

University of Arizona – Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) Initiatives

Executive Summary

The Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) is a series of initiatives at the University of Arizona (UA) that support student veterans on campus, from their initial point of contact with the University through their successful graduations. Student veterans are underrepresented in higher education, specifically at four-year institutions. We are beginning to see a rise in the enrollment of this student group and are only expecting to see these numbers increase over the next few years. Hence, it is a critical time for colleges and universities to develop services to support veterans as they enter or re-enter higher education.

In spring 2008, UA Student Affairs, recognizing the need to learn more about student veterans, launched a survey of vets on campus. The data collected helped crystallize basic trends around campus climate, common needs and barriers. One important theme was the vets' interest in a resource center on campus dedicated to the veteran community, bringing into question their collective identity on campus. With the exception of administrative support around the GI Bill, there was no recognition of vets as a community or cultural group, making it difficult for them to connect with one another or integrate into campus life. Later in the semester, UA was awarded a congressionally-directed grant to look at the reintegration and education of veterans with an emphasis on disabled veterans. The grant currently funds a research project as well as outreach and recruitment to student veterans.

In fall 2008, the UA implemented a comprehensive series of campus-wide initiatives to support veterans on campus in response to the data collected from student veterans. A key element of these initiatives is that all efforts will be informed by student veterans themselves. In addition to the GI Bill support that the University has already provided, the campus has opened a VETS Office, staffed entirely by student veterans, that serves as a resource center and campus hub for veterans. Housed within the VETS Office, is the Student Veterans Association, an official campus club for veterans. The aforementioned grant is funding a research project that empowers veterans to share their experiences related to higher education and be involved in all aspects of the research process.

The VETS program is impressive in the breadth and scope of its services. Already in a few short months, the campus and most importantly student veterans have benefitted from these initiatives. What is unique about VETS is the way the efforts span campus and the surrounding community. This is an example of a university truly taking a leadership role in meeting the needs of its community; the UA has truly done so regarding the attention and priority of student veterans.

Program Description

UA VETS background:

In spring 2008, the UA noted the increase in its student veterans and the need to learn more about this underrepresented and unique population. Student Affairs administration launched

a survey of UA student veterans to gauge the general climate on campus. The data collected helped crystallize basic trends—common needs and barriers to success. The UA then procured federal funding to research student veterans, with an emphasis on disabled veterans, as the statistics indicate a high frequency and range of injuries for Middle East vets. The data revealed that UA student veterans were interested in a resource center on campus dedicated to the veteran community. Their responses indicated that they did not feel a sense of collective identity on campus, stating that it was difficult to identify other vets on campus and that they had no space to congregate or call their own. With the exception of administrative support around the GI Bill, there was no recognition of vets as a community or cultural group, making it difficult for them to connect with one another or integrate into campus life.

VETS Office:

In response to this initial data, UA Student Affairs opened a VETS Office, staffed by student veterans, to serve as a resource office and space for prospective and enrolled student veterans. The VETS Office also serves to educate the campus community about veterans. The office has excellent relationships with campus partners in Financial Aid, Admissions, Office of the Registrar, UA Facilitators, Dean of Students, Health Promotions and the Disability Resource Center. In addition to campus units, the Office works closely with the V.A., local organizations such as Vets4Vets, the Department of Economic Security, and local Veterans centers, again, demonstrating the level of collaboration and communication that is necessary to truly support a student population such as veterans. The VETS Office also houses the Student Veterans Association, an officially recognized campus club dedicated to raising awareness around student veterans through programming and outreach. Since August, the office has seen almost 100 visitors, which is approximately twenty percent of student veterans on campus.

Veterans Reintegration and Education Project:

The aforementioned grant currently funds a research project as well as outreach and recruitment to student veterans. The objective of this project is to have veterans inform the types of programs put in place for them on campus. A main component of this project is a research study that employs participatory action research to empower student veterans to identify the barriers, issues or opportunities they encounter related to higher education. The ultimate goal of the research is to have data inform the programs and services put in place to aid in the success of student veterans on campus. Staff are engaging veterans, student veterans, and other constituent groups in focus groups to solicit their perspectives. The study will employ Participatory Action Research to gather their direct input. The goal of the study is to create implications for higher education that are informed by student veterans to improve their transition to and overall experience in college.

In addition to the research, the grant funds recruitment and outreach efforts. The UA will host an orientation to adaptive athletics in May 2009 to introduce prospective disabled student veterans to collegiate wheelchair sports, as well as the UA campus. The experience will focus on success strategies around learning, leadership and, personal and academic

balance. Participants will attend courses in a small cohort and take advantage of the UA's premiere adaptive athletics facilities by learning about adaptive fitness and participating in adaptive sports. To support higher education professionals who are working with veterans, the UA will also host a Professionals' Institute in fall 2009. The purpose of this institute is for professionals to come together, discuss the student veterans population, share best practices and tap into a network of professional resources.

Transition Classes:

To meet the academic needs of veterans, the UA University Teaching Center has created S.E.R.V. (Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran) courses. This three course curriculum is designed specifically for student veterans and focuses on hardiness, resiliency, and leadership. Student veterans enroll in these General Elective courses in a cohort and work together on strategies for success during their transition to college. This type of camaraderie can help ease some of the anxiety that vets experience with the large campus setting. While these classes are not required for veterans, they provide an option for those students who wish to share their transition experience with other veterans.

Conclusion:

VETS is only in its second semester at UA, but thus far has made its presence known on and around campus. The impact of these initiatives has been extremely positive for student veterans who have utilized services, but also simply for identifying and honoring a population of students that has been misunderstood or ignored for too long. The series of programs demonstrates a creative and unique collaboration across campus and community to meet the needs of student veterans. This project was born out of research and continues to be committed to conducting scholarly research to inform all future efforts.

Program Assessment Data

In fall of 2007, the UA, recognizing the need to better support and understand student veterans, did benchmarking research and surveyed its veterans. This initial data was used to justify developing the VETS program. Because we launched VETS in late August, more current assessment data is not yet available, however we have been tracking the numbers of those individuals utilizing the VETS office and those numbers are included in this report.

After gathering data from institutions across the country regarding the availability of resources for student veterans, the Vice President for Student Affairs pulled together a group of individuals already affiliated with student veterans through their work at The University of Arizona, to create a survey. The survey, which was released in November 2007, assessed 1) which resources student veterans felt needed to be tailored specifically for them, 2) which campus resources student veterans were already utilizing, 3) what hours student veterans were regularly on campus, 4) the level of involvement in campus life of the student veteran population, and 5) whether or not student veterans felt that there were barriers to their full participation in campus life.

The survey had a very high response rate. Of the approximately 450¹ veterans on The University of Arizona campus, 218 responded to the survey. This high response rate should indicate the level of need and interest vets had in providing feedback about the campus.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (78.44%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they support the creation of a Veterans' Resource Office on the University of Arizona Campus. The strength of this support was the driving force behind the creation of the current VETS office and the allocation of a specific space for the purpose of providing student veterans with a place to congregate and share their experiences.

**Please indicate your level of agreement with this statement:
I support the creation of a Veterans Resource Office on The University of Arizona campus.**

Count	Percent	
23	10.55%	Strongly disagree
4	1.83%	Disagree
20	9.17%	Neither disagree nor agree
47	21.56%	Agree
124	56.88%	Strongly agree
218		Respondents

When asked to indicate which of 15 different resources they would most like to see specifically tailored to their needs, the veterans indicated that their top five choices would be Career Services, Financial Aid, Academic Advising, Health Resources, and a Veterans On Campus Association. All of these needs have been addressed in the current configuration of the VETS office, with which representatives from each of these areas have a designated individual to serve as a programming liaison.

Count	Respondent %	Response %	
72	33.03%	11.94%	Academic Advising
62	28.44%	10.28%	Health Resources
86	39.45%	14.26%	Career Services
85	38.99%	14.10%	Financial Aid Advice
61	27.98%	10.12%	Veterans On Campus Association

When asked which of 15 different services or resources they were currently utilizing most frequently, veterans indicated that they were heavily utilizing Veterans Affairs at the Registrar's

¹ The number 450 is reflective of those students utilizing the GI Bill. The total number of veterans on campus is based on self-identification, and therefore, impossible to capture at this time.

Office, Academic Advising and Financial Aid. These units were targeted as partners for the VETS Office. The VETS Office has regular communication and contact with specific staff in these offices.

Count	Respondent %	Response %	
71	35.86%	15.14%	Academic Advising
37	18.69%	7.89%	Campus Health
36	18.18%	7.68%	Career Center
62	31.31%	13.22%	Financial Aid
40	20.20%	8.53%	Recreation Center
75	37.88%	15.99%	Veterans Affairs at the Registrar's Office
40	20.20%	8.53%	Other (please specify)*
198	Respondents		
469	Responses		

When asked how they would rate their level of involvement in The University of Arizona campus, significantly more respondents (35.86%) indicated that they felt that they were on the low side of involvement than on the high side (24.75%). This result indicated the lack of connection that student veterans were feeling to their campus. It is hoped that future data will reveal that after the implementation of the VETS center, that this population will feel a much stronger connection to the campus community.

Count	Percent	
30	15.15%	Very low
41	20.71%	Low
78	39.39%	Neither high nor low
35	17.68%	High
14	7.07%	Very high
198	Respondents	

A final open-ended question in the survey provided an opportunity for veterans to indicate what barriers, if any, exist on campus that prevented them from full participation in the community. A typical response to that prompt indicated that student veterans felt disconnected and sometimes unwanted in the campus community. Some representative comments are included here:

The atmosphere and programs are really tailored for younger people who are fresh out of high school. I felt I really needed support from people who understood where I was coming from mentally and emotionally -it would have made the transition much easier - but I couldn't find anything like that, I felt a huge rift between my army life and campus life. That was psychologically very difficult to over come and I felt all alone in doing it.

I find that since I'm older and have gone through drastically different experiences than the majority of the student body, I have a very tough time connecting with other people on campus.

Have not found any group I really fit into.

Since the opening of the VETS Office on August 25, 2008—the first day of classes for the academic year, approximately 100 veterans have visited the office. About half of these individuals continue to come back to the office for services or simply to spend time in the space. These numbers are encouraging, as they increase weekly. We will continue to track our numbers and assess the experiences of those who utilize the office. Based on the initial data collected, we believe that the VETS office and our other initiatives are meeting the needs of our student veterans. The research component of our program will be driven by veterans themselves and will inform our future efforts. This program was born out of research and will continue to be driven by first-hand data.