

## History of the Veterans Knowledge Community

### Origins

2006-2009 saw a vast increase in veterans returning from service to campuses across the nation. Many veterans programs were reestablished or reinvigorated. Some were created from scratch. The Post 9-11 GI Bill was enacted in 2008 and implemented in 2009.

Michelle Cyrus attended the 2008 NASPA Conference in Seattle, WA, and realized that there were no offerings on Veterans topics. Seeing this gap, she was determined to find a way to start a knowledge community. She worked with Joey DeSantos of NASPA to draft a proposal to create the knowledge community. Once Dr. Gwen Dungy, then Executive Director of NASPA, became aware of the proposal she championed it. Gwen also spoke at University of Arizona at the first Veterans Conference in 2009. In addition to Michelle's concerns for representation, there were also concerns over connecting Veterans more readily with Mental Health and persistence resources. Administrators also recognized a shift within all adult learners. There was also a need to connect practitioners and provide a venue for conversation and to discuss research.

ACE, NASPA and others started participating in on-line jam sessions (including directors of programs and the USO). All parties were excited to start VKC.

NASPA hosted a Student Success series on Veterans prior to the establishment of VKC.

University of Louisville provided a venue and opportunity for collaboration for several years under the leadership of Tom Jackson and Frank Mianzo (then the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Chief of Staff for the Office of the President for Student Affairs). In 2014, NASPA was honored to assume leadership of this annual conference which is now the flagship professional development event for the Veterans Knowledge Community. In 2016 the conference was renamed the Symposium on Military-Connected Students to recognize and more accurately reflect all of the students that it serves to support.

### **Michelle Cyrus and Katrina Whitney Co-chairs Mar 2010-Mar 2012**

Michelle's primary goal for creating the community was representation. There were some individuals working on Veterans issues from the Academic side. It appeared that all other constituent groups had representation except Veterans. Once the Knowledge community was created, Katrina joined her as co-chair.

Initially starting to push information out to groups via email and the web, Michelle worked with the Washington State Veterans Affairs to find information and best practices and provided that information to the members of the knowledge community. Initial goals were to recognize student veterans on campus, understand that veterans' experiences were different than that of normal college students, and provide safe spaces and environments on campus. Michelle and Katrina wanted to find out what issues were affecting veterans, and provide support and advocacy to the students on their campus.

Michelle initiated the process that the knowledge community still follows, having monthly meetings with the KC officers and representatives and publishing monthly newsletters. Some additional controls by NASPA have more recently been established for web publishing.

Michelle worked with a graphic artist at Central Washington University (CWU) to create the KC logo. This was one of the first unique monikers that did not simply tag onto the NASPA logo.

They started with a great social media team, developing the list serve and web page. During the first year the VKC sponsored two webinars. Also during the first year there were many presentations of papers on research that had been conducted. During the first year, membership in the community grew to approximately 320.

Also during this period Michelle worked with Dr. Dungy and refined the mission statement for the group. The current mission is still mostly original language.

During this time, the American Association of University Women interviewed Michelle and Katrina to get insights on the work being done with and for Veterans. Michelle and Katrina also conducted interviews with women veterans from all generations, including WAVES, members of the first class with women at the US Military Academy, focusing on the experience of veterans, academic and personal development and identity development.

### **John Mikelson**

VKC Chair Mar 2012-Feb 2014 (retired from higher education in May 2013)

David Vacchi was Vice Chair and Region I Research and Publications Rep.

Groups were starting in various professional associations. John got started through Academic Advising and NACADA but eventually gravitated to NASPA once the VKC was established. His last position was the Veterans Student Center Coordinator at University of Iowa.

John took a less formal approach to the group, but was very interested in making sure that the Veteran's program coordinators across the country could access resources, share information, and communicate with one another when necessary. He developed the social media plan, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

During his tenure as Chair of the Veterans KC, John authored a chapter on Articulation Agreements (Enrollment, Transfers, and Degree Completion for Veterans) in *Called to Serve: A Handbook on Student Veterans and Higher Education* and a chapter on Wounded Warriors in *Beyond The Americans With Disabilities Act: Inclusive Policy And Practice For Higher Education*.

### **David Vacchi**

(2013-2016) David took the helm upon John's Retirement, nearly a year early, while still working on his doctoral studies. David continued Michelle, Katrina and John's efforts to provide a forum for professionals working with Veterans and Military-Connected students on our campuses nationwide. He encouraged research and knowledge sharing among the constituency and continued to build membership.

Under David's guidance and direction, NASPA, through the VKC took over leadership for the annual Veterans symposium in 2015. The name was changed to Symposium on Military Connected-Students in 2016 to more closely align with the student population and trends in research and policy. The 2016

conference continued to expand and improve the opportunities for professionals serving the military-connected population. 2016 was the largest conference yet with over 50 programs.

Caring deeply about research, David and the VKC remained abreast of current scholarship. In collaboration with the leadership team, he provided critical needed feedback to NASPA and researchers and strived for the highest quality information for the VKC membership.

David met regularly with his leadership team. Generally meetings were teleconferences monthly.

Continuing VKC leadership research and publishing, David authored a chapter on student veteran success in NASPA's *Increasing Adult Learner Persistence and Completion Rates: A Guide for Student Affairs Leaders and Practitioners*, coauthored a chapter on student veterans in higher education for *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* and authored a chapter on student veterans' college experiences in the forthcoming *Researching Student Veterans on Campus, New Directions for Institutional Research*.