

# **Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group Meeting**

**McCormick Foundation and CAEL**

**October 14, 2011**

Meeting Summary

## **Introduction and Opening Remarks**

The second meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group was held on October 14, 2011 at the offices of Quarles & Brady. There were a total of 23 attendees, including representatives from 16 colleges and programs serving the Chicago area. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

After introductions, the McCormick Foundation's Anna Laubach shared information with the group about the rest of the McCormick Foundation's Midwest Veterans Employment Initiative, and she noted the importance of postsecondary education to helping returning veterans succeed in the workplace. CAEL's Becky Klein-Collins shared that the purpose of the group 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

Becky also provided a brief summary of what was discussed at the first meeting of the group in July and what topics of interest were raised by individuals during CAEL's follow up phone calls. Specific topics of interest included:

- Building community for veterans on campus, especially on commuter campuses
- Providing special orientation sessions for vets
- Faculty/staff training
- Getting buy-in from higher level administrators
- Recruitment strategies
- How to staff programs and secure a dedicated budget for vet services
- Student Veterans of America chapters
- Addressing common challenges regarding VA benefits

This second meeting was designed to focus on three of the above topics: veterans orientation sessions, Student Veterans of America, and communication with the VA about education benefits.

## Veterans Orientation

Annette Wright from University of Illinois of Chicago (UIC) described a new veterans orientation that was offered this past August. In the half-day session, the goals were to introduce UIC services to the students, provide information on education benefits (especially the newer changes), provide opportunities for students to connect with each other, and ease their fears about attending a large campus like UIC. Valerie Creedon from Jesse Brown VA Hospital came to offer the opportunity to register for health benefits. Staff invited all vets they knew, both new and returning students. Approximately 15 students attended. One highlight of the session was a panel of returning students that shared their experiences and offered tips to the newer students.

Annette said that the session was well received, and they now have some insights as to what they might do differently the next time around. One lesson was that it was difficult to create one session to meet all needs. In the future, there could be breakout sessions targeting new, returning, or transfer students. They will likely add some information for students on mapping out where their classes were located, and provide additional time for them to interact with each other. Some other ideas to consider for future versions include peer mentoring programs, discussions about expectations, more faculty involvement in the orientation, and a resource fair so that student veterans know about the writing center, tutoring, etc.

The larger group added their own experiences to the discussion:

- Keith White, Governors State University, said that his school's orientation was offered to separate groups of veterans according to the eras in which they served (e.g., Vietnam, First Gulf War, Post 9/11, etc.). The initial separation helps them relate more to their peers. The school then brings the different groups together. They have found that this approach helps to get the different veterans to interact.
- Cynthia Rathunde, Northeastern Illinois University, has found that vets like to be walked at least part of the way to their classes because that is what they are used to in the military. She usually ends up providing mini orientations as the vets walk in her office. She also noted that the vets are more likely to return to the office for help after they have had that more personal interaction.
- Jeremy Kingery, Moraine Valley Community College, reported that his school offers multiple orientations on a rolling basis so that veterans can participate right away rather than waiting until a day or two before classes start. The sessions are usually attended by 5-20 vets. The sessions are held in a computer lab so that they can register for classes on the spot. Jeremy invited the group to visit Moraine's orientation if interested in seeing it in action.

Several responded to Annette's comment that she does not know who is a vet until they self-identify:

- Cynthia Rathunde at NEIU said that they code veterans in their system anytime someone calls or comes in the office to ask questions about benefits.
- Jeremy Kingery from Moraine Valley Community College said that his school changed the wording on their enrollment/registration forms because some veterans thought that the term "vet" only applied to older generations. The question now asks if the student has ever

served in U.S. armed forces. Also, the school's vet orientation is mandatory for students receiving vet benefits.

- Ed Davis of Wright College says that most people choose not to answer the question on the registration form about veteran status; also, many international students sometimes check that box by mistake. One good source of information on which students are vets is the certifying official on campus.

## VA Benefits: Issues for Future Discussion

Becky Klein-Collins shared a list of issues regarding VA benefits that were raised during phone conversations with members of the group:

- Need for better communication with students about certification status prior to the start of classes
- Work study positions – delay in processing approvals
- Level of detail in VA payments – the need for more information about what specific payments are covering
- Consistency of information received
- Refund process and the complexity of college tuition charges
- Need for more information on upcoming housing changes
- Illinois VA: clarification on SB 1624 requirements

Chris Chalko of Veterans Upward Bound shared that the VA is developing a student portal, [ebenefits.gov](http://ebenefits.gov), that will provide up-to-date information to vets on the status of their benefits.

Cynthia Rathunde of NEIU recommended that the group invite Marie George from the regional VA office in St. Louis to the next meeting. One thing that the group could request is a dedicated point-of-contact for school administrators to call when there are questions about benefits.

Cynthia shared with the group that she belongs to the National Association of Veterans Program Administrators ([www.navpa.org](http://www.navpa.org)) which has a listserv/forum where members discuss common problems and solutions. The group discussed that we might use social media to create our own community to answer each others' questions.

## Rodrigo Garcia, Student Veterans of America

Rodrigo Garcia, newly appointed Assistant Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, spoke with the group about Student Veterans of America (he was one of SVA's co-founders). After sharing the kinds of things that SVA chapters do on campuses, Rodrigo suggested that schools wanting an SVA chapter should find one or two passionate individuals who care about student veterans to establish the group and bring others into it.

Rodrigo recommended a best practice guide that is available on the SVA website. Some of the best practices are strategies that help veterans transition into the larger campus community (rather than segregating them for all activities), mentoring programs, and peer-to-peer support networks.

## Next Steps for This Group

- CAEL will set up a LinkedIn group or other social media service for the group to collaborate and share information in between meetings
- CAEL will send the group information about:
  - other McCormick grantees assisting veterans with employment
  - veterans orientation materials from the group
  - information on NAVPA membership
  - SVA best practice guide
  - new Pew research study on transitions of veterans
- The next meeting of the Affinity Group will be in early February. Governors State, National Louis, St. Xavier, and DePaul University volunteered space to hold the meeting. Becky Klein-Collins will poll the group on topics for the agenda. Possibilities include:
  - Strategies for engaging college presidents (planning an event)
  - Veteran courses for credit
  - Meeting with Marie George from the VA. One idea is to approach VA as a group to discuss a waiver for Illinois so that state benefits do not have to be last resort (e.g., Wisconsin and Texas waivers). *Cynthia Rathunde will send Becky Klein-Collins information on Wisconsin waiver strategy.*

## Attendees

Richard Kennedy	American Intercontinental University
Linda Owens	Benedictine University
Christopher Wilkerson	City Colleges of Chicago - Workforce Institute
Edward Davis	City Colleges of Chicago-Wilbur Wright College
Dennis Trejo Jaime Jimenez	DePaul University
Keith White	Governors State University
Carl Vizza	IIT
Jeremy Kingery	Moraine Valley Community College
Karen Mendoza	National Louis University
John Bergholz	National Louis University
Cynthia Rathunde	Northeastern Illinois University
Julia Jenkins	Northwestern University
James Flagg	Robert Morris
Asia Mitchell	Roosevelt University
Debra Todd	St. Xavier University
Rodrigo Garcia	SVA
Annette Wright	UIC
Christopher Chalko	Veterans Upward Bound
Becky Klein-Collins	CAEL
Amy Sherman	CAEL
Christina Hardman	CAEL
Jack Amberg	McCormick Foundation
Anna Laubach	McCormick Foundation