Section 1: The Year in Review
   1. Departmental accomplishments

The summer of 2019 saw the Veteran Services Office (VSO) headed into the academic year with a record number of veterans and dependents using benefits, work on Veterans Park finally underway, the pending launch of our campus Green Zone initiative, the launch of our program review as part of the division’s phase one of program reviews, and the development of several external programming partnerships. Additionally, we were blessed to be adding a new “staff member” in the fall (Talacia Cain, our office Administrative Assistant was expecting) and this provided us the opportunity to make some adjustments to our processes; better taking advantage of her skills as well as those of our Veterans Administration (VA) work study students.

The academic year began with our second annual welcome dinner for our militarily affiliated students and families. This event was attended by nearly 140 people (40% growth over 2018) and served as an outstanding opportunity to integrate our new students with our returning students and to help build on the concept that going to school is a family endeavor and that we understand, welcome and respect that. Additionally, this year we were joined by a number of external partners (Salisbury VA as well as representatives from several local veteran affiliated organizations) that allowed us to expand the reach of our offerings.
As we moved into the fall, the office was focused on: our operational adjustments (moving the full-time staff member off the front desk and fully staffing that position with students) our new programs (we introduced two new programs with external partners; one, an art therapy program that we hosted in the Veterans Lounge space, the other a career opportunity/site visit with Barrings corporation for our veterans to learn both more about opportunities with Barrings as well as to provide them with the opportunity to experience and prepare for the corporate interview process in a less stressful environment.

Both programs were well received and were intended to be replicated in the spring. The art therapy program involved guided pottery making which was designed to provide: physical therapy (the use of fine motor skills), art therapy (the creative release and refocusing of emotions through art) as well as a recreational opportunity for our veteran student population. The visit to Barrings was another example of the outstanding partnership between the VSO and the University Career Center. While each program only serves a small portion of our population (10-15 veterans) they laid the ground work for future programs and initiatives.

Additional areas of focus in the fall was the execution of an extended Veterans Week that would include the grand opening/ribbon cutting on the newly completed Veterans Park as well as our campus launch of Green Zone training.
Veterans week is traditionally held in November (overlapping with Veterans Day and often includes events such as the Military Appreciation Football Game, Roll Call of Remembrance and the Warriors Breakfast. This year we extended to week to include the ribbon cutting for Veterans Park.

By dedicating the park, the University recognized military veterans for their service. The park honors UNC Charlotte community members past and present who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. The November 11th Veterans Park ribbon cutting was extremely successful with several hundred people in attendance and campus and local media coverage. Dean of Students, Christine Davis said,

“The presence of this park on our campus is a physical symbol to both our institutional history and continued commitment to serve our student veterans. I hope this park will be a regular reminder to our entire community of the dedicated service performed by fellow 49ers to protect our freedoms,”

The park is located beside Memorial Hall.
In August, in conjunction with UNC Charlotte’s office of Learning and Organizational Development, we began offering Green Zone training to both individual departments/offices as well as open sessions. These 90-minute Green Zone training sessions are designed to provide faculty and staff with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the veteran and military experience as well as develop tools to better serve these students. Participants gain tools to enhance the overall college experience for military-affiliated students so they may better guide and assist these students toward degree completion and onto a successful future. We strive to achieve this by teaching participants more about the veteran experience and helping them to provide an encouraging, structured environment for our veterans and gaining greater knowledge about campus and community resources focused on veteran student success.

**Learning Objectives include:**

1. Learn the basics of military structure, culture, and jargon
2. Gain insights into the military to college transition issues faced by veterans
3. Become familiar with the services available to military-connected students at UNC Charlotte
4. Recognize ways to make your services, programs, and interactions more military-friendly
5. Understand the key GI Bill educational program concepts and procedures

To date we have taught 7 sessions, each at or near capacity and have certified over 140 staff and faculty members as Green Zone Certified. While we canceled our remaining spring term sessions due to COVID-19, we are beginning to offer this training virtually, beginning June 2020.

The spring term started with the VSO starting to spread their wings on a national stage as the Director and the Lead Certifying Official began a series of (what was suppose to be) three national presentation on the changes made within the office over the previous two-plus years. The first presentation was held at the Student Veterans of America NatCon 200 in Los Angeles, California in January, followed by a presentation in February at the NASPA Symposium on Military-Connected Students. Additionally, the VSO FINALLY began meeting with UNC Charlotte IT on the roll-out of the long-in-planning, on-line Veteran Certification Portal. This portal is designed to provide students with more transparent access to the certification process and timelines while also both simplifying and streamlining the process for the office’s certifying officials. As this report is being submitted, this project is in its final testing phase before being rolled-out to students for SOAR 2020 and Fall 2020 benefits certification.

Throughout the 2019-2020 academic year, the VSO has certified 2,685 students representing a 13% growth year over year to our militarily affiliated student population.

- 314 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in summer I 2019
- 270 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in summer II 2019
- 1,067 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in fall 2019
- 1,034 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in spring 2020

2. Departmental Challenges

Moving forward, these numbers are the largest perceived challenge. Staffing levels do not meet VA’s new recommendation for certifying officials (1 for every 200 unique students); currently we are closer to 1:550. With the continues broader introduction of A/B terms into the fall and spring semesters and the extra workload that this will bring
(not just certifications, but grade reports, reporting out to the VA, times a year that tuition and fees must be calculated…), this shortfall is only going to be exacerbated.

2019-2020 has presented some significant challenges as well. These include issues at the state level with NCDBA funds and of course COVID-19. First, once again a portion of our population was financially impacted by matters out of their control. About 10% were impacted by miscommunication and poor communication regarding the awarding of NCDBA scholarship funds from the state and were initially shorted anywhere from $1,375 to $2,000. There was no prior notification to the students that this would be an issue and it only came to light at Thanksgiving break. Due to diligent efforts on the behalf of the university (Financial Aid and the Comptroller’s Office) these students were “made-whole” for the fall term and were able to register for classes in a timely manner.

Of course, the single most significant challenge that the VSO has faced this year (and that any of us have ever faced professionally) is COVID-19. The impact on the VSO and the Militarily-Affiliated student population has been exacerbated by existing Federal legislation regarding on-line learning and the GI Bill as well as other aspects. Fortunately, by April, new legislation was passed and as the VA developed policies and procedures to go in-place with the new legislation, we have been able to minimize the impact on our students (including the delayed ability to continue to pay our work studies like the rest of campus and to differentiate between traditional on-line learning and that learning being forced on-line due to COVID-19.

One positive outcome was our late spring introduction of our “Battle Buddy Check”. Working with our work study students, we tasked the to reach-out to our population and check-in on them. Over three weeks’ time, they reached-out to roughly 40% of our population and did wellness checks on them. This activity was widely well received and with us functioning from a virtual campus through the summer term(s), one we will be replicating in both Summer I and Summer II 2020.
3. Student Profile

Gabriel graduated in May of 2020. He appeared on the Deans’ list numerous times throughout his career as a 49er. He will also commission as an officer, transitioning from the Army National Guard to Active Duty Army as a Quartermasters Officer. With four years already served in the National Guard, he plans to make a career of the military. He attributes much of his success to his support system; God, Family, and Friends. Family to always be there, friends when his family cannot empathize with what he is going through and God to lead him through his darkest moments.

During his time at UNC Charlotte, he has been called into active duty service multiple times by the National Guard to assist in natural disaster relief missions. In August of 2018, hurricane Florence devastated the Eastern Coast of the United States. He was called to active duty to perform various missions during and in the wake of Hurricane Florence in the North and South Carolina region. For his efforts he was awarded the North Carolina Army National Guard State Active Duty award.

Adding to list of experiences, Gabriel is also a VSO Student work-study. Being a member of the VSO since the Summer of 2019, he has assisted with serving over a 1,000 veterans, dependents and service members education questions and needs on the campus of UNC Charlotte. He is able to understand and empathize with this unique population and assist them with their needs.

Gabriel, the youngest and only boy of three, was born and raised by his parents, Retired U.S. Army, Command Sergeant Major Ron Evans and his mother, Retired Cumberland County Sheriff Officer, Senior Sergeant Queen Evans, in Fayetteville North Carolina. Like most children, when Gabriel was younger, he idolized his parents and looked at them as role models. He was torn between wanting to become a police officer or
serving in the U.S. Military, but he knew he wanted to serve his country and his community in some capacity.

In late 2016, Gabriel enlisted in the North Carolina Army National Guard as a 92Y, Unit Supply Specialist. After finishing his initial entry training in the summer of 2017, he applied and was accepted into UNC Charlotte, where he went on to begin his undergraduate degree and participate in Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (AROTC).

Following in his father’s footsteps, Gabriel attended Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning, Georgia during the 2019 school year. After successfully exiting a high-performance aircraft 5 times, he was awarded the Basic Parachutist badge and was pinned by his father.
Section 2: Professional Accomplishments

The summer of 2019 was very fruitful for the VSO staff from the perspective of professional development opportunities. The Director, Bill Wilson, along with the Lead Certifying Official, Tori Gothie submitted proposals to present at three national conferences and all three were accepted (see below). Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, they were unable to present at the final conference (though they have offered to present at the virtual program being developed for later this year).


Wilson, W. R. & Gothie, T. W. (2020, April). Bringing about transformational change within a veteran services office. Presented (canceled) at the NASPA National Conference 2020, Austin, TX.

William Wilson currently serves as the North Carolina representative on the Southeastern Council on Military Education (SECOME) Board of Directors, is a member of the UNC System Military Affairs Working Group, and is a Board member of the Piedmont Veterans Coalition.
Section 3: Linkage to Divisional Priorities

**Priority 1:** Develop and deliver programs that promote student learning, student success, leadership development, personal and interpersonal growth and development, personal and community safety and healthy lifestyle practices both inside and outside the classroom.
- Used Veteran Campus Climate Survey to help with VSO Program Review
- Used the survey results to revise and improve survey. Capitalized on services related questions to help inform process improvements. The information obtained from this survey, combined with the team’s work in developing their Mission, Vision and Values will be combined with the results of the Program review to develop a Master Plan.
  - Delayed to allow for completion of program review—interrupted by COVID-19
  - Develop and implement faculty and staff veteran climate survey

**Priority 2:** Develop a culturally competent staff and commensurate programming in order to become a more diversity-affirming community.
- Partnered with HR for roll-out of Green Zone training. Successfully implemented seven sessions during