Section 1: The Year in Review

Departmental accomplishments

The 2020-2021 Academic year has been a year of making plans and then changing them; not just in the Veteran Services Office (VSO), but across the Division, University and country. As we began the summer 2020 term, we were making plans on what returning to campus was going to look like and how we would execute our programmatic efforts in an environment of limited crowd sizes as well as social distancing. Things changed and twelve months later we find ourselves in the same place but more hopeful!

One of the first components of our programming that we moved online was our Green Zone training. Beginning in July of 2020, in conjunction with UNC Charlotte’s Office of Learning and Organizational Development, the VSO continued to offer Green Zone training to both individual departments/offices as well as open sessions, online. 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
In this, year two, we taught 7 sessions, virtually. To date we have certified over 200 staff and faculty members as Green Zone Certified. While we had to cancel several spring ’21 term sessions due to low enrollment, we feel that by continuing with these offerings, we continue to serve both our student veterans and the greater campus community as a whole.

Additionally, the VSO continued its roll-out of the online 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. The transition to this portal has been exceptionally timely as well as a tremendous example of the partnership with IT and the VSO in its inception as well as in the enhancements that have been added throughout the process. The Portal now allows students to upload all relevant documentation, to request that their classes be certified, as well as to see the status of their request at any time. Additionally, they are able to do this all remotely and to complete the process in under a minute. On the back-end, it allows the VSO staff to process these benefits more quickly and efficiently, to use our VA funded work studies to assist in several components of the certification process and to function in an environmentally friendly manner. It also creates tremendous efficiencies within the office by granting all of our staff access to data relevant to incoming student inquiries (access to all submitted documents, the timeline of submission, all related correspondence, as well as access to the details of the individual submissions). We have also worked with IT to incorporate “flags” for academic progress issues, to note FERPA waivers and are currently working with them to roll-in our Yellow Ribbon and 702 waiver processes; creating a one-stop shop for benefits for our militarily affiliated population.

“They were helpful in getting me started at UNC, I had many questions when I was accepted and had to start registering for classes, the FAQ on the site is also super helpful.”

Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, the VSO has certified 2,600 students (adjusted to reflect reporting changes in place since last year) representing a 4.5% growth year over year (and 29% growth since the arrival of the current director and his team in the fall 2017 term) to our militarily affiliated student population (this is using adjusted 2019 summer numbers to reflect the changes in recording summer numbers from 2019 and 2020).

- 385 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in summer 2020
- 1,134 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in fall 2020
- 1,081 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in spring 2021

If we exclude the nearly flat number for the summer 2020 term (when COVID’s full impact was just being realized and the subsequent reduction in student enrollment...
numbers as classes initially moved fully virtual for the summer 2020 term), we see that the increase in enrollments growth is over 5.1% year over year.

In the fall of 2020 we were finally able to virtually conduct our external review component of our program review. This was originally scheduled for the spring of 2020 and was postponed due to COVID. We were hopeful that the fall would allow us to conduct this in person, but we ended up being limited to conducting the visit virtually. With the completion of the external review, we were finally able to complete our action plan and submit it to our Vice Chancellor. The key components of the action plan included a focus on: assessment, resources (funding and staffing level will both need to be addressed in the near term), and programming.

Programmatically, the VSO cutback significantly this year, focusing on meeting and enhancing our core functions and preparing for a return to a more programmatic norm upon students return to campus. There were a couple of exceptions and these included our efforts with regards to our student’s mental health and with recognition.

Throughout the summer of 2020, in conjunction with the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), we made plans for the return of our weekly group sessions. This past fall, virtual weekly sessions began again. The VSO made efforts to encourage participation via our: newsletter, web site, social media efforts and Canvas page.

“The Vet Center is the most valuable asset to me and perhaps to others, more than they know. It can be hard to connect with younger students in class and it's really nice to meet other vets at the Vet Center.”

In addition, the VSO hosted Veterans Day Remembrance Ceremony at Veterans Park on Veterans Day. This sparsely attended even (in person and online) helped demonstrate to us the level of “Zoom fatigue” our students were experiencing and adjust our spring plans accordingly.

2 All quotes were taken from the Annual Veteran Student Services Needs Assessment and were, thus, anonymous
In the spring of 2021 we completed our fourth annual Veteran Student Services Needs Assessment. Our response rate was down this year (down from 221 to 176 but the completion rate increased from 66.5% to 70.45%). Key findings within the survey demonstrate that even during these times of reduced programs and COVID related challenges, UNC Charlotte and the VSO are perceived as supportive of our militarily affiliated student population with over 97% agreeing at least somewhat that they feel welcomed by faculty (98% staff and nearly 97% by students) and over 95% stating that they feel UNC Charlotte, “was a good choice” for them. With regards to the work of the VSO, nearly 94% of all students that had an interaction with the VSO were satisfied with the service they received with over 94% ranking them helpful. Finally, with regards to the Veterans Portal, we introduced several new questions this spring. Nearly 95% of respondents stated that, “I believe the Veterans Portal has made my Benefits Enrollment process easier and more transparent.”

“…the responsiveness of the VA office is the service I find most valuable, whether it is because they can resolve my issue or because they can connect me with who can resolve my issue.”

**Departmental Challenges**

Moving forward, the growth rate of our militarily affiliated students is the largest documented challenge. Staffing levels do not meet VA’s new recommendation for certifying officials (1 for every 200 unique students); currently we are closer to 1:735 (our total unique students for 2020-2021 were 1,476). With the continued broader introduction of A/B terms into the fall and spring semesters and the extra workload that this brings (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 being exacerbated. Additionally, assuming all responsibilities for the Military Tuition Assistance programs creates an additional workload.

Again, this year, the most significant challenge that the VSO faced was COVID-19. The impact on the VSO and the Militarily-Affiliated student population continued to be exacerbated by existing Federal legislation regarding on-line learning and the GI Bill. New legislation continued to be adopted throughout the pandemic and thus we have been able to minimize the impact on our students. Fortunately, we were well prepared to continue our core certification duties due to fortuitous timing with regards to the roll-out of the Veterans Portal.

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3 All quotes were taken from the Annual Veteran Student Services Needs Assessment and were, thus, anonymous
Student Profile

Raymone Byrd

Raymone (RJ) is an Army veteran having spent six years in the Army as a Senior Signal Systems Chief. He is currently a Senior, Information Systems major. While he began his educational journey at Cleveland State University, he decided to transfer to UNC Charlotte to join one of the most prestigious business programs in the nation. Choosing Charlotte allowed him to return a second home.

RJ was raised by a single mother however, he is the epitome of the expression “it takes an entire village to raise a child”. The “village” that helped his parents raise him started in his community where the neighbors would guide him and encourage him to be great. Furthermore, they had taught him to reach back and be a helping hand. A major key in RJ’s “village” was his grandfather. His grandfather would share inspirational stories of serving others. Those stories were connected to his grandfather’s service as an Army soldier. RJ connected the dots and concluded that he could be great and reach back and be a helping hand by following his grandfather’s footsteps in the Army.

RJ enlisted in the Army in 2009 as a Quartermaster and Chemical Equipment Repairer. The sense of “village” followed RJ throughout his military career. He had seniors and peers who would reach back to help him find his passion by allowing him to shadow them in many on-the-job trainings. RJ then found his passion in technology and reclassified as a 25U, Signal Support Systems Specialist. Due to injuries sustained in combat, he was medically discharged in 2015 after serving his country for six years.

In 2017, RJ transferred from Cleveland State University to UNC Charlotte. Immediately, he was contacted by OASES and the Veteran Student Office (VSO). The VSO is where RJ found his new “village” to support him throughout his academic career. He was no ordinary student as he is a single father of two girls, a transfer student, and an adult student. The support and connections made at the VSO have been an important role in his academic success.

During RJ’s Sophomore year, he was recommended by the VSO to serve as a Peer Mentor. He saw an opportunity to reach back and help others, so he accepted the role with the University Center for Academic Excellence (UCAE). Although, he was attending as a single parent he found a way to balance life and give back. During his time at UNC Charlotte, Raymone has also used his leadership skills while he served as a Financial Accounting Peer Assistant Leader, served on the Chancellor search
committee and as he currently he serves as the Treasurer of the Student Veterans Association (SVA).

Raymone had this to say about his time at UNC Charlotte,

“My words of wisdom for adult students considering to return to college are: Use your resources and be honest with yourself. When you feel you are alone or have thoughts of doubt, and you will, reach out to your advisors, your instructors, or your peers. My first year at UNC Charlotte was full of doubt and fear. I was afraid that maybe I had made a mistake going back to school, and maybe I could enter my career field by getting an IT certification instead. Being honest with myself allowed me to see the bigger picture. I thought, ‘If I get a certification, I'll get hired yet a degree would still be required for any managerial positions’. Reaching out to my academic advisor equipped me with a toolbox of resources I take pride in. It pulls me through the tough times. It's going to take hard work and dedication but the obstacles separating you from success are not meant to be endeavored alone.”

RJ is currently holding a 3.7 overall GPA and is set to graduate in December of 2021. He appeared on the Deans’ list multiple semesters. He has secured an internship with Allstate and accepted a position as a Cyber Security Analyst with Allstate. He strongly believes life is meant to be lived as a village. He encourages those he comes in contact with to be great however, true greatness is not achieved until you have reached back to help others.

Section 2: Professional Accomplishments

The 2020-2021 year saw the Veteran Services Office Staff reach a number of milestones/set themselves up for future success. In March 2021, Certifying Official, Christopher Brasel was accepted into the UNC Charlotte Educational Leadership (Higher Education) master’s program and will begin in the fall of 2021. Lead Certifying Official, Tori Gothie completed her second master’s degree (in Instructional Technology) from Eastern Carolina University in May 2021 and Director, William Wilson began his Ed.D. program in Learning and Organizational Change at Baylor University.

Additionally, 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 Confronting Racial Injustice

The VSO has been attempting to incorporate these issues into our staff training and professional development as well as within the conversations that take place within our
office. Prior to the pandemic, we drafted our own version of the Noble Niner creed, labeled the Noble Niner Veteran which, in part states,

“This is an open environment. Veterans of all backgrounds, creeds and beliefs are welcome…A Niner Veteran will be free from fear of intimidation, physical, and emotional harm.”

This is displayed in the Veterans Lounge. Additionally, we have worked with the Office of Identity, Equity and Engagement (IEE) to facilitate professional development sections for both our professional and student staff on micro-aggressions.

The VSO has included language related to equity and justice in the staff job descriptions. Also, the VSO staff has taken part in numerous conversations within our staff meetings related to current issues and their personal impact as well as examining how they may impact our students.

Section 4: 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.
  - 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 transition of Green Zone training to an online format. Successfully implemented seven sessions during