tour involved five campuses, including Greenfield Community College, Mount Wachusett Community College, Salem State University, Suffolk University, and UMass Lowell. The members of the SVAB as well as the number of student veteran participants at each listening tour varied, with at least two Board members or state representatives present, and anywhere from four to thirty student veteran participants at each session. During the Tour, much of what was observed and documented from the student veterans, faculty, and staff was consistent with national and state-level discussions concerning veterans' experiences on campus. As Massachusetts considers its role in supporting colleges and universities, the key objective is to determine how the Commonwealth can support these existing initiatives while simultaneously fostering the development of new veteran support programs which mimic best practice. A clear contrast between the concerns of community colleges and the concerns of four-year institutions emerged, primarily around the ability to deliver services and the extent to which any assistance from the Commonwealth is meaningful. We must keep in mind that the varied missions of institutions, along with access to resources, and the individual educational goals of student veterans interact to create a dynamic landscape for providing support. This suggests that there is no "one size fits all" approach to supporting veterans' higher education in Massachusetts.

Theme One: Dedicated Support Staff

Several main themes emerged from the data collected during these five focus group sessions, the first of which is the need for a full-time, dedicated professional to support student veterans. Campuses that evolved from a single, part-time employee who only performed GI Bill certifications to at least a full-time employee experienced rapid and noticeable improvements to the quality of services for veterans, particularly in areas other than benefits processing. While all 28 public institutions of higher learning in the Commonwealth report having a single point of contact for veterans, the most critical aspect of successfully supporting student veterans appears to be that a full-time staff member can focus on personal guidance without the additional responsibility of having to dedicate time to benefits certification.¹ This dedicated support staff individual is ideally a veteran or someone with extensive experience serving or working with veterans; however, any dedicated and committed professional with appropriate skills can fulfill this role. This individual also appears to be most beneficial when bringing an additional area of expertise to the position, such as academic advising, career counseling, or support counseling. An advantage to having this full-time employee is that this person serves as an intermediary expert who helps to bridge the gap between veterans and the campus in addition to demonstrating to veterans that the campus is invested in their success. Clearly, this is not feasible for the many campuses in Massachusetts with small numbers of student veterans, but for many campuses the volume of benefits certifications prohibits the delivery of other essential services. Therefore, providing a dedicated employee separate from the certifying official has an immediate positive outcome for the persistence and success of student veterans in college. In an ideal situation, there would be a full time director and one or more staff members who function as liaisons for benefits certification. These positions could exist within the veterans' services office, registrar's office, or ideally the bursar's office.

Theme Two: Cohort-based First Year Programming

A second major finding is the apparent value of first year programming with the distinct purpose of aiding the transition of veterans to campus. In addition to participating in a traditional student orientation, the focus groups reported that targeted programming benefits student veterans in their transition from military to student life. Specifically, these programs assist veterans in developing the agency to be successful students, and to become successful navigating the less-structured environment that is a college campus. A salient point emerged that there are two current approaches to veteran



orientations and transitions: those which seek to integrate veterans into traditional orientations, and those which seek to segregate student veterans to minimize the potential for stigmatization by younger students, staff or faculty. Neither model seems to support the needs of student veterans fully.

There are cases, however, where institutions are considering targeted first year programming and modifying their orientation experience to serve student veterans. An example of an alternate approach comes from Suffolk University, where they have a two-week “boot camp” for student veterans who have not been on a college campus in a long time, if ever. This enhanced orientation and transition program helps student veterans succeed by familiarizing them with the more relaxed environment of college campuses as compared to the rigidity of the military. Another alternative approach comes from Salem State University which offers a voluntary first year cohort program that includes three courses: a first year seminar, a general education history course, and a public speaking course, all exclusively for veterans. The public speaking course evolved after feedback from student veterans suggested public speaking was a skill they desired.

The cohort model has precedent in the Commonwealth in the Emerging Scholars program at UMass Amherst. This program provides opportunities for promising under-represented first year students to live together and to take a yearlong seminar intended to prepare these students for admittance to the Commonwealth Honors College.² Further, the higher education empirical literature is replete with evidence that first year seminars have the highest positive correlation with student persistence through graduation.³ Additionally, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE) has also identified first year programming as important to veteran success. In their most recent status report DHE indicates a significant rise in specific programming from 2010 to 2012.⁴

Theme Three: Translating Military Experience to College Credit

A third theme that emerged from the listening tour is the disparity and disconnect between experiences veterans had in the military and how these experiences translate into college credit. Many veterans conveyed that their schools are unable to assess military learning and education and therefore are unprepared to assign credit for those experiences. Furthermore, there are inconsistencies between how credited experience transfers both within campus departments and among various institutions.

Two consequences flow from the inconsistencies regarding the application of credited military experience between different departments and universities. First, veterans hear mixed messages about whether their military experiences are viable for academic credit. When student veterans are told they will receive credit before matriculation, only to learn that in fact they will not – or, when they receive credit in one department and this credit does not transfer outside that department – this creates an unnecessary obstacle that may limit overall success. Second, the resources provided by the GI Bill may be subsequently wasted when the academic credits cannot be applied to a degree.

There are opportunities for institutions to standardize both internally and state-wide. Colleges can use benchmarks for prior experiences and transfer credits from military training without doing a lot of work by consulting the rigorous criteria for prior learning credit from the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).⁵ Another method for assigning prior learning credit may be through an institution’s continuing and professional education center in which it is a more common practice to award credit for work and non-traditional experiences. A final resource is to consult some of the military-based programs that do this work for institutions, such as the SMART transcripts from the Navy⁶ or the information at GoArmyEd.com⁷. The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education has again also recognized this as a critical issue, and is taking the lead on developing a consistent approach to assigning credit in accordance with the VALOR act.⁸



Theme Four: In State Tuition for all Veterans

Many veterans choose to attend college in Massachusetts because of the Commonwealth's reputation for high quality education at all levels. These opportunities are made possible by the post 9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program. The Post 9/11 GI Bill pays for all tuition and mandatory fees up to and including the expenses of the highest cost public institution in the respective state. The Yellow Ribbon program is an important supplement to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and is designed to cover additional costs incurred by student veterans attending private schools. At present, the Yellow Ribbon Program is also being used by student veterans who do not have in state residency. It is not required they use Yellow Ribbon, but many do in order to offset additional costs. Student veterans may not have a Massachusetts residency for a few reasons. They may be from out of state and seeking the high level of education that Massachusetts public schools provide, or they may have been from Massachusetts originally and changed their home of record while in the military. The result is that out of state veterans going to public schools are faced with additional obstacles and frustrations at institutions that are not accustomed to processing Yellow Ribbon claims.

To streamline the benefits acquisition process for veterans and the institution, it may be simpler to allow the small percentage of out of state veterans attending our public colleges and universities in-state status as students. Massachusetts may consider joining the other ten states that offer in-state tuition to all veterans regardless of residency status.⁹ A move such as this may enhance a veterans' ability to focus on their education and draw more veterans to our public schools, enhancing the overall environment and educational experiences for all students in classrooms at public institutions.

Theme Five: Intentional Accommodation of Student Veterans

A fifth theme from the listening tour is the availability of support services on or off campus, coupled with difficulty in identifying veterans who need assistance and encouraging them to seek help. For some military veterans, there is a stigma around being perceived as weak, disabled or dangerous; likewise, many veterans generally want to avoid being stigmatized as a veteran with PTSD.¹⁰ This is perhaps the biggest obstacle to identifying student veterans who may need counseling services or other accommodations on campus. There is no easy solution to this problem, as the stigma reaches back to the Vietnam War era when student veterans were more unpopular than at any point in our nation's history.¹¹ Based on the concerns expressed about stigmatization or marginalization of veterans in school communities, it becomes necessary to create an environment for student veterans to self-identify in order to deliver and receive peer support.

There is a need for veterans to be able to connect informally with other veteran peers, as this provides a powerful means to support student veterans. The ideal context for veterans to connect with their peers is in a dedicated veterans' lounge or veterans' services office with a social space. In conjunction with the universal appeal of a veteran lounge, many campuses have active student veteran organizations to host social and community service events each year. While having a student veteran organization is not a panacea for student veteran issues, having a physical space available fosters more opportunities for veterans to congregate and generate peer support. Furthermore, the physical space enables the organic growth and development of student veteran organizations as needed by the student veteran population. It is important to note that many student veterans have separated from military service and are not active members of the military; therefore, it is critical to ensure that student veteran organizations are not militaristic in nature, and should not be conflated with ROTC or other military-oriented organizations on campus. For veterans transitioning to civilian life and student life, replicating a military organization may be an obstacle to an effective transition.

Another concept that facilitates peer support, both within single campuses and across the Commonwealth, is an Internet based resource, such as that which is provided by the Student Veterans of



America. While student veterans at any college could benefit from this type of resource, it would be most beneficial to student veterans on smaller campuses where resources or peer support systems are limited.

Theme Six: Campus Veteran Friendly Concepts

A final theme emerged surrounding various perspectives on campus veteran friendly rankings and ratings, most commonly seen with the GI Jobs.com¹² and Military Times Edge.com¹³ rankings and listings on the Internet. The universal sentiment of all focus groups is that campuses should aspire to be veteran friendly, and that campuses that are in fact veteran friendly experience fewer issues surrounding student veterans. What was also clear from participants' perspectives is that Internet ranking systems and labels of veteran friendliness are meaningless to both campuses who are legitimately veteran friendly and to veterans themselves.

Numerous critical questions arose regarding these Internet-based ranking sites, such as: Why does a campus have to create a veteran lounge to be veteran friendly? Why does a campus have to be a member of SOC in order to be a veteran friendly campus? Why does having a Veterans Upward Bound program have to be a criteria? Why does having ROTC on a campus matter for veteran friendliness?

The reality is that empirically tested criteria of veteran friendliness do not appear to inform Internet assessments of veteran friendliness. The starkest example may be that these lists do not consider the effects of faculty or support staff on the campus - the people that student veterans interact with most. Sentiments of participants during the listing tour clearly reflected that pursuing Internet-based rankings, grounded in static or inflexible criteria, should not be something high on the priority list for institutions. However, taking meaningful steps to support the success of student veterans according to their own campus context and student veteran population was a high priority: this is a veteran friendly action.

There is a need to identify schools that support veterans and more importantly the services that each school offers to veterans. A possible way to achieve this may be to develop a list of best practices for schools, and make schools' adoption of those best practices available to perspective student veterans. One benchmarking tool the Commonwealth could use is the Toolkit for Veteran-Friendly Institutions offered by the American Council of Education (ACE)¹⁴. Creating a *Consumer Reports* style overview of services available for veterans on campuses across the Commonwealth would allow veterans to choose a campus that best suits their needs rather than relying on poorly assigned rankings. Additionally the series of best practices could act as a state-sponsored guideline for institutions that want to provide ongoing support for student veterans.



Data on Massachusetts Student Veterans¹⁵

- Roughly 10,000 student veterans use VA provided education benefits and three quarters of them are using the Post 9/11 GI Bill
- Over 5,000 student veterans attend public institutions in the Commonwealth and almost 55% of those attend community colleges.
- 93 different private schools have identified student veterans on their campuses, six of those have over 100 student veterans and 38 schools have 10 or fewer veterans.
- The average number of student veterans at a private institution is 32 and at public institutions, the average is 175.
- An additional 400 student veterans use educational benefits at 70 non-degree granting institutions across the Commonwealth.



Notes

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5. Service Members Opportunity Colleges: <http://www.soc.aascu.org/>
6. Navy SMART transcript: https://www.navycollege.navy.mil/smart_info.aspx
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13. Military Times Best for Vets Colleges 2013: <http://projects.militarytimes.com/jobs/best-for-vets/2013/colleges/4-year/>
14. American Council on Education (ACE) Toolkit for Veteran-friendly institutions
<http://www.todaysgibill.org/>
15. Department of Veterans Affairs: April 2013 RCS Report



Profiles of Success:

How student veterans and institutions have built programming to support veteran education.



University of Massachusetts Lowell

Establishing the Office of Veterans Services

University of Massachusetts Lowell has a long history of outstanding service to Military Veterans. Established in 1897 as the Lowell Textile School, the University has served many generations of Veterans, including those who have served in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. Following each of these conflicts, enrollment at the University has been bolstered by returning Veterans using their VA benefits. When the United States Congress recently expanded GI Bill educational benefits for Veterans in 2008, the University experienced a steady increase in the number of Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard students, along with Military Veterans. Since his appointment to Chancellor five years ago, Marty Meehan significantly expanded services available to student Veterans and created an Office of Veterans Services, demonstrating his dedication to ensuring their success. Currently, the University support offered to this population is comprehensive and proactive, and the program aims to be a nationally recognized model for Veterans Services in Higher Education. This paper reviews the evolution of the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Office of Veterans Services in addition to the challenges and successes faced in the process.

Chancellor Marty Meehan demonstrated persistent devotion to Veterans' issues while he served in Congress representing Massachusetts's Fifth Congressional District and as a member of the House Committee on Armed Services. As the new UMass Lowell Chancellor in 2007, he began a thorough evaluation of the University's services to student Veterans and established a University wide Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs to provide a full assessment and recommend improvements. Comprised of representatives throughout the campus, the Standing Committee included members from the Faculty, Staff, Admissions, Graduate Admissions, Registrar's Office, Financial Services, Public Affairs, Counseling, the Student Veterans Organization, and the local Vet Center. Veterans Services, at that time, included a part time staff member in the Registrar's Office who processed student Veterans benefits with the assistance of two VA Work Study students. The Standing Committee met quarterly for over two years and, in 2010, authored a White Paper with recommendations to the Chancellor. Primary among these suggestions were the formal development of a Veterans Services program and the establishment of a student Veteran "lounge". That fall, during the University's annual Veterans Day celebration, the Chancellor agreed to both recommendations and announced formally that space would be devoted to an Office of Veterans Services with fulltime staff.

That year, the Chancellor allocated space and resources for an Office of Veterans Services, a Director of Veterans Services, a meeting place for student Veterans, and an operating budget with the goal to develop a nationally recognized Veterans Services program. Veterans' Services supervision re-aligned from the Registrar's Office to the Division of Student Affairs, a national Best Practice recommendation. Larry Siegel, Dean of Student Affairs, carefully considered requisite criteria for the Director of Veterans Services and insisted that a clinical background be part of the job posting, a move considered unusual within higher education Veterans Services programs. In August 2011, a new Director of Veterans Services, who was a former VA Social Worker, came on-board to create a research based Veterans' Program. Chancellor Marty Meehan, along with student Veterans, cut the ribbon for the UMass Lowell Office of Veterans Services and Veterans Lounge that September and, with unwavering support from University administration, the Office quickly built a reputation for outstanding services and advocacy for student Veterans.

Enhancing the Student Veteran Experience

During that year, new traditions, events, and culture changing efforts included the establishment of the UMass Lowell Military Veteran Alumni Hall of Fame with an annual induction ceremony, an annual



Military Ball, and expansion of the annual Veterans Day celebration, which is a Flag Raising Ceremony. UMass Lowell expanded student Veteran participation in the SALUTE National Honor Society (the only National Honor Society for Military Veterans), a Graduate Recognition Dinner, and the institution of all student Veterans wearing a white aiguillette on their left shoulders during the Graduation Ceremony in honor of their Military Service. A group of Alumni inducted into the Alumni Hall of Fame, the Pershing Rifle Brothers, established the General Pershing Fund for Student Veterans, promising \$250,000 for short-term loans for student Veterans. The Veterans only Orientation expanded from just the Fall semester to both Fall and Spring semesters and a student Veterans Living and Learning Community provided increased social interaction between Veterans.

Improved processes and policies increased benefits and insured a more timely delivery of those benefits for student Veterans. The Office transferred all paper files to secure paperless files that enable easily accessed information. Online certification request for benefits enabled staff to process VA benefits more easily so student Veterans did not wait months for their monthly stipends. With Congress's change for VA Benefits implemented in August 2011, UMass Lowell retroactively increased Yellow Ribbon benefits from \$323.50 per semester to the maximum allowed so that student Veterans would be able to continue and complete their education.

The Office of Veterans Services' expanded services established positive interactions with student Veterans. They began to rely on the Office to answer questions about VA benefits and listened when staff suggested they transfer to using Chapter #31, Vocational Rehabilitation when appropriate. VA Vocational Rehabilitation Applications were completed and submitted to the VA for those qualifying. Staff established close working relationships with UMass Lowell's Office of Disability Services so that Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries and other issues could receive the accommodations they deserve. Student Veterans began requesting referrals to local VA services and engaged more in treatment and assessment of service related issues. Compensation and Pension claims were submitted by the Office to the VA for processing and student Veterans are advised to seek a Service Veterans Officer for representation. National and State programs supporting Veterans were contacted and enlisted in order that student Veterans would continue their educations. The Massachusetts SAVE and SHARP programs assisted student Veterans when necessary. Student Veterans experiencing difficulty with their VA educational benefits counted on the Office of Veterans Services to advocate for them with the VA and UMass Lowell Office of Veterans Services staff requested expedited processing for student Veterans with pressing financial needs.

Over the past year and a half, the Office has established reliable reporting on student Veterans and sought to improve identification and classification of all military affiliated students on campus. In order for data to be reliable, process improvements offered new and truthful reporting. In Fall 2011, UMass Lowell served 500 student Veterans and Military members. Spring 2013 finds that number has increased to over 1200. Demographics of this population inform program development and improvement, and without it, the University can only rely on conjecture and antidotal evidence.

This past year, the Office of Veterans Services focused on transforming the Student Veterans Organization (SVO) to a vital, recognized, and valuable contributor to campus student life. Membership exponentially increased and members attended the SVA National Conference in January. In October 2012, the Chancellor declared the week before Veterans Day, Student Veterans Week and the SVO distributed both UMass Lowell Veteran and UMass Lowell Veteran Supporter backpack tags to acknowledge the Military service of our students. The SVO hosted several fundraisers for the General Pershing Fund, completed community service, instituted an Annual Golf Outing, and will shortly host their first Annual Change of Command Ceremony. SVO members hold Board positions on other student organizations and have a member elected to the Student Government Association. Plans for next year's SVO far exceed their current achievements, and the university continues to provide consistent support and encouragement.



The Office of Veterans Services staff members attend national conferences to gather ideas and share both successes and challenges. The Director presented at the Veterans Symposium at the University of Louisville in February 2013. Foundational clinical research crucial to the success of UMass Lowell's program was briefed and the development of the program reviewed. Successes include building camaraderie within both the student Veteran community and the local Lowell Veterans community (The Office invites local Veterans of all eras to UMass Lowell Veterans' events and they attend). The Office successfully developed mutually beneficial processes and supports with the following university components including the Admissions Office, Counseling Services, Student Health Services, Special Events, Registrar's Office, Financial Aid, Student Financial Office, Residence Life, STARS (Behavioral Committee), Academic Advising, the Career and Co-Op Center, Advancement, Academic Tutoring, Faculty and Staff. Office staff presented military cultural understanding presentations so that those interested can better assist student Veterans.

Challenges and Opportunities

UMass Lowell's Veterans Services program faced challenges borne of their own success. With a significantly increasing student Veteran population came resource issues, and both increasing space requirements and staffing required inventive approaches. Expansion and new construction provides future accommodations and short term sharing relieves crowding presently. In order to address the staffing issue, current staff stretch their hours with increased positions in the near future easing stress for staff. The most important challenge during the establishment and expansion of the program would be the development of trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with student Veterans, University faculty, and staff. For the student Veterans who experienced little support prior to the program's expansion, long waits for benefits and lack of a single locus of support caused frustration and alienated many of them. Demonstrating consistent advocacy and developing a reliable reputation for answering questions and solving problems overcame this issue and created a student Veteran "fan club". Veterans began recruiting others to attend UMass Lowell and shared their positive experiences nationally on social media. University Faculty and Staff also showed initial resistance until Veteran Services consistently delivered new processes that assisted other administrative units and respectfully cooperated in an effort to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. As a result, increased and expanded University service and support to student Veterans is a benefit to the University.

The Department of Defense estimates that 1.5 million service members will be leaving military service in the next five years. Recent use of the Post 9/11 GI Bill demonstrates that a large number of these Veterans seek to use their educational benefits. UMass Lowell proactively created a Veterans program designed to absorb the wave of incoming student Veterans, while maintaining outstanding service to them, maximizing graduation rates, and minimizing their pain and suffering while transitioning from military to civilian life. Student Veterans and their families enjoy substantial University resources in addition to referral to VA, Community, and National support services. Those with undiagnosed injuries receive additional services, encouragement, and support to pursue appropriate treatment and intervention. The UMass Lowell highly values the contributions to the classroom and the social fabric of the campus, while recognizing the potential contributions of these veterans to the Nation and the World. UMass Lowell is dedicated to developing student Veterans who are Work Ready, Life Ready and World Ready!



Northeastern University

The Student Veterans Organization (SVO) at Northeastern University was founded in 2009 by a mandate from the University. Northeastern saw the value created by Veterans participating in their own group that leads to success. The group met monthly and discussed ways to better the lives of veterans at the University. It tackled issues like post 9/11 GI Bill payments, The Yellow Ribbon Program, and health benefits. The members gradually became friends and by late 2011 reaffirmed their commitment to the group and began its expansion. In the last year it has grown exponentially to include more than twenty active members, a veteran's lounge, monthly social events, and a strong relationship with the University's administration. Most notably, the Student Veterans of America awarded the SVO as the 2012 'Chapter of the Year'.

Meeting to discuss policy

After the creation of the group, members met to identify policies that best ensure the success of veterans. At the time, a major hurdle was the Veterans Administration ability to process paper work correctly and in a timely manner. Northeastern also had some difficulties acclimating to the new process of certifying veterans for the new Post 9-11 G.I. Bill. This galvanized the group to focus on ensuring that all veterans get paid correctly and on time.

The best way to do this, the group decided, was to ask the University to hire a dedicated Veterans Services Specialist. This way, there could be a single point of contact that veterans could go to get information on application to the university, financial aid status, and general information about the University. The SVO also pushed for the creation of a Veterans space that could act as a 'sanctuary' for veterans to get away from the general student body and bond with individuals who have similar experiences.

Policy proposal

To address these issues the SVO leadership arranged a monthly meeting with key University officials in the newly created Veterans Success Committee. This committee met monthly to discuss different projects the SVO was undertaking as well as to propose changes to improve the standard of life at Northeastern for veterans. This committee would also discuss difficulties and how realistic the proposals from the SVO were to actually being implemented.

In April 2012, the SVO met with Northeastern University President Joseph Aoun to discuss the future of the SVO. There the group discussed above-mentioned policies that could be implemented to make Northeastern a leader in veterans services in the 'Boston Area'. President Aoun agreed, but challenged the group to be the best in the country. The SVO leadership took this to heart and did everything in its power to meet this challenge.

Gaining momentum – 2012

With new leadership elected in May 2012, the SVO instituted a number of policies that would not only grow the group but also achieve success with the previously proposed policies. To do this the group launched a website (www.neu.edu/svo), social media accounts, and built relationships with the Universities media outlets. Also, the leadership committed to holding a general monthly meeting with all its members outside of the Veterans Success Committee meetings. Events were planned monthly, such as brewery tours, sporting events, and ski trips. These policies went a long way to building a group committed to each other's individual success at Northeastern University and by December 2012 the SVO had tripled its active member base.



The SVO leadership recognized that veterans could sometimes feel 'isolated' on campus. To address this, the Educational Outreach Program (EOP) was established to bridge the general student body with the veteran community. As part of the EOP, members of the SVO volunteer to go speak in front of classes about their experiences. The SVO works with individual professors whose curriculum can match the experiences of the veterans. This enhances the curriculum of the professors, provides an outlet for veterans to speak about their experiences, and builds a connection with the Student Body. Questionnaires were also sent out before and after to the professors to gauge the effectiveness of this program.

Enacting Policies

Meanwhile, the SVO leadership continued to reform the certifying process as well as push for a dedicated Veterans Services Specialist and a Veteran's Lounge. It was not long before the SVO was able to achieve these policies. In late August 2012 the SVO acquired keys to a space in 124 Forsyth Building, at Northeastern's main campus, as a Veterans lounge. Soon thereafter, on Veterans Day 2012, Northeastern announced that they had hired the Veterans Services Specialist.

Student Veterans of America Award

In January 2013, The SVO was asked by the Student Veterans of America to present their 'Business Plan' at their National Conference held in Orlando, Florida. There, the SVO leadership was asked about their success by a panel of judges and was deemed the 'Chapter of the Year' by the Student Veterans of America.

Future

Moving forward, the SVO is working to build relationships with officials at the local, state, and national levels as well as with business to maximize benefits for their membership. The SVO partners with other local SVO's to provide guidance and insight as to how to become successful.



Greenfield Community College

Greenfield Community College (GCC) has taken significant steps to ensure that the institution meets the needs of student veterans on campus. GCC is preparing an ambitious plan to create a comprehensive veterans education program to address the needs of this rapid enrollment growth of student veterans on campus.

While preparing, promoting and producing these important changes, the following outcomes continue to be at the forefront of GCC's success:

- Student veteran peer engagement
- Top-down commitment (dedicated human, physical, fiscal resources)
- A sustainable model (inclusive components)

Educational programming for student veterans began in 2009 as a peer-initiated, peer-driven quest as one student's transition struggles motivated him to seek out support. The designated VA certifying official, a front line clerk in the Financial Aid office, was the only individual that student veterans came into contact with for services, therefore, the information was limited to processing paperwork for the Veterans Administration.

The student veteran that ignited awareness of student veterans on campus met with his advisor on a weekly basis for support. It was through those meetings that the academic advisor recognized her limitations with expertise and resources to assist the student veteran in a meaningful way. Together the student veteran and the advisor initiated a weekly meeting to create visibility and attract other student veterans. The group met on Wednesdays from 12:00-12:50 p.m. wherever there was space available on campus. The academic advisor was granted 7.5 hours a week to attend the meetings and explore veteran-related issues.

The weekly student veteran meeting was promoted through digital media on campus, postcards, posters, weekly emails to all students, and word of mouth. This marketing yielded very little interest throughout campus and the meetings were not well attended. The few student veterans that attended the meetings decided to extend their peer-to-peer outreach in the gathering spaces where student veterans could be found beginning with the smoking pavilions and in to the classrooms. They also felt that the group needed to be named and they created a Facebook page. VetNet (GCC Student Veterans Network Organization) became the identifying tag and its identity began to develop. Student veterans hit the smoking shacks on campus and their classrooms with meeting cards in hand.

During that fall 2009 semester, the college registered for a webinar: *Building a Veteran Friendly Campus* and key student affairs personnel attended. Although awareness was created, administrative interest fell short of tangible commitment to serving student veterans. Recognizing the forthcoming battles for support, the academic advisor and the few student veterans went on the road for recruitment and education to learn from institutions that had a visible student veteran contingent. GCC students and the advisor visited the UMass-Amherst Veterans Office (a feeder institution for GCC) to experience a veteran 'space.' Students returned to GCC with a clear vision that dedicated space was necessary but understood that they had to create the need and awareness for administrators to consider a proposal. Student "vet-dar", a nickname for veteran awareness radar was in high gear, best practices handouts were produced and distributed, VetNet T-shirts and buttons were made, a GCC Veterans Group banner was created, fundraisers (bake sales, raffles, more bake sales) for local veterans organizations (DAV, Toys for Tots, etc.) happened on a regular basis. This allowed VetNet to establish solid resource connections with (local) veteran agencies (Springfield VET Center, VA Medical, S.A.V.E., SVA, Holyoke Soldiers Home, VA Leeds).

These activities attracted the attention of students, college administrators, faculty, and community



members. VetNet meetings grew with student veterans, allies, and staff supporters. Student veterans formalized their group with elections (President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, Sergeant at Arms) and a mission statement for the group. The primary goal of VetNet is to generate a campus-wide culture that embraces the leadership, discipline, and high standards veterans bring to campus while translating their military experience to student success. Commitment from the VetNet leadership sparked synergy on and off campus that began to draw the greater community together. Off campus, VetNet members sported their t-shirts at community events, including Veterans and Memorial Day parades, and helped to clean local parks and cemeteries. On campus, VetNet hosted a 'meet & greet' with other student club leaders to learn more about their purpose and identify ways to collaborate. Following this gathering, VetNet officially applied for and gained approval for status as a student life club. Subsequently, the members began to strategize ways to become more connected with the campus community and developed an aggressive campaign to vote a student veteran in as a campus trustee while others became senators and active members in student activities. This political positioning brought the voice of student veterans to the forefront of student life and the administration. Student veterans began to recognize that co-curricular activity was a perfect opportunity to show the community where the gaps in services and support existed for student veterans. (i.e., information resources, new student orientation, recognition at graduation, safe space, academic advising, counseling, and professional development for staff).

While VetNet members became visible and fully engaged with student life activities, the advisor drafted a proposal for permanent space on campus. In the fall of 2011, GCC opened the VETS Center, home to VetNet. The space has evolved over the last eighteen months to include formal and informal resources for any veteran or veteran ally, a welcome desk where a student veteran greets visitors, four computer stations, printer/copier/fax machine, a study area, and an office for benefits certification files and the academic advisor/veterans coordinator. The VETS Center is located in the Main Campus building and serves as the central hub for our veterans programming on campus. The atmosphere gives a 'mini-USO feel' and attracts a cross-section of folks from civilian peers to community leaders. The opening of the VETS Center dissolved many of the barriers and myths that existed on campus regarding student veterans.

While VetNet has developed veterans personally, emotionally, and academically, there are roadblocks that continue to threaten student veteran retention, such as *limited counseling services, full time enrollment for full benefits, delayed Gi Bill payments, health record and state insurance requirements, class attendance and participation requirements*). The sustainability of the VETS Center is contingent upon the ability to keep student veterans engaged in and out of the classroom.

GCC has made a public commitment to developing a comprehensive student veteran's center which includes a coordinator and a small budget for programming. The epitome of this commitment was actualized this semester when the College conducted a daylong professional development seminar, involving the entire campus community. In coordination with supervisors, offices closed on this day to make it possible for all staff to participate. The day profiled how we can enhance the way we work with our veterans. The theme for the day was: *From Military Service to College Campus life: Reintegration Challenges for Returning Students*.

In many ways, this year's staff development day is a culminating event that exemplifies the culture shift inspired by one student veteran's need to be visible and supported.