



**Robert R. McCormick Foundation
Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group Meeting
July 20, 2011 – AON Center’s Mid America Club**

Purpose of the Meeting:

This was the first meeting of The Robert R McCormick Foundation’s Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group. The meeting was attended by a total of 24 individuals representing 11 higher education institutions in the Chicago area. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) facilitated the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Acknowledge the challenges facing Post 9/11 veterans in their pursuit of postsecondary degrees
- Identify and support best practices of colleges and universities in serving veterans – nationally and here in Chicago
- Identify any gaps or needed services to support the academic and career success of veterans
- Determine a role and action plan for a Chicago area Higher Education Affinity Group

Background Information:


CAEL provided some background information to frame the day’s discussion. Illinois Post 9/11 veterans have two important financial resources to support their education: the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Illinois Veterans Grant. Together these benefits offer a tremendous opportunity for veterans to establish themselves in civilian careers, and the benefits also have the potential to educate a large segment of the U.S. workforce, which could yield great economic benefits to the country for years to come.

The majority of veteran students share attributes with other non-traditional students, such as being older, having financial independence, having dependents, and working full time. So, even though veterans may be as young as 21 or 22, the way they approach higher education may have more in common with adult learners (non-traditional) than with the traditional 18-24 year old college student.

In CAEL’s interviews with various stakeholders in Chicago, several themes emerged:

- Delays in VA payments are still a problem – but mostly affecting the student and not as much the institution
- Delay in eligibility certification can present problems for the student veteran
- Veterans need guidance about their veterans education benefits – getting information they need from VA can be difficult and time-consuming
- Veterans, service providers, schools, National Guard reps, agencies all told us that career and educational advising is not widely available and is badly needed to help veterans make good decisions about what to study and where

CAEL also heard two additional concerns. One concern is whether student veterans are receiving the support that they need to persist and complete degrees (a concern that exists for



many other postsecondary students). In addition, as veterans come to institutions with lots of hands-on experience and training, there is a concern that they often need to take courses in subjects that they have already learned and mastered.

Several “best practices” or “emerging practices” in serving student veterans have been highlighted in recent reports by the American Council on Education and the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium. These were summarized and presented during the meeting.

Discussion

The remainder of the meeting was a facilitated discussion about best practices in helping veterans succeed, issues and challenges, and ways that this group might work together on an ongoing basis to improve services to veterans in the region. The comments are summarized below.

Best Practices and General Comments:

- The group was in agreement that having a Student Veterans of America (SVA) group on campus makes a big difference for student veterans.
- University of Michigan has created a process (one that does not violate Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA), allowing the campus SVA group to reach out to incoming students immediately after the student submits enrollment paperwork.
- At one attendee’s institution, there are policies in place to support for students whose spouses are deployed, allowing them to drop classes (without losing money) at any point in the term.
- In the first electronic communication with student veterans, one attendee offers his own personal military experience, which lets the student veterans know that he can relate to their experiences.
- Frequently discussed was the importance of training not only mental health professionals, but also faculty and staff.
 - One attendee recommended the Center for Deployment Psychology, a Department of Defense psychology training consortium, as a useful training resource for campus mental health professionals. “Addressing the Psychological Health of Warriors and their Families” is a mobile, one-week course geared toward helping civilian mental health providers understand and react to the needs of individuals suffering from serious physical and psychological trauma, as well as their families (More information can be found at <http://deploymentpsych.org/>)
- Attendees acknowledged that the Illinois Veterans Administration makes a great deal of effort to work with higher education institutions on issues related to the GI Bill and the IVG. State VA representatives are willing to visit institutions whenever they are needed; however, even then students often still rely on college representatives for additional clarifications.
- Some attendees pointed out the importance of including friends and families in student veteran clubs and spaces.

- One institution connects to local businesses and shows student's examples of people developing small businesses. They offer the Veterans Entrepreneurial Boot Camp in partnership with CenterPoint.
- Another attendee discussed a model that has faculty who are veterans discuss their research interests and experiences. This also doubles as a way to identify potential student veterans
- There was clear support for some sort of assessment, advising, career navigation and exploration of educational options for student veterans to help them make good decisions about what to study
 - One institution offers an alumni mentor program where students can search an online database of hundreds of alumni who have volunteered to discuss their own careers and career paths.
- Governor Quinn is a major supporter of veterans and is highly receptive to working on solutions for veteran students

Issues, Challenges, and Roadblocks:

- One challenge is the nature of student leadership at the college level; a group may have a strong SVA leader for 4 years, then upon his or her graduation, the SVA struggles until another talented leader arrives. This issue of leadership turnover is intensified at community colleges and other two year programs
- Most schools do not yet have systems in place to track their veteran population. This may need to be addressed very soon given that the VA recently announced that they will be requiring schools to report veterans' programs of study, veterans on academic probation and those terminated for unsatisfactory progress, and veterans' graduation rates.
 - A related concern is that in Illinois, because of the IVG option, many student veterans' enrollment and experiences will not be counted in the VA data collection initiative.
- One attendee mentioned that there is tension between providing separate facilities and programs for student veterans, and encouraging integration with the rest of the student body.
 - One institution provides an adult student lounge that veterans can use, rather than a veterans-only student lounge.
 - Another suggestion was for schools to treat veterans as another learning community. This allows veterans to connect with the larger student population, but does not institutionalize the isolation and segregation.
- There were a number of comments regarding the ambiguity and misuse of the term "veteran."
 - Often National Guard members and students in the Reserves do not consider themselves veterans. This can cause additional tracking and identification issues, as well as causing them to not take advantage of needed programs that can help them succeed in higher education.
 - One attendee mentioned that often people in this group are talking about Post 9/11 veterans, but his institution has veterans who are 50 years old. They don't have

access to the GI Bill anymore, but many of these issues still pertain to them. They still need assistance.

- One person observed that many veterans are being advised to go to school as a solution for unemployment in a weak job market. The veterans may not have clear ideas on what they want to study or why. In these cases, they tend to get steered to general studies, even if that might not be the best place for them.
- One attendee noted that sometimes the Illinois Veterans Grants run out of money and does not pay for all tuition obligations, leaving schools responsible for covering that cost. This can result in institutions steering students away from the IVG even though it might be in the student's best interest to use that program first.
 - Related to this issue is the fact that the state is talking about requiring students to use their federal benefits first, before accessing the Illinois Veterans Grants tuition benefits
- An attendee noted that one need is for registrars to be trained about the ACE process for evaluating military transcripts, and that there is a need generally for more consistent policies in how veterans issues are addressed by administration.

Possible Ideas for Working Together

The last portion of the meeting was spent discussing how the institutions in Illinois can work together to address some of the issues raised in the previous portion of the meeting. The ideas included the following:

- Sharing more information about best practices on serving veterans at each institution
- Sharing written policies and procedures that institutions are already using to address veterans' needs and special circumstances.
- Working together on a joint research project examining the student veterans' experience in higher education.
- Holding an information summit where institutions can share information with faculty, staff, administration, potential students, and current students
- Sharing news and details about events and programs that will allow veterans from across campuses to connect with one-another
- Exploring how to enhance career advising for veterans – and all students

Next Steps

1. CAEL will hold individual conversations with each attendee to get feedback on this meeting and ideas for working together in the future.
2. Discuss findings and next steps with McCormick Foundation staff
3. Hold a second meeting of this Affinity Group in late September or October



Attendees:

Anthony Scola - Benedictine University

Eric Dropkin - CAEL

Becky Klein-Collins - CAEL

Amy Sherman - CAEL

Randy Plunkett - Capella University

Christopher Wilkerson - City Colleges of Chicago - Workforce Institute

Edward Davis - City Colleges of Chicago-Wilbur Wright College

Bernie Thomas - DePaul University

Jim Dauer - DePaul University School for New Learning

Michael Ruybal - Eastern Illinois University

Keith White - Governors State University

Erica Warrior - Illinois Institute of Technology

Jerry Field - Illinois Institute of Technology

Kevin M Hull - John Marshall Law School Veterans Legal Support Center

Cynthia Rathunde - Northeastern Illinois University

Jack Amberg - Robert R McCormick Foundation

Anna Laubach - Robert R McCormick Foundation

Don Cooke - Robert R McCormick Foundation

Jennifer Tani - Roosevelt University

Christopher G Chalko - Roosevelt University

Rita Vazquez - University of Chicago

Christopher Cuymon - University of Chicago

Major Fred Hockett - University of Illinois at Chicago

Annette Wright - University of Illinois at Chicago