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Vet 2 Vet

Peer Support for Transitioning Student Veterans

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Abstract

The Veterans Services Center [VSC] of Hartnell College two primary functions, academic counseling and Veterans Affairs [VA] benefit certification. Any veteran or depending attending Hartnell is entitled to support, whether or not they are using VA benefits. From a broader perspective, campus veterans centers exist to support veterans who have, most of the time, recently left military service and are beginning their military-civilian transition. The *Vet 2 Vet* peer mentorship program addresses many transitional issues by pairing first semester student veterans with those in their sophomore year and currently working under the VA federal work study. The goal is to educate new student veterans in resources that may be available to them. After evaluation, it was found that almost half of participants identified that they had benefited from on/off campus resources following their conversations with their peer mentors. Next steps include minor modifications to the program and further implementation.

Keywords: veterans, peer mentorship, transition, disabilities, college

I. Agency Description

Monterey County is home to several military installations including Naval Postgraduate School, Defense Language Institute, Presidio Of Monterey and a small Coast Guard Unit. It is also home to, old Ford Ord, closed in 1994 and the largest military installation at that time. Established in 2012, the Hartnell Community College Veterans Services Center [VSC] serves veterans and dependents, attending Hartnell College, through a multitude of services. The mission of the Veterans Services Center is “to provide personalized and caring support to Hartnell student veterans during their transition from military service to college life” (Hartnell, 2019).

The VSC serves two primary functions. Firstly, to provide academic counseling through a dedicated academic counselor for new, transfer, and continuing students, whether or not they are using educational benefits. Secondly, the Veterans Program Assistant certifies the benefits through which the veteran or dependent may be applying for through the Department of Veteran’s Affairs [VA]. These benefits can range depending on the veterans discharge status, time period served, disability rating, or the dependents entitlement to a veterans educational benefits. While these are the primary focuses of the 2 staff members' jobs, the center itself does much more for veterans and dependents: The VSC offers a lending program which includes textbooks, computers, smart pens, statistical calculators, and other class specific items available each semester at no cost to the borrower. There is also a refrigerator and cabinets that students can use to store their lunches, drinks, or take advantage of the many snack items that are free to the student as well as storage areas for any items they do not wish to carry throughout the day.

The VSC also serves as the hub and meeting area for the Student Veterans Club, a chapter under the Student Veterans of America which has activities weekly including fundraisers, activity planning, meetings, and sponsored lunches throughout the semester.

II. Communities Served by the Agency

Monterey county is home to an estimated 19,500 veterans of all eras and branches of military service. As under representation is concerned, this number is expected to drop to below 10,000 by 2045 according to the VA's population projection chart (2019). While the veteran population declines in Monterey County, and almost all of the United States, the student veteran population has seen growth in recent years with the introduction of the post 9/11 G.I. bill providing better educational benefits for veterans. Geographically, the majority of the students live in Salinas or South Monterey County as Hartnell is a closer college than Monterey Peninsula College and those who live in the Monterey Peninsula. Currently the VSC provides benefits to over 200 students, including both veterans and dependents. In comparison to their nonveteran counterparts, only 15% of student veterans are traditionally college aged. Most student veterans are between the ages of 24-40 compared to the 18-23 traditional and common college age. In addition, 47% of student veterans are married and 47.3% have children (VA, 2019). The veteran population is already considered a vulnerable and an at-risk population because of their low representation, potential individual stressors, trauma, transitional issues, and experiences that separate them from their greater societies and groups. The VSC seeks to bridge the gap that

exists between each student veterans military service and gainful employment through the pursuit and attainment of higher education.

III. Problem Description

Beyond having a military rich history, California is home to almost 1.8 million veterans of the estimated 21 million veterans living around the world (Taylor, 2017). Monterey County is home to approximately 19,500 veterans. (Census, 2010). Hartnell College has over 100 veterans attending any given semester. The number is unknown as these are only those who have identified as a veteran on their application into the college. There are more known that have chosen not to identify. The definition of a veteran varies between individuals and agencies. The Department of Veterans Affairs, following Federal Regulation Title 31: Chapter 1:3:A §3.1 defines a veteran as “any person who has served in the active military, naval or air service and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” (2019). Active military service is defined as serving in the Army, Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force, or Marines more than 180 days, or, having been injured resulting in a disability during a reservist training period. Contrastingly, many nonprofit organizations, schools, and veteran agencies consider a veteran as any person who has raised their right hand and has taken the oath of enlistment into military service. This definition encompasses anyone who has served in the military, regardless of time served, discharge status, or branch of service.

Over the years the Hartnell College Veterans Services Center [VSC] has seen a rise in graduation rates for veterans who have become involved within the veteran center or the veterans

club. For some, activity means to take part in the Veterans Club helping with outreach and fundraisers while attending bi monthly meetings. For others, being in the VSC is beneficial in other ways such as being around other like minded, or similar experienced individuals. While there is no catch all way to make veteran graduation rates 100%, the incline in graduation rates in active versus not active proves to be a determining factor. While the Department of Veterans Affairs [VA] and Department of Education [ED] track graduation rates as only those who actually receive a diploma, the VSC tracks, internally, those who also transfer to four year institutions who have met basic requirements. The numbers presented in this report are those who have completed their two year degree, or two year transfer degree requirements, different, and higher than governmental agencies. The community is directly impacted by the number of veterans who complete their two year program. Completion of 2 year degrees adds better job and resume skills, higher education among the population, and assists in the transition process at times.

There are numerous causes and potential causes and reasons for why a veteran may not complete their two year education at Hartnell as there are numerous reasons for a traditional student to not succeed. Such causes that are more prone and specific to veterans can include, but are not limited to, post traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] or other mental health conditions, cognitive or other brain injuries, transitional stress, other priorities, or lack of support through the education system.

Consequences

Provide a description of the macro-level problems that your project addresses and how the agency, their clients/patients/customers, and the local community are impacted by the identified

problems. Describe the primary causes or risk factors that contribute to the problem and the consequences of not addressing them. Please include evidence from your research to support your claims. Figure 1 presents the problem model discussed in this section.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Causes/Contributing Factors	Problem statement	Consequences
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or other mental health issues	Too many student veterans are not finishing two year degree programs at Hartnell College	Substance Abuse
Cognitive disabilities such as traumatic brain injury		Lack of gainful employment or unemployment/homelessness (economic burden).
Transitional stress and lack of support		Physical and mental health degradation
More likely to be older, married, and have kids than traditional student		Loss of purpose/Suicide

IV. Capstone Project

“Vet 2 Vet” is a newly implemented peer mentorship program in the VSC. This program consisted of developing training, recruiting and organizing, and supervision with continued evaluation. The program seeks to address the challenges new and/or transferring student veterans face when beginning their education at Hartnell College. These challenges are no strangers to any new student, but as will be discussed, the veteran student is considered nontraditional. The goal is to increase student veteran retention, graduation, and transfer rates for Hartnell College. This goal will be attained by providing ongoing progress checks, and supportive tools through peer mentoring throughout the semester. The VSC has found through a prior trial implementation that many student veterans are not familiar with the services offered on campus such as disability

support services, tutorial programs, and other workshops offered. The prior implementation also found that there was a lack of knowledge for other supportive programs off campus that could benefit veteran students. The VSC found that through the initial trial run and progress checks, the disability services department of Hartnell College saw an increase in the number of student veterans requesting services in the following weeks. The VSC concluded in the spring of 2019 that a peer mentorship program would be beneficial to new students and has no additional financial cost to the center. They also found, through surveying continuing student veterans in verbal conversations during academic counseling appointments, that there was also minimal knowledge in other supportive services. When asked about the idea of a peer mentorship program there was a very high interest and agreement with the potential positive effects and beneficial outcomes.

Because there was an immediate interest from both students and staff in the potential benefits, The VSC, along with some Hartnell staff, decided to pursue the changing of the student worker role into a peer mentor role. Because the student workers are paid by the VA under federal work study, so long as their front desk roles are completed, the name change would not be an issue. Work study students are all veterans and have access to each student veteran and dependents file, as maintaining, organizing, and filing is part of their duties. Approval of the role change was given at the beginning of the fall semester (August 2019) and actual implementation began January 30th 2020.

The primary goal of this project is to support student veterans during their first two semesters at Hartnell College. The primary goal for the peer mentors is to reach out to their specific group's members to conduct progress checks. Through these checks, as some trial

checks conducted, the peer mentor then discussed with the student supportive services they may have available or qualify for. The resulting end goal would be to increase the graduation and transfer rate of student veterans while also lowering any potential stressors the student veteran may be encountering. Through this program, any issues of transitional stress will be addressed through a variety of methods which can include referring to different resources and supportive services addressing such issues as homelessness, financial hardships, mental health, other veteran benefits, disability qualifications, and on-campus supportive services.

The more services available, and the more stressors relieved, the better the expected outcome can be. Increased graduation rates among student veterans benefits not only themselves and their families, but also the community. Equipping them with the tools they need to succeed academically also benefits their own personal lives and professional futures.

V. Project Implementation

This project was complex and required different components for its implementation. Each component is described below as an implementation step that ensured a smooth transition for the work study peer mentors, the VSC staff, and the supervising peer mentor.

Step 1: Training Manual and Reference Guide

The first component completed was the training and expectations manual which was approved by the counselor and veterans program assistant. This new training and guide outlined new and additional duties pertaining to being a peer mentor including an established timeline of when to conduct progress checks, a reference guide with services available, and different areas of concern to potentially identify. The first step was to create a reference binder in which the peer mentors

will have access to information. This binder, similar to the Monterey County SAMS Guide, lists different agencies in the area, what they offer, and contact information specific to veterans and their families. Such agencies included the Veterans Transition Center, Monterey County Department of Veterans Affairs Office, VRSI, and other local nonprofits as examples of off-campus resources. On-campus resources included the department or supportive programs and services (DSPS), the transfer center, crisis counseling, and emergency services. Following the creation of the reference guide, the peer mentorship job description was also outlined and completed. The job description included several training sessions that the new peer mentors completed under supervision to ensure the knowledge of off and on campus resources as well as identifying different stress markers, red flags, or other issues and the appropriate response/support needed. The deliverable of this phase was the completed binder that includes the job description, different resources and supportive services in Monterey County , and a brief explanation of what they offer, application process, and contact information.

Step 2: Recruitment and Organizing

Student workers are chosen every semester by the VSC staff. Generally, any continuing work study is rehired and any spaces available are open during an application process at the end of each semester for the following semester. First semester students are not eligible to do work study as they are not yet familiar with the different tasks and knowledge required to work in the center. The VSC staff notified student workers last semester who were seeking to work this semester that their job role responsibilities and duties would be increased should they decide to continue working. The peer mentors were then trained during the first two weeks of the Spring 2020 semester. Some continuing work study students going into this semester began receiving

initial training and reference guide familiarization at the end of the Fall 2019 semester so that they were able to begin work early in this semester. Following training, the peer mentors then initiated their first contact calls with their designated first semester students. Each peer mentor has a “caseload” of 3-4 students. There are currently 8 total peer mentors (work study), a supervising case manager (internship role), and the 2 VSC staff above as program supervisors. Each peer mentor is responsible for filling out a contact form and what was discussed, issues that may have been presented, and any references that were made. They were also asked to notify the VSC staff of any potential issues that required further follow up.

Step 3: Ongoing Supervision and Evaluation

This current and ongoing phase consists of an active and ongoing evaluation, supervision, and further training of the peer mentors. This phase ensures that from creation through evaluation, the peer mentors are supported by all staff and have the resources available to successfully fulfill their new role and the new duties associated with them. Any adjustments in responsibility will be made accordingly and at the VSC staff’s discretion. The supervising case manager ensures that ongoing and quality support is given, and that all tasks are completed within the expected time frames.

Implementation Challenges

As with any program, especially new ones, there exists potential challenges both known and unknown. The primary challenge that is expected and will be closely watched is the quality in which progress checks are being conducted. The first calls for all peer mentors will be monitored but schedules may not permit the monitoring of follow up calls. The challenge is ensuring that the peer mentors give their full attention and do not treat it as a “check-the-box” type task where

they only call but do not pay attention to any potential stressors and end the conversation. There are no other known challenges at this time directly with the peer mentors.

Scope of Work and Timeline

Much of the work was completed during the early months of the Spring 2020 semester. During this semester, much of the groundwork was laid to ensure a solid foundation. Table 1 describes the timeline of planned activities, dates, and the expected deliverables.

Table 1. Scope of Work and implementation timeline

Goal: To increase graduation rates among student veterans attending Hartnell College		
Primary objective: Increase student's knowledge of supportive services offered on and off campus.		
Activities	Deliverables	Timeline
Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor	Final Capstone project idea approved	November 2019
Develop training manual for peer mentors	Final training manual approved	December 2019
Compile reference list and contact information	Final list approved and added to training manual	December 2019
Begin training peer mentors	Trained peer mentors begin making contact with selected peers.	25 January 2019
Deliver 1 hour sessions to peer mentors	Agenda, session materials, ongoing training	Jan-Apr 2020 (Ongoing)
Survey peer mentors and new students	Results from implementation	March 2020
Compile and evaluate peer mentorship data	Results from implementation	March 2020
Prepare capstone presentation	Present project at Capstone Festival	May 15, 2020

Conclusions

There are far too many potential benefits with no cost or additional resources needed to not pursue a peer mentorship program. Transitioning into a new school can be difficult within itself, each student facing their own challenges. It is our responsibility to serve those who have served us. This is taking that step forward, ensuring that the higher education system takes care of veterans in any way they can. This also seeks to prevent further stress adding for student veterans. These preventative measures benefit the veterans, their families, and our communities.

VI. Project Assessment**Expected outcome**

The expected outcome of this program is that any issues identified are addressed, and that students who qualify for supportive services, begin receiving that support. Students who qualify for DSPTS services begin receiving those classroom accommodations, those struggling in class begin tutorial services, and those facing “at home” issues are connected with the proper community programs.

The project's impact was assessed through several means. Firstly, a referral for any type of supportive services by a peer mentor was used as an indicator that there was something in the contact that the peer mentor identified. Because the peer mentor made a referral, this shows that the student may not have known about these services. Further follow up contacts made by the peer mentor will show whether the student decided to utilize those supportive services.

VII. Results of Assessment

It was found, through the implementation and supervision of the program that several first semester students were benefiting from the program. While originally the goal was to conduct an end of the semester for both the peer mentors and the mentees, due to COVID-19 this was not achievable, and put a burden on the students on both sides. During the beginning of the spring 2020 semester however, the Department of Supportive Programs and Services (DSPS) saw an increase in the number of self identified veterans seeking consultations, evaluations, and surveys. While DSPS did not notify the Veterans Department directly, due to confidentiality, some first semester students identified, to their mentors, that they had either begun services, or were planning on receiving them. Furthermore, while some of the peer mentors were able to connect, or recommend various on and off campus resources to their peers, one case stands out in particular above all. A peer mentor, while talking with a student identified some on campus resources he would benefit from. As the conversation progressed, the peer mentor found out that the student was being evicted and had to be out of his apartment within 3 days. Through the identification of this, and other issues by the peer mentor, the follow up by myself, and the coaching through the academic counselor, this student veteran found permanent housing within a week, not having to spend a single night homeless. Furthermore, he was awarded emergency monies from Hartnell Emergency Services, and connected with other off campus resources for veterans organizations that he was entitled to. Though this happened before Hartnell went fully online, mid semester, the program was deemed a huge success in that this particular student did not have the plan, resources, or knowledge of all the different supportive services that he was entitled to. These are but a few examples of resources that we know were taken advantage of by

the students. Other recommended resources were the tutorial center, Monterey County Veterans Office for compensation and pension claims, the Mobile Vet Center, Vocational Rehabilitation, the various Food Bank locations, and the Veterans Transition Center.

The strength of the program was that it was run, on the ground level so to speak, by other student veterans. Relatability was a key factor in establishing some of the connections the peer mentors made with their students. Having also taken the time to conduct a trial run in the first semester of internship, followed by a semester of planning leading before implementing a, allowed for time to be taken to work out any issues that may have presented themselves as well as ensure proper planning and preparation. The biggest challenge initially was ensuring that the peer mentors were conducting quality calls and not just calling to “check the box”. While some peer mentors conducted timely and quality contacts, others took a few extra weeks and it was unknown if the contact made was of quality. Otherwise, the COVID-19 pandemic surely had a significant impact on the continued implementation of the program. The peer mentors no longer would contact their students, and instead the academic counselor would host weekly meetings on zoom for those students who had any questions regarding classes, resources, or just plain needed help.

VIII. Recommendations

After evaluation with my mentor, the overall outcome of the Vet 2 Vet peer mentorship program has been deemed a success. Numerous students began supportive services both on and off campus. The program should be continued throughout each semester. The program demonstrated that by a peer mentor reaching out, beyond the initial registration/certification, that a peer mentor could recommend additional services to support student veterans.

While there were significant and evident benefits to the program, I would recommend that the peer mentors be better prepared before initiating the first contacts with students as it was observed that there was some uncomfortability. This uncomfortability led to some peer mentors not initiating or brief calls.

In the macro-level scale, this program sought to address the transitional issues student veterans face when entering Hartnell College during their first semester. *Vet 2 Vet* addressed this by reaching out to first semester Hartnell student veterans, and asking a few of the baseline questions: “How are classes going? Do you feel like you’re at the same pace as your student peers? Do you think you might benefit from supportive services? Do you have home and food security at home?” This program sought to address each, but not limited to, these presented issues. Each peer mentor had a list of basic questions that they were to elaborate on, given there was a presenting issue. Veteran stress in the classroom is a relatively new concept for many higher education instructors. It is important that through this program veteran students can begin to understand the challenges in the classroom as well as being able to explain, if not themselves, through the vet center, veteran culture, and how it relates to the academic world.

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