Overview

This annual report covers the period of August 1, 2016 to August 1, 2017.

The University of Utah Veterans Support Center (VSC) continues to be utilized as a place for service members, veterans, and their family members enrolled at the university to find services, support, and camaraderie. The services offered by VSC staff and tenants include university certification of student enrollment for Veterans Affairs (VA) educational benefits, VA Vocational Rehabilitation case management, VA counseling and referral, and Utah Tuition Gap processing. The center offers advocacy, computer and printing resources, tutoring vouchers, yoga, and peer support, as well as a lounge, study area, refreshments, and veterans’ events.

The center staff has experienced substantial turnover in the past two years. A new Director was appointed in 2016 when the founding Director retired after five years, and the Executive Secretary was replaced in 2016 and will be replaced again in late August 2017.

The VSC houses tenants who provide specific services for veterans. Although they are not part of the VSC staff, they are housed in the same suite for the convenience of student veterans. There has been no turnover of tenants. The Registrar’s two School Certifying Officers have not changed. The same VA’s Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) Coordinator has continued to work out of an office one day each week, and the VA’s VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) Counselor continued to work out of an office in the VSC four days a week. A Career Coach from the U’s Career Services visits the VSC once a week for a few hours.

The average military-affiliated student (“student veteran,” for convenience) enrollment per semester (fall/spring) in the 2015-16 academic year (AY) was 990 students. In the 2016-17 AY, the average was 994. These numbers do not include the Schools of Law, Dentistry, or Medicine. In the fall 2016 semester, there were 1,012; however, some students do not self-identify as veterans. Approximately 75% of them were undergraduates, 16% were in master’s programs, and 9% were doctoral students. Assuming the cost of $310 per undergraduate credit and $339 per graduate credit, students using VA educational benefits provided a total of $5.2M in VA-funded tuition in the AY, excluding the summer session and the Schools of Law, Dentistry, and Medicine.

Key Activities

Outreach

The ability to reach all veterans continues to be challenging, because many students do not self-identify as veterans. Generally older, often married and/or having dependents, and focused on efficiently obtaining a degree and then finding employment, veterans are less interested in engaging in campus activities than traditional students. However, the center offers support, services, and information that
can assist them in achieving their goals. For this reason, the center continuously seeks to contact and engage as many student veterans as possible.

In support of outreach and marketing efforts, the VSC was able to obtain two grants from the Utah Department of Veterans and Military Affairs (UT DVMA) totaling $56,673.20. The projects funded included rebranding for the VSC, overhaul of the VSC website, development and distribution of marketing materials, and a video highlighting the experiences a “U Vet” had at the U. Development of the materials was performed in collaboration with University Marketing & Communications (UMC) for a launch at the beginning of the fall 2017 semester.

Outreach Activities:

- Advertisement: The VSC has utilized signs, tabling opportunities, its website, and Facebook to advertise the presence of the center and its offerings.
- Newsletter: Each month, the Director of the VSC produces a newsletter highlighting events and information relevant to student veterans, including updates from the VA, events at the VSC, and academic or professional opportunities for veterans. The newsletter is publish on the VSC website and through email using a listserv.
- Veterans Day commemoration: Annually, the university hosts a Veterans Day commemoration event that honors eleven Utah veterans for their service. The event includes a panel discussion, military formation by the three Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) units, music by the Wasatch and District Pipe Band, music and a cannon salute by the Utah National Guard, recognition of the Student Veteran of the Year, and a luncheon. In 2017, the U will host its 20th commemoration and the VSC will hold a weeklong series of veteran-centric events.
- The VSC partnered with Career Services to have a lunch for veterans and employers during the spring STEM Career Fair. At least two students received job offers as a direct result.
- In collaboration with the university president’s office, the Student Veteran of the Year was highlighted during the commencement ceremony.
- The VSC director met with each dean on campus to introduce himself and inform the deans of the services offered by the VSC.

Goals:

- Make student veterans on campus aware of the services available.
- Demonstrate the university’s commitment to the veteran population.
- Make colleges aware of the VSC and its offerings.

Outcomes expected:

- Increased utilization of the VSC.
Outcomes Achieved

Utilization of the VSC remains very high; however, the data capturing the utilization is inaccurate and incomplete due to technical issues with the wireless network, options listed in the check-in system, and the iPods used for check-in. The previous VSC administration had installed a rogue wireless network because the UConnect network was largely unavailable in the VSC. However, the independent network began interfering with other offices’ connections. Working with Student Affair Network Support, the VSC removed the unauthorized network and received a booster for the UConnect signal. Additionally, the iPods used for the check-in system connected inconsistently to the wireless network, so many students could not check-in when they visited the VSC. Finally, the system offered 16 choices for reasons they were visiting the VSC, which resulted in students choosing the first option rather than paging through the options on the iPod. The VSC intends to replace the iPods and improve options in the 2017-18 academic year.

Student Support

The intent of the VSC is to provide a dedicated place for student veterans to obtain services or assistance with obtaining services, to get up-to-date information about benefits they earned, and to receive advice and support regarding challenges they may be facing. It also provides a place for veterans to share their experiences and common bond as they reenter civilian life. In the case of family members, the VSC provides support that they might not find in a less military-oriented population that does not always understand military families.

The VSC decided that the “Boots to Utes” tagline was more appropriate for an orientation program than for VSC services, so it engaged UMC to collaborate on a new tagline as part of the outreach and marketing campaign to engage more students to support. Additionally, the “coin” (a logo, essentially) said “Student Veterans” without mention of those currently serving or their family members, so UMC was enlisted to help with designing a new coin in order to be more inclusive of all military-affiliated students. The target launch of the new branding is the fall 2017 semester. The VSC continued its existing support to students and added initiatives and capabilities.

Support Activities and Resources:

- The VSC facility: The VSC is open for students from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday – Thursday and 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Friday. The center offers free coffee, tea, and hot chocolate daily. It contains a computer lab with Common Access Card readers for those still serving to check their military email, free printing, a lounge, and a conference room that is used primarily as a study hall and tutoring room. The center is a free speech space, permitting students to speak about whatever they want in whatever way they want, with few exceptions (e.g. hate speech, if it ever occurred, would not be tolerated). This open and unfiltered communication allows student veterans to share a part of their identities without censorship or fear of misunderstanding from those who have not experienced military life.
Registrar: Two School Certifying Officers (SCOs) are located in the VSC to certify enrollment to the VA for educational benefits and provide related information regarding such things as changes in credits and classes and the impact on the students’ benefits. The SCOs are Registrar’s staff who occupy space in the VSC for the convenience of student veterans. They are not VSC staff, and they utilize a separate phone system.

VSOC: A VA VSOC Counselor is located in the VSC four days a week, providing services to those veterans with service-connected disabilities. The VSOC program provides specialized services in support of education and employment, such as vocational counseling and rehabilitation services. The VSOC Counselor also provides general benefits information to any student veterans. The VSOC Counselor is a VA employee and not VSC staff.

VITAL: A VA VITAL Coordinator is located in the VSC one day a week, but can be reached via mobile phone daily. The VITAL program provides collaboration between the VA medical services and the University, including counseling and disability support for student veterans. The VSC also partnered with the VITAL program to provide a part-time peer mentor who visits the VSC a few hours each week. The VITAL Coordinator is a VA employee and not VSC staff.

Scholarships and financial aid: The VSC currently administers one $2,000 undergraduate veteran-only endowed scholarship provided by the Stoker family. In addition, the VSC received $5,400 from the Greek community and $2,000 from the Parent Fund in order to establish an emergency aid fund for students who are veterans, currently serving, or surviving spouses or dependents of service members. The Eccles School provided $2,000 for scholarship funding, with a preference given to Business students.

Donation: The Wagner Foundation donated $25,000 to the VSC for student support. The funding provides supplies such as paper for free printing, SWAG, and coffee.

Yoga: The VSC began a yoga program for student veterans using the UT DVMA grant. The yogi is a graduate student at the U and veteran. In the spring semester, students completed pre/posttests using the World Health Organization quality of life survey and reported a 23% overall increase in their quality of life.

Goals:

- Provide a central place for students to request and obtain academic and individual support.
- Provide a place to receive accurate and up-to-date information about VA benefits.
- Provide a safe place for student veterans to be themselves among students with similar experiences.

Outcomes Expected:

- Increased mean undergraduate student veteran grade point average (GPA).
- Overall growth of the non-first semester undergraduate student veteran population.

Outcomes Achieved

The undergraduate student veterans’ mean GPA at the beginning of the fall 2017 semester was 3.21 and for fall 2016 was 3.13. This represents an increase of 1.6%. There were 596 non-first semester
undergraduate student veterans in the fall 2016 semester and 599 in fall 2017, which may indicate steady retention and persistence of student veterans.

**Plans for the Future**

**Anticipated Challenges**

**General Outreach**

The ability to identify and engage every student veteran on campus remains a challenge; however, the VSC developed a new branding and outreach campaign that will be implemented in fall 2017. Additionally, the VSC has worked with other appropriate offices such as deans’ offices and New Student and Family Programs (NSFP), to reach out to those who may not know that they qualify as veterans under the state of Utah and university definitions. The NSFP has permitted the VSC to have up to two minutes of speaking time during orientation for transfer students, but it is unlikely that the VSC will be provided the time in the future.

**Student Veteran Engagement**

The VSC recognizes that not every student veteran needs assistance and some students are reluctant to seek assistance. However, the center desires to inform every student veteran of the center’s services and to encourage them to take advantage of them. To that end, the VSC will continue to develop and improve a peer mentoring program with the goal of contacting every new student veteran to offer a friendly and informal peer to contact for assistance or advice. The VSC will also work with the National Center for Veteran Studies and the VITAL Counselor to provide training to the peer mentors so that they can identify signs of any student in crisis who needs referral and/or hand-off to an appropriate service provider.

**Data Collection**

The VSC will seek to improve the precision of data collected on utilization of the center by student veterans. Current reasons for visits are ambiguous, omit common reasons such as tutoring, and do not provide students with intuitive choices for the reason for each visit. Additionally, the current system of data collection uses old iPod technology versus a U-card. Beginning in the fall 2017 semester, the VSC will provide clearer and fewer reasons for office visits from which the students can choose and will provide improved devices as well.

**Manpower**

The VSC comprises 2 full-time equivalent (FTE) personnel. The center is open for students from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday – Thursday and 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Friday, for a total of 54 hours. Students take full advantage of the early and late hours, and their overall utilization has historically exceeded that of some other co-identity student support offices. The Executive Secretary is a nonexempt employee limited to
40 work hours weekly, and the Director is an exempt employee. Even with standard Student Affairs operating hours (8-5), simple staff coverage for the VSC can be challenging if the director or secretary must be away for meetings or leave. In addition to simply providing office coverage during the VSC’s hours of operations and performing administrative and operational tasks, the VSC staff provides individual support and services for its patrons, with the exempt staff providing the lion’s share of specialized support such as advocacy, mentoring, and collaboration with external offices in support of students. These activities are the priority of the VSC. In order to accomplish its mission, provide responsive student support, obtain additional resources needed by students, and implement new initiatives in support of increased student success, the exempt staff has willingly invested significantly extra time before and/or after VSC office hours; however, other tasks that are important but less urgent are sometimes neglected or postponed due to competing priorities and a lack of manpower resources to perform them in a timely manner. The undesirable alternative is to reduce services and support of student veterans and to forego provision of improved services and resources for student veterans.

**Initiatives Planned or Underway**

**Faculty and Staff Awareness and Support**

Faculty and staff awareness and support of student veterans and their needs is mixed. The VSC obtained grant funding from the UT DVMA to develop and implement a faculty and staff training program to better prepare them for the education and support of student veterans. Progress on the program has been limited due to competing priorities requiring manpower. The intent is to launch the training program in mid-spring 2018.

**Veteran Studies Minor**

The VSC has been in discussions with faculty members and the Dean of the School of Cultural and Social Transformation in an effort to establish a Veterans Studies minor at the university. Such a program would be one of only a few in the nation. A Writing professor, in collaboration with other faculty members, designed the program which would comprise courses already offered at the university.

**Student Veteran Orientation**

As non-traditional students who are older and have more life experience than traditional students who come to the U directly from high school, student veterans should attend an orientation that is tailored to their needs as veterans and non-traditional students. One option is to collaborate with NSFP to develop and organize non-traditional orientation programs in such a way that student veterans attend a block of appropriate non-traditional orientation presentations, such as the Registrar’s presentation on graduation requirements, then enter a separate block of presentations tailored to veterans, such as VA educational benefits processing at the U, adjusting to life as a civilian college student, and introducing resources available to veterans on and off campus. The veterans’ orientation could also be supplemented by an optional program similar to the Honors program that includes a nature-based orientation the week prior to the start of the regular semester, followed by weekly nature-based activities and related writing
projects. This would support the development of a cohort of student veterans and bolster student veteran engagement with the VSC and other veterans.

**Female Veteran Support**

Female veterans have come from a male-dominated military and have faced challenges that are unique to women and that are often better understood by women. Female veterans make up 26% of the overall student veteran population, so again, they have found themselves in a male-dominated environment again when interacting with other veterans. The VSC will seek to better serve the female student veteran population. The VSC has discussed the annual year-long Purdue University’s Focus Forward Fellowship program for female veterans with its director. The program brings in female student veterans from across the nation for mentoring, training, and support, but at a significant cost. The VSC will explore opportunities and initiatives locally to support female student veterans as well.

**Anticipated Opportunity**

**Enrollment**

The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics stated that from 2014 to 2019, the overall Post-9/11 veteran population in Utah would increase more than 40%. This represents a substantial opportunity for the university to increase the enrollment of Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries at the campus. Utah is continuing its efforts to draw more veterans through an increasing number of benefits and a strategic marketing plan. The 40% increase of veterans in Utah that was projected by the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics could likely be low.

The university could leverage the increased number of veterans and the state’s efforts by systematically recruit veterans to its campus. Advertising in military-oriented publications, making presentations at education centers and transition assistance programs at major bases and stations, and sustained communications with those entities will result in increased enrollment of students who possess federal funding for tuition and who have honorably served our nation. Such an effort would require additional personnel.

**Staff Excellence**

Nothing to report.