

# Salt Lake Community College Veterans Services

## Site Visit Review – Final Report

January, 2015

Lorri Castro-Zenoni, Director, Health and Wellness Services, Salt Lake Community College

Tony Flores, Program Coordinator, Utah State University

Chryssa Jones, Veterans Services Coordinator, University of California, Riverside

*Note: Veterans Services has provided clarifying information in an addendum regarding some items in the report.*

## **Introduction**

The Veterans Services department of Salt Lake Community College serves approximately 1300 military-affiliated students across all of SLCC's campuses, with a dedicated Veterans Resource Center on the Redwood-Taylorsville campus and office space on two other campuses.

In June 2014, an external review team was invited to visit both the Redwood-Taylorsville and the South City campuses to evaluate the programs and services offered by SLCC's Veterans Services department. This report includes the findings, concerns, and recommendations from that program review.

## **Methodology and limitations**

The sources used in the program review include a self-study report and a two-day site visit by external reviewers, which included observations and interviews with student veterans, student workers, Veterans Services staff, other campus departments, the Utah State Approving Agency, and the Utah State Department of Veterans Affairs. The observations based on the site visit are limited to information from those who were interviewed and may not reflect all points of view or perspectives.

For the purposes of this report, the review team identified concerns and recommendations related to four specific areas: personnel, institutional resources, processes, and programs. Within each area and sub-area, we have identified areas of strength, areas of concern, and some possible recommendations based on industry best practices and the suggestions of the interview groups. It is not expected that the institution, campuses, or department implement all of the recommendations, but rather use the recommendations to guide institutional conversations on resource allocation and program support. Where possible, we have included some possible measures and outcomes that may assist in program development.

## **Concerns and Recommendations**

### **Personnel**

Many of the conversations, and concerns raised, during the site visit were related to staffing, collaboration, and professional development. SLCC currently has three full-time staff and two part-time staff, plus student workers, to maintain offices on two campuses, plus office time one day a week on a third campus, and serve all of SLCC's veterans and VA beneficiaries on all campuses. Given the current enrollment levels of around 1300 veterans (850 VA beneficiaries) on all campuses, this is certainly a formidable task.

When asked what kinds of things were working really well, interview groups responded that the Veterans Services staff at SLCC is very supportive, responsive, and attentive to individual student needs. Most of the staff know their jobs well, and have established a good working relationship, open communication, and collaboration within their department and with other departments on campus.

Most of the student workers indicated that they understand processes, have clear communication channels, and respect the roles and processes of the department. The quality of services provided was highly praised, with one group responding that SLCC “provides a model for the community and other schools.” The face-to-face orientation works well, and creates a welcoming environment for students new to the SLCC community. Veterans seem to get the services they need, and Veterans Services staff seem capable of handling most issues. Student workers also indicated that they enjoy helping their peers, and appreciate the flexible work hours and not having to leave personal items in the car. Overall, Veterans Services employees seem to enjoy their work, but are frustrated with the high workload and VA-related inefficiencies.

According to the self-study, a student assessment conducted in spring 2013 revealed that while 50% of respondents stated that their overall satisfaction with SLCC Veterans Services was “good,” the other 50% indicated that there is room for improvement. A fall 2014 article published in NASPA’s Leadership Exchange journal states that student perceptions of “veteran friendliness” involve impressions about the quality of services obtained at veteran services offices on campus, and particularly the timeliness and accuracy of veteran benefit processing, referrals to needed services, assistance with admissions and enrollment paperwork, and helpful academic advising (page 18). Therefore, concerns in these specific areas may result in lower perceived “veteran friendliness,” while improvements in these areas will improve student satisfaction.

SLCC’s Program Review standards expect a “sufficient number of well-qualified employees (professional, support, student) to effectively provide the core programs/services offered by the department. Employees have clear and current job responsibilities. Employees are oriented to their roles, receive appropriate leadership and supervision, are provided with ongoing professional development opportunities, and are regularly evaluated.” While the existing Veterans Services staff should be commended for their hard work and exemplary service on limited resources, a review of the concerns raised by the interviewed groups indicates that SLCC’s Veterans Services office is not meeting the defined leadership and staffing standards and expectations, as described below.

### *Staffing Levels*

Every interview group expressed significant concerns about current staffing levels. Respondents stated that the department is understaffed, there is no back-up support when employees are especially busy, sick, or away from the office, there is no coverage for staff meetings, and some employees have to work alone. There is a concern that the office is too dependent on student workers to perform critical tasks, and when students don’t show up for work, give out inaccurate information, or there is a period of student worker turnover, it negatively impacts the rest of the department. Respondents also stated that it takes too long for a student to get certified, and there is not enough time to sit down with students because the workload/case load is too high. Because there are classes year-round and the office is busy all year long, there is no “down time” for staff to catch up, get organized, or participate in professional development opportunities.

Additional staffing concerns were specifically related to certifying officials, stating that the work load is too high, there are too many distractions, and too much time spent on non-certifying tasks, programs, and events. Interview groups state that students want more attention and help with their paperwork, but certifying officials are too busy to give adequate individualized attention.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about staffing levels:

- Hire additional staff as outlined allow, and upgrade existing part-time staff to full-time status to improve the overall staff: student ratio, to allow more time for student interaction and individualized assistance. The ideal staff: student ratio for SLCC should be determined by evaluating the desired outcomes and student satisfaction assessments.
- Hire an administrative assistant to field inquiries, manage interruptions, and support the office, so that certifying officials don't have to spend as much of their time on these tasks.
- Hire a program/outreach coordinator to handle programming, outreach, and events, so that certifying officials don't have to spend as much of their time on these tasks. Industry best practices recommend that the job functions of programming and VA certification be handled by different people (dedicated full-time staff) when resources allow.
- Hire additional staff, or cross-train existing staff, to provide adequate student support at satellite campuses. Students should be able to access resources and complete VA certification processes at any campus.
- Coordinate work schedules for existing staff to provide back-up coverage for absences and busy periods
- Create a dedicated time and distraction-free work environment for certifying officials; e.g., designate one person with "floor duty" to handle all the walk-ins and other requests, and block out everyone else's time for interruption-free work. Screen certifying officials from student view, and reduce other distractions in the work space.
- Engage competitive hiring of student workers, and establish clear expectations and consequences of poor performance

### *Staff Training & Professional Development*

Another area of concern that was frequently cited among interview groups is that of training and professional development. Currently, full-time employees are encouraged to participate in professional development conferences, but part-time employees do not have the same opportunities. Training is often conducted on-the-job, and has been sporadic or inconsistent during periods of high turnover or especially busy times, and some employees are not satisfied with the quality or quantity of training that they have received. While some employees are confident in their job knowledge and training received, some of the interview groups expressed concerns that they or their co-workers are unsure about job responsibilities and expectations, make mistakes processing VA certifications, need help learning and understanding VA regulations, need clear and consistent guidance from the VA and SAA on flight program requirements, need specific training on mental health issues, need better cross-training to support their co-workers and provide adequate staffing coverage, and need a better understanding of

VA programs, such as Veterans Upward Bound, VITAL, and VetSuccess on Campus. Student workers do not always give out complete or accurate information, and students are often confused or don't understand VA requirements because of conflicting information. One of the groups interviewed specifically requested additional training on how to work with difficult students, which they state comprise 50% of their case load. Another group complained that "if you make a mistake, you'll never hear the end of it." Some employees expressed that the lack of professional development opportunities make them feel less valued, respected, or supported than other employees within the institution.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about training and professional development:

- Define success outcomes and measures for professional development and training
- Review knowledge base with current staff to ensure all employees have received the same training and are comfortable with their job responsibilities; identify training gaps (if any)
- Continue to improve training for all staff, and especially for student workers and part-time employees
- Foster cross-training within and between related departments for back-up and office coverage
- Allow & encourage part-time staff to attend conferences, training meetings, and other professional-development opportunities
- Seek clear & consistent guidance from VA & SAA on flight training programs
- Provide training on "VA Math" and ensure all certifying officials understand responsibility for certification accuracy
- Provide positive feedback and helpful/supportive on-the-job training and corrections as needed
- Collaborate with other Utah colleges and universities, ELR, and SAA to create state-level training and professional development opportunities
- Encourage all staff and other/related departments to participate in SAA/ELR training, conference calls, and webinars
- Create a reference book or checklists for training and certification to ensure consistency and accuracy
- Use student workers for less-critical peer mentoring and program support instead of intake, orientation, and certification-related tasks

### *Academic Advising*

Another area of concern that was frequently cited involved the department's interaction with Academic and Career Advising. The VA has very specific requirements on course enrollment, academic progress, and program completion. If students enroll in classes which are not eligible for VA certification, they have to find different classes to take, often after classes are already filled. This leads to a significant delay in VA certification and a high level of student confusion and frustration. The site review found that academic advisors are perceived to be unsure about VA requirements, forms, and procedures. Students sometimes get conflicting information from different advisors, or the wrong advice about courses to take. In addition, some of the interview groups expressed a concern about the lack of employment or career counseling, a lack of focus on persistence/completion, and a lack of transfer

continuity through the community college program into an advanced degree. Finally, students also expressed a concern that they frequently meet with different people (advisors and certifying officials) each time they visit those offices, and they feel like they have to start over each time they sit down with a new person.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about appropriate academic advising:

- Hire a dedicated advisor to assist with transition, persistence and completion goals, advising and degree plans for student veterans, and career or transfer goals
- Place the academic advisor/counselor in the Veterans Resource Center (main campus) at least twice per week (full-time would be preferable) to assist with transition and improve student access, but only for first-year students. Second-year students should seek academic advising within their departments to prepare them for transition to university-level services.
- Consider assigning caseloads so that students meet with the same advisors, counselors, and certifying officials each time they visit
- Improve transitional advising for new students coming in and graduating students going out
- Collaborate with USU, UoU, and other state institutions to improve transfer process & student experience
- Collaborate with career services and community resources to improve career counseling
- Conduct annual training for advising staff to stay current on VA policies and procedures; include training on VA and veteran-specific terminology
- Review current procedures and training for transcript evaluators on VA prior-credit policies, to ensure consistency
- Invite Veterans Services staff to attend (periodic) advising staff meetings, to answer questions and facilitate inter-department communication
- Prepare a reference booklet for academic advisors, with sample forms and instructions, so they know what to do when they get a new form
- Standardize advising forms between departments
- Foster a good rapport with advising centers and maintain open lines of communication

#### *Other Concerns*

The other personnel-related concerns that the review team identified include a dependence on temporary funds for staffing, a dependence on VA-staffed programs, and a lack of shared ownership or collaboration. Most, if not all, of the College's veteran programs are housed under one department, and other campus departments do not necessarily identify or "take ownership" of veteran-specific support, services, or programs. One respondent noted that although SLCC's veteran programs are highly acclaimed and nationally recognized, there is little awareness, recognition, or support of the same programs within the institution. The review team recommends the following actions to address these concerns:

- Improve collaboration and information-sharing between departments

- Create a cross-department “Veteran Support Team” to improve visibility and campus ownership of veteran programs, improve communication and collaboration, and improve student engagement with other departments
- Where applicable, encourage other campus departments to develop veteran-specific programs within the scope of their services, and share responsibility for veteran support with the entire institution rather than just one department
- Conduct regular, joint-staff meetings with other departments
- Offer regular/recurring “Ally” training for faculty and staff in unrelated departments

### *Outcomes*

Some of the positive outcomes that should be expected through the implementation of these staffing and training recommendations include:

- Full coverage/staffing at all times and greater staffing/scheduling flexibility
- Improved job satisfaction, lower turnover rate, and a less-stressful work environment
- Improved certification accuracy and processing time
- Reduced payment errors, overpayments, collections, and garnishments
- More time to spend with individual students
- Improved academic advising experience
- Improved student engagement and satisfaction
- Improved student persistence and completion rates and transfer/career placements
- Improved academic outcomes from appropriate advising and improved transfer credit policy
- Improved cross-campus student experience
- More support and recognition from colleagues and other institutional departments

### **Resources**

The second review area encompasses institutional resources (other than personnel), to include facilities, equipment, technology, financial resources, and collaborative resources. The SLCC Program Review Standards specify that departments should have “safe, accessible, and current physical facilities, equipment, and technological resources to support its core programs/services and personnel.” In addition, departments should have sufficient financial resources to “meet the department’s core programs/services, staffing, facility, equipment, and technology needs.” This peer review seeks to identify concerns among interview groups and areas that are misaligned with review standards, as well as recommendations and outcomes for improvement.

When asked what was working well, interview groups responded positively about the veterans resource center and student lounge space at the main campus, having a physical presence at the South City campus, the one-stop-shop format of both VRC’s, the co-location with VA staff (helps to facilitate referrals), improved access to DRC services and ease of DRC staff to obtain documentation, the physical

proximity of the VRC to the registrar's office and transcript evaluation services, which helps to facilitate collaboration, the small campus community, and the homegrown Accounts Receivables database that is used to track VA certifications and payments. A collaborative resource strength is SLCC's participation in a working group of educational institutions, VA, and state agencies.

The Utah Department of Veterans & Military Affairs office stated that SLCC's Veterans Services office has a track record of getting a big return on investment from a small increase in resources. If campus resources are leveraged through the Veterans Services office, SLCC will achieve the greatest impact on student veteran outcomes.

### *Physical Space*

Some of the concerns, however, were related to the physical space of the Veterans Services office at the South City campus, and the lack of a physical presence at other satellite campuses. The SCC space is too small for additional staff or student workers, there is no student lounge or resource space, and there is limited space for storage and maintenance of files and records. The cramped space is less than ideal for working and meeting with students. In addition, there are significant security and safety concerns, as the space is isolated from other student services offices, and people can walk in off the street directly into the office without passing other offices or staff. When a student/person enters the office, there is no way to get around the person to the exit as the space is too narrow to access the door from the side.

The review team recommends the following improvements to facilities for Veterans Services:

- Relocate the South City Campus office space to a more suitable area with adequate security and sufficient space for additional staff, student workers, file maintenance and storage, and student lounge/resource area
- Identify possible shared space that can be used as a work/resource area for veteran services on the other satellite campuses, at least periodically

### *Technology*

Other concerns and recommendations from the interview groups were related to technology resources. Some commonly-heard concerns were related to the degree audit system (DegreeWorks), which apparently doesn't work properly and fails to consistently inform students whether or not a class meets degree requirements. When a new class is added that meets a previously-filled requirement, the system will drop the old class from that requirement, resulting in potential certification problems that require manual checking. In addition, the grade management system allows faculty to submit "E" grades without entering attendance data, as the current policy only requires attendance information for failing grades, even though certifying officials need the data for withdrawals as well.

Interview groups note that the technology is outdated and computers are slow, especially those available for student use in the VS study area. Because printing is free, and because students state that the computers are too slow to do anything else, students usually just use the computers for printing.



Additionally, the VA certification process is manual, complicated, and tedious, and paper files are not organized as efficiently as they could be.

Students complain that there is not enough information about VA processes, events, and goal-planning resources. While the Veterans Services staff routinely sends out emails, students state that they don't get them. Furthermore, while there is ample information on the department's website, students report that the website is hard to find and navigate, and doesn't contain the information they are looking for.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about technology resources:

- Correct errors in the degree audit system to meet certification requirements
- Force entry of attendance information when submitting E grades to meet certification requirements
- Use system veteran codes to enable priority-group registration for veterans
- Upgrade scanner and software to manage paper files
- Automate reports, audits, and processes wherever possible, as discussed in the next section
- Utilize Banner Workflow to monitor enrollment & funding changes and improve process flow
- Update computer hardware so that they can be effectively used for other applications besides just printing
- Develop a "print anywhere" card to allow students to print anywhere on campus, so they aren't using the computers in the veteran lounge for printing
- Periodically verify email addresses and create an email list serve for bulk email delivery
- Improve the Veterans Services webpage to make it easier to navigate and more useful (engage student focus group for web development and content), and require students to use the webpage for continued VA certification
- Create a Veterans tab on MyPage for important reminders, announcements, upcoming events, easy access to forms, etc.

#### *Other Concerns*

The other concerns noted by the review team include a financial dependence on temporary funds for staff payroll and limited collaboration with area universities on transfer programs. Recommended actions include:

- Seek permanent funding for staff payroll
- Improve institutional collaboration

#### *Outcomes*

Some of the positive outcomes that may result from recommendations on facilities, budget, and collaboration include:

- Safer work environment
- Improved space for work and student resources
- Improved veterans services on satellite campuses
- Improved accuracy and processing time
- Reduced workload
- Improved student participation and engagement for events and programs.
- Improved student experience and satisfaction

## **Processes**

The third area of review was that of internal processes and procedures, as they relate to VA certification and program administration. Interview groups identified several areas that SLCC is doing well, including the monitoring of clock hours and reports for SAT programs; using an Excel spreadsheet to track payment sponsorship, tracking payments and certs in a homegrown database; billing for Chapter 31 (VA Vocational Rehabilitation) payments; using a Google Docs form for VA certification requests; having dedicated staff in the Veterans Services office to process certifications, and in the Student Business Services/VA Accounting office to reconcile payments; and coordinating referrals between the Veterans Services office and the Vet Success program.

### *VA Certification*

The VA certification process is extremely detailed and complex, as the VA has very specific (and sometimes not well-defined) rules for certification, monitoring, and reporting. It is a significant challenge for any institution to remain abreast of ever-changing VA regulations and coordinate them with institutional policy and procedure. Since accurate certification relies on students, faculty, and other departments to provide timely notification of needed elements each quarter/semester, the orchestration of all of these elements can be as frustrating as tracking a moving target.

Understandably, then, there are several concerns raised by interview groups surrounding the VA certification process. Among these are concerns about student communications (students don't complete paperwork on time, students don't check their emails, students don't have their own eligibility documentation, students aren't sure who to contact or how to complete paperwork, and staff have to "chase students down" to get missing information), concerns about timeliness (the processing time to certify, the backlog of pending certifications, and the timely notification of enrollment, grade, attendance, or funding changes), the certification process itself (manual, complicated processes that take too much time), and the capacity of the institution to increase veteran enrollment with current resources.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about communication and information-sharing, as related to VA certification:

- Where possible, designate points-of-contact in related department to assist with VA claims, help resolve issues, and help track down missing information. Nevertheless, maintain fluid communication between departments, which are related to processes rather than a specific individual, to allow flexibility for staffing changes.
- Hold regular cross-department staff meetings to stay abreast of academic program changes, VA requirement changes, procedural changes, etc., and maintain electronic documentation of these changes for easy reference between meetings
- Require periodic re-validation of student email addresses and other contact information, and utilize an email list-serve or messaging software to send electronic reminders to students about important dates and deadlines, missing documents, etc.
- Streamline, clarify, and simplify the enrollment and certification process for students. Develop web tools and forms to make the process easy to find and understand, and simple to navigate. Use student feedback to design an effective web interface. Short video clips may be helpful to explain various processes rather than a large amount of text.
- Instead of the current Google Docs form, consider developing a web form that is integrated into Banner Self-Service that students are prompted to complete as soon as they finalize a registration activity, which can be pre-filled with registration information and submitted online.

Furthermore, the interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address record management, timeliness, and the certification process itself:

- Fix the degree audit system to validate required coursework
- Automate the certification-prep process by using Banner and/or report-generating software to package data needed for certifications (student ID information, course registration data, required course validation, tuition/fees, and student financial awards)
- After initial certification each term, use Banner Workflows to notify certifying officials of changes in student enrollment, attendance, tuition/fees, or financial awards
- Use reporting tools to pull data, batch, and queue reports for entry into VA-Once
- Use traditional file-maintenance tools and techniques to ensure proper and timely paper handling and record management
- Use a document imaging system where possible to manage files, claims, forms, debt letters, and other records, and set up the system to automatically file and queue records for processing
- Create system checks and audits to ensure data accuracy, integrity, and security
- Where possible, integrate data systems to facilitate a seamless exchange of information and minimize manual data entry
- Where possible, use Workflows and other system tools to automate alerts or prompt data entry, to minimize chances of forgotten steps or overlooked information
- As the certification process is complex, create a distraction-free work environment for certifying officials to process certifications, review reports, conduct internal audits, and research files.
- Ensure adequate staffing and resources (see previous sections of this report) to meet department goals and desired outcomes

### *Payments and Debts*

Some of the concerns identified by the interview groups were related to VA payments. These include the institutional financial responsibility of VA overpayments and debts, certification errors that lead to payment errors, VA tuition/fee payment delays, difficulty tracking payments and certification changes, difficulty reconciling VA payments, direct disbursement issues, the collaboration and communication of notes and documentation between Veterans Services and Student Business Services, and Treasury Offset Program garnishment. Additionally, one group noted that the Veterans Services and Student Business Services departments are under different Vice-Presidents and have different institutional priorities, which may affect resource allocation and process development.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about processes related to VA payments:

- Automate processes where possible to minimize data entry errors
- Establish system checks to verify certification data entry prior to submittal
- Certify tuition later in the term (after add/drops) to avoid overpayments, if possible
- Research adjustment/overpayment cases more carefully to minimize errors
- Communicate expected payment amounts to SBS to help reconcile payments
- Designate SBS staff as certifying officials so that they can call VA adjudicators if needed to research a payment discrepancy, and ensure that they know how to do so

### *SAT and Flight Programs*

Because the SAT and Flight programs are distinctly different from the rest of the institution's programs in terms of program format and tuition charges, there are some concerns that are specific to these programs. Many of these concerns are external to Veterans Services, but have a significant impact on VA certification, student benefits, and the timeliness of payments. For the SAT program, these include not having enough clock hours in SAT programs for students to get full-time benefits, and frequent changes in SAT program requirements that make course requirements (and certification) more difficult to track. For the Flight program, lack of controls with vendors for billing and flight hours, routine payment delays for flight claims due to the high dollar amount, incomplete or changing VA guidance on flight program certifications, and frequent policy exceptions in the flight department (such as late adds, incomplete grades, overlapping enrollment periods, and incorrect final billing statements) that result in multiple certification adjustments and payment delays. In addition, due to centralized certification and decentralized programs, some students do not have access to veteran services or a certifying official at which they take their classes, and some students do not know who to contact for assistance.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns about processes related to SAT and Flight programs:

- Seek SAT program restructuring to allow students full-time clock hours
- Hold regular, cross-department staff meetings to stay abreast of SAT program changes

- Ask flight department to minimize policy exceptions, and explain the impact of such exceptions on student benefits and institutional payments
- Seek VA clarification on flight program certification
- Seek improvements in VA payment processes for flight programs to minimize payment delays
- Review payment policies for flight programs to balance student and institutional needs
- Review and tighten vendor controls for flight and SAT programs
- Establish a point-of-contact for veteran services at all satellite campuses, and designate back-up. The contact person does not need to be a Veterans Services employee as long as they are able to answer routine questions and refer specific questions to the appropriate staff.

### *Outcomes*

Some of the desired outcomes from these recommended process changes may include:

- Improved accuracy and efficiency
- Reduced backlog and processing time
- Reduced time to investigate and process refunds & repayment
- Fewer errors, changes, overpayments, and VA debts
- Improved communication between departments
- Improved work environment (less stress)
- Improved customer service and student satisfaction

### **Programs**

The final area of review is student programs. SLCC is to be commended on the large number and variety of programs that it offers to its student veteran and military dependent population, which include many events and activities, transition services, mental health services, and academic services. The interview groups identified several strengths in this area, which include a welcoming environment, good transition services, financial support via scholarships, community resources and involvement, consistent tutoring availability, and in-house counseling for VA benefits and mental health services. Some students responded that they get regular notification of upcoming events and deadlines, but other students responded that they do not.

SLCC's review standards state that the department should have a "set of core programs/services which are central to and consistent with the department's mission and goals. These programs/services are responsive to the needs of the department's constituents, are cost-effective and, when appropriate, are supported by other departments or agencies both within and outside of the college."

SLCC's variety of veteran services and programs meet the review standards and are responsive to the needs of student veterans and dependents, but several of the interview groups extended concern that the department is overextending itself, and that the current level of programs/services is not sustainable or effective without additional resources. As has been discussed previously in this report, the ideal

solution seems to be to increase staffing and resources to maintain the department and its programs as they are currently offered, but the review team has also identified several areas of concern, and provided some recommendations, which SLCC may choose to address and/or implement in the interim, and which may help stretch existing resources.

In addition, some of SLCC's current programs are in-house VA services and depend on VA support to maintain. If a shift in federal priorities end one or both of these programs, SLCC will have to decide whether or not to continue the programs under institutional resources.

### *Transition Programs*

Some of the interview groups acknowledged that some of SLCC's students are not adequately prepared for college-level coursework, and older students sometimes lack the computer skills that are necessary for college success. While the Veterans Upward Bound program helps new students transition to the academic environment, that interview group expressed that there seems to be a general lack of knowledge among students and even some staff about the program and its services, which could benefit these students. The VITAL program provides needed mental health services in-house (via a VA employee), but services are not available on satellite campuses, students are ineligible for services if ineligible for VA healthcare, and they also have challenges getting the word out about their services. The student group expressed a need for improved services for students on transfer tracks to four-year institutions, and some also expressed a need for improved career-planning services.

The interview groups and review team recommends the following actions to address concerns related to transition programs:

- Ensure that all staff are aware of VUB, VITAL, and other campus programs and services, so that they can make appropriate referrals
- Create an outreach plan to determine who is the target audience, and why, including goals
- Expand services to other campuses, as resources allow
- During intake or orientation, identify students' long-term educational goals, and create an individualized transfer plan, customized services/programs, or appropriate referrals
- Create or improve existing transfer or career advising programs
- Collaborate with the Career Services office to develop a veteran-specific career program
- Collaborate with four-year institutions to identify and improve intersegmental transfer pathways for veterans

### *Social and Financial Support Programs*

One of the interview groups expressed concern about the lack of child care services on campus, and a different group mentioned a challenge identifying students who may be eligible for financial support/scholarships, and students who may be eligible for dual benefits. Several groups expressed concern about poor student involvement in campus events, services, and programs, and wondered whether students are unaware of the programs, or if they are unable to attend, or simply not interested

in the programs. The review team also identified a potential risk / conflict of interest for scholarship selections by having the director of Veterans Services on the selection committee.

The interview groups and review team recommends the following actions to address concerns related to social and financial support programs:

- Collaborate with other campus departments or community providers to connect students with needed childcare services
- Encourage and assist students to apply for financial aid and scholarships at the time of initial intake/orientation
- Veterans Services director can make recommendations to the selection committee, but should not be on the committee due to possible conflict of interest
- Use program evaluation tools to determine reasons for poor attendance at campus events and programs, and make changes if needed
- Use email, messaging services, social media, or other technology tools to inform students about upcoming events, as guided by student evaluation forms
- Emphasize web-based resources and calendars at the time of initial intake/orientation, and ensure that students can find and navigate the resources
- Use a veteran peer network to help with outreach, word-of-mouth, and student engagement
- Encourage veterans to “get out of the VRC” and get involved with other campus programs, such as sports, clubs, honor societies, study groups, community service, etc.
- Collaborate with other diversity programs (ethnic and gender programs, TRiO, disability services, etc.) to help students identify “common ground” with other groups for broader campus awareness, engagement, and integration
- Foster collaboration of student veterans among various academic institutions, such as the Inter-Valley Student Veteran Network
- Seek student feedback or incorporate students in planning social or recognition events

#### *Capacity, Balance, and Success*

All of the groups expressed a concern about future capacity to maintain current programming levels with existing resources, balancing staff time between the office and community outreach, and balancing student time between the office and other campus departments or programs. Some expressed that the SLCC Veterans Resource Center office has such fabulous in-house programs that veterans may be unlikely to venture beyond the VRC to engage with the larger campus community, and a concern that isolation may hinder a veteran’s long-term transitional needs, or his/her preparation to transfer to an institution which may not offer the same level of services. Most of the groups also expressed that the Veterans Services office seems to be doing as many programs as they possibly can, even with limited resources, without knowing whether or not the programs are contributing to student success. Some groups observed that there have been cases when the department has seemingly sacrificed individual success for overall program goals.

The interview groups and review team recommend the following actions to address concerns of capacity, balance, and success:

- Capture veteran data and ensure all self-identified or benefitting veterans are properly coded
- Shift department focus to end result (career or transfer placement), rather than current status, persistence, or graduation rates
- Define success measures and outcomes based on desired end results
- Find out why individual veterans are not successful, as defined by the measures and outcomes
- Conduct a needs assessment for resource allocation based on measures and outcomes
- Cut back on less-effective programs or services, or collaborate with other departments to share the work
- Seek integration balance: some services in-VRC, some services out-VRC
- Create a cross-department Veteran Support Team to foster collaboration, identify opportunities, increase awareness of veteran needs, and establish whole-campus ownership of veteran programs
- Allow state/community agencies function as the “front door”

#### Outcomes

The recommended actions are intended to foster the following positive outcomes:

- Increased distribution of financial awards and scholarships to eligible student veterans
- Greater student involvement and engagement with campus programs
- Students are better connected to peers and the Veterans Services office
- Better understanding of success factors and the effect of programs/resources on success outcomes
- Improved end-result success rates

#### **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, the overall tone of the site visit interviews was very positive, with interviewees expressing the positive impact of campus veteran services as a whole, how well the department works together and collaborates with the larger veteran community, and how hard-working and dedicated the department staff is in their work and service to the military-affiliated student community. The Utah State Department of Veterans Affairs said it best, “Salt Lake Community College has a proven track record of doing great things for veterans on a shoestring budget. Any increase in resources for that department would be an investment well spent.” We believe that the improvements recommended herein would provide measureable improvements in student veteran success.



**Addendum:** *The Veterans Services Manager has provided the following clarifications regarding these observations in the report.*

p. 3 "... a student assessment conducted in spring 2013 revealed that while 50% of respondents states that their overall satisfaction with SLCC Veterans Services was "good," the other 50% indicates that there was room for improvement.

*Students rated their overall satisfaction with Veterans Services as 50% good, 17.3% average; 11.54% below average; 13.11% poor, 7.69% never used*

p. 6 "Review current procedures and training for transcript evaluators on VA prior-credit policies to ensure consistency."

*SLCC's Transfer Evaluation Office is current on VA prior-credit policies and provides consistent evaluation of transcripts.*

p. 9 "...the grade management system allow faculty to submit "E" grades without entering attendance data..."

*To clarify, SLCC's grade management system requires Last Date of Attendance for "E" grades but not for "W" grades.*

p. 10 "Periodically verify email addresses and create an email list serve for bulk email delivery"

*SLCC policy requires that all departmental communication with students be conducted through the college's email system; email addresses are generated when students are admitted and are verified through the college's system.*

p. 10 "Seek permanent funding for staff payroll."

*Except for one position, all Veterans Services staff are funded with permanent base dollars (Ed and General); only one staff position is funded by the Vice President of Students Services. Student employees are funded with work-study or On Campus Student Employment funds.*

p. 12 "After initial certification each term, use Banner Workflows to notify certifying officials of changes in student enrollment, attendance, tuition/fees, or financial awards. "

*Veterans Services already get automatic notification of these changes through a Banner process that is sent to VS and Billing services to review each day when changes are made.*

p. 13 "Research adjustment/overpayment cases more carefully to minimize errors."

p. 14 "Fewer errors, changes, overpayments, and VA debts."

*Adjustments for overpayments are not errors but required reconciliations and accepted business practice to accommodate changes in flight hours and credits after the fact.*