Changing infrastructure, culture to help student veterans

By Tabitha Whissemore, Published May 25, 2012

For the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system, becoming military-friendly wasn’t a matter of just adding a few programs—it was about building an infrastructure.

That didn’t happen overnight. It took nearly a decade to ensure the system’s 24 two-year colleges and seven universities were prepared to help the more than 10,000 veterans and service members and their family members enrolled at a MNSCU institution.

Veterans’ centers were established on each campus. Partnerships were formed with the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, the Minnesota Army National Guard and others to help reintegrate service members and to provide resources needed to help them understand their military benefits. A career-planning tool was launched. An entrepreneur program was created specifically for veterans. A more systematic approach to granting college credit for military education was developed.

“This is more than just a program. We set up a culture,” said Steve Frantz, system director for student affairs.

Outreach begins early

The outreach happens before most veterans and service members set foot on campus. Gina Sobania, MNSCU military education director, recently spent time in Kuwait and at Camp Shelby in Mississippi to help Minnesota National Guard troops prepare for education and employment upon their return.

“They served us, and now it’s time to serve them,” Sobania said.

Many of the troops she meets are unsure of what educational and career path to take and how their benefits work. In June, 48 returning soldiers will take a two-week course to set goals and receive academic and career counseling. They’ll also learn to use MyMilitary GPS LifePlan, a tool created by MNSCU to help them design plans to reach their goals and gain employment.

Turning experience into credits

The process also involves helping soldiers recognize the skills they’ve acquired while serving, which can translate into college credit. The Veterans Education Transfer System (VETS) is an online application veterans can use to help determine how their military training can count toward a certificate or degree at MNSCU institutions. In other words, it’s about valuing experience, Frantz said.

It’s a concept many colleges are embracing. In Texas, Lee College is one of seven community colleges piloting the state’s College Credit for Heroes program, a workforce development initiative to recognize military experience, education and training gained during military service.

With a $303,000 grant from the Texas Workforce Commission, Lee College worked to develop an education plan for veterans to help them move quickly into meaningful jobs. Veterans can use a Web portal to enter information, such as their rank and the jobs they performed, and receive credits.

In addition, the college created two technician programs specifically to get veterans working. With hands-on training, the programs give veterans skills that area employers are seeking.

Lee College also supports veterans with tutoring, advising, counseling, financial aid, military benefit assistance and outreach activities. In November, the college opened the Veterans Center. Between classes, veterans come to the center get free tutoring, work on the computers, or just talk with one another.

“It’s become a hot spot,” said Ehab Mustafa, the college’s veterans specialist.

Though Lee College provides tutors, many of the veterans have taken to tutoring each other, and are offering help to civilian classmates.

It’s one of the many things Mustafa, a veteran himself, is proud of about the program.
"They're not only receiving services, but giving back without anyone asking them to," he said.

Making it local

Because of the number of service members residing in the community, Clackamas Community College in Oregon has different needs than those of many colleges in the state. Despite a steep cut in state funding, the college has invested time and resources into helping military undergraduates.

College officials started by meeting veterans and service members on their own turf, on their own time, said Shelly Parini, CCC's dean of advancement.

"We have made ourselves an integral part of their community," Parini said.

CCC used surveys and focus groups to find out what was needed. One request was to establish a place on campus just for veterans. CCC answered that request by opening the Veterans Education Training (VET) Center, which offers specialized services and provides a place for veterans to meet and support each other. The college hired someone who "speaks the military language," too.

A student veterans club also formed on campus. The group created the Pay It Forward Veteran Discretionary Grant, seeded by the Oregon City Elks and supported by other local donors. Financial help is given to veterans to fill the gaps caused by late benefits. CCC works closely with community partners—including the National Guard and Army Reserve—to make sure efforts aren’t being duplicated, and that the whole family is being served. Working in isolation can be counterproductive, according to Parini.

Because of the structure in place, CCC can scale up the program if necessary, even with funding cuts.

The college’s work has paid off. CCC was the only Oregon college to make Military Times Edge’s top 100 list of veterans-based programs.

Community colleges serving veterans is a “fundamental part of our DNA,” said CCC President Joanne Truesdell. She noted that the 1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education named community colleges as the educational entity best suited to serve veterans.

“These are the people we are missioned to serve,” Truesdell said.