

# MEETING SUMMARY

*Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group  
June 11, 2018*

## Welcome and Introductions

The twenty-seventh meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group (VHEAG) was held on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, at the CAEL headquarters in Chicago. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

## Illinois Joining Forces update

*Jaime Martinez, Executive Director of Illinois Joining Forces*

IJF's structure is changing - previously there has been a larger board structure with working groups. Today, the program focuses on establishing Veteran Support Communities (18 throughout the state) - centralized hubs that can convene all stakeholders willing to have an exchange platform, and that can provide assistance with housing, financial needs, education, women's support, and peer-to-peer mentorship.


For example, we are establishing a Veteran Support Community in Peoria, where we were able to bring together Caterpillar, Bradley University, and Goodwill Industries to collaborate in addressing veterans' needs. We did the same thing in Rock Island with John Deere, and we also work with Boeing, Walgreens, and others. We look forward to greater collaboration with the VHEAG on educational issues.

## Expanding Access to Veteran Programming through Educational Technologies

*R.J. Jenkins, Curriculum Designer, Center for Veteran Transition & Integration,  
Columbia University*

Columbia University's School of General Studies offers a course called University Studies - a mandatory non-credit transition workshop to give nontraditional students the tools they need to succeed academically. The success of this program, especially regarding student veterans, led us to ask if we could use this program to help other institutions. Our goals were to create a suite of learning objects designed around best practices for transition into higher education, and to engage a network of professionals who support veterans in transition. From this, we developed [\*University Studies for Student Veterans\*](#) - a completely free and open-access curriculum with six instructional modules and 26 hours of content.

The curriculum can be utilized as a whole, or instructors can take pieces to use in various ways in their own courses and support services. Of the six modules, the jewel is Section 1: Metacognition and Mindset. The curriculum is set up through EdX as a massive open online course (MOOC), but can be integrated into your own institution's learning management system (LMS). Columbia plans to continue evaluating and updating the curriculum to keep it relevant to student veterans, including a major update planned for May 2019.



Check out more details on this curriculum in the attached slideshow.

## UMUC's Online Peer Community and Tutoring Services

*Jessica Clemmons, Assistant Director, Veterans Services, University of Maryland University College*

UMUC shared about various online support systems that they have put into place to support their student veterans that don't break the bank!

- MIL-VET checkpoint / Vessey Veteran Resource Center - an online veteran student union with resources, guides, whom to contact, monthly newsletter. Students can post resources they want to share and connect with other student vets. Cost: \$5,000/year for all-inclusive website setup, data integration, and maintenance.
- One2One mentorship program for military-connected students. During their first two semesters, student vets can be connected with student mentors, and starting in their third semester can start mentoring new students. There is also a career mentorship program with alumni who are working professionals. Cost: can be done on your current website using a simple form application to recruit mentors and mentees!
- Tutor.com offers free tutoring for active duty military and spouses. UMUC worked with Tutor.com to offer specific free tutoring for the two classes that are the biggest obstacle to graduation for their students - MATH 107 (algebra) and STAT 200. Usage rate has continued to increase and is currently at about 40%. Tutor.com will also help creatively work with students who don't have reliable access to internet. Cost: \$3,000 for unlimited tutoring for three semesters for any vet student in these two classes.
- Green Zone training - connects military language and UMUC language. Useful for individuals who work at UMUC who don't know what it's like to be in the military. Curriculum is about 9 hours total, but can be taken piece by piece, not all at one time.

See more info on these programs in the attached slideshow.

## VHEAG Panel & Discussion: How to Build Capacity and Increase Impact with a Limited Budget

*Roman Ortega, Director of Veterans Affairs and Recruitment, Lewis University*

*Kevin Smith, Director of Veterans Affairs & Testing Administration, Governors State University*

*Moderated by Amy Sherman, AVP of Policy and Innovation, CAEL*

## *What is your first step – how do you prioritize in planning?*

Roman: Start with your strategic plan and ask what facets of the university priorities and resources can we incorporate? What is the low-hanging fruit? Start with small victories and build from there.

Kevin: Small victories are huge! One of my first ones was at one of these VHEAG meetings, and we talked about VA fees. I went and asked the university where this money was - there turned out to be \$11,000! And it had to be used for veterans only, so we were able to direct it to our office.

Amy: Lots of things can get in the way of strategic planning, so work on your focus - like a mini-plan - look at potential opportunities, threats, and then ask what will it take to get there? Strategic planning will help us to speak the language of our bosses - explaining how your goals are advancing the mission of the school will increase your opportunity to convince them to support you!

## *How do you build the capacity to take on your priorities?*

Roman: I started putting the right people in the bus once I knew where the bus needed to be driven. I use student vets. Our 11-person team is two full-time staff, one graduate assistant, and the rest are VA work study students. We've also used Americorps VISTA, federal work study - wherever we can find additional resources! Partner with your student engagement office - work with the marketing department, finance, sociology, etc. They send me students to help work on projects for the veterans center.

Kevin: I currently have six VA work study students - they get all the forms together, the COEs, create folders, find the student schedule in the database, upload that into VA-ONCE. I empower them to do a lot. It took some time - we had some pushback from the school and had to send the students to some training. But it's so worth it for the one-on-one relationships they build with the student vets who come to our office for assistance. The VA pays for the work study and it's tax-free for the students who get the check.

## *Advisory committees and university foundations?*

Roman: We have a veterans advisory committee - a great way to have people help sell your message. Pull people who are directors of student services, financial aid - all the different touch points that impact student veterans and the friction points at your university. Have the committee meet quarterly, update them on your plan, rally them to help with programming and funding. It's all about finding other people to help you do the work.

Kevin: We work very closely with our foundation. We have a veterans' endowment now that people are making donation towards. Once it gets to a certain size we'll be able to utilize that. Our VP will now send me invitations to go to the south suburban foundation managers' conferences, which gets my reach out beyond the university. I get to go to golf outings and dinners and network with other foundations. This past year I was able to sit down at one of these with Senator Tammy Duckworth for 10 minutes.

## *External Sources?*

Kevin: We have the Chicago Heights veterans counseling center. A year ago we thought we had lost a veteran student. I was able to contact the counselor and they were able to locate the student inpatient at Hines Hospital. Having that rapport with outside sources allowed us to do that. We support the Manteno veterans home, and we sent a student worker to the Prince home to do an internship. That happened through this outside connection.

Roman: Student Veterans of America of Illinois - they offer programming for free. If you aren't involved with them, start now. It helps because you don't have to do a lot of legwork - you just broadcast the info.

Kevin: On the SVA note, the president and vice president of my student vet organization on campus made an amateur video pitch and sent it in to SVA, and we were approved for a \$1,000 grant.

Roman: We drafted a simple letter to the American Legion - some of them have some very specific funds that they can give out for certain projects. We got a \$5,000 grant for a student vets' emergency fund, like for students whose application is delayed and they need money to buy books or cover rent.

Check out the attached slideshow for more recommendations from Roman and Kevin!

## Going Forward & Announcements

- Ashley Becker of the Illinois Community College Board announced the Illinois Veterans Coordinators Training Conference on July 9, 2018, at Illinois State University in Normal. This training is specifically for the designated Student Veterans Coordinators at public institutions.
- Keep an eye out for coming details on a big event on October 4 with Student Veterans of America at Pritzker Military Library. You're invited to bring the senior administration / leadership from your school to come hear about the value of veterans for your institutions and what it means for our region.
- Our third "Best Practices Survey" is coming out this summer. It's completely anonymous and allows us to collect aggregate data and see what kind of progress we've made by coming together as a group and what directions we want to go in the future.
- We are going paperless in future meetings! We will be sharing the slideshows and other materials electronically.
- If you don't have a student veterans club on your campus, talk to Weston Polaski, the new President and CEO of SVA!

## In Attendance

- **John Bassmaji, DeVry University:** DMRC Staff Advisor-Chicago Loop Metro
- **Joe Bochantin, College of Lake County:** Veteran Student Services Coordinator
- **Debra Brown, Roosevelt University - Veterans Upward Bound**
- **Julie Carballo, North Central College:** Veteran & Military Student Services Coordinator
- **GeGe Carr, Northeastern Illinois University:** Director of Veterans Services
- **Ron Carter, East West University:** Director of Veteran Affairs and Transfer Students
- **Jessica Clemmons, University of Maryland University College:** Assistant Director, Veterans Services
- **Bridget Collier, University of Chicago:** Associate Provost for Equal Opportunity Programs
- **Karl Constant, Benedictine University:** Assistant Director of Student Life
- **Stacey Dixon, National Louis University:** Veterans and Military Program Coordinator
- **Jacob Hill, Elmhurst College:** Veteran Support Coordinator
- **R.J. Jenkins, Columbia University:** Curriculum Designer, Center for Veteran Transition & Integration
- **Anitra King, Elgin Community College:** Veteran and Student Success Specialist
- **Jesus Molina, UIC:** Associate Director of Student Veteran Affairs
- **Tom Molony, Loyola University:** Associate Director of Military Veterans Services
- **Trent Orndorf, American Intercontinental University - Atlanta Veteran Center:** Senior National Military Relations Manager
- **Roman Ortega, Lewis University:** Director, Veterans Affairs and Recruitment
- **Weston Polaski, Student Veterans of America - Illinois:** President and CEO
- **Ramon Prieto, National Louis University:** Director of Veteran Student Coordination
- **Brooke Roche, Oakton Community College:** Student Veteran Advisor Representative
- **Georges Sanon, Prairie State College:** Coordinator, Student Veterans Center
- **Kevin Smith, Governors State University:** Director of Veteran Affairs
- **Cari Stevenson, Kankakee Community College:** Professor of Psychology and partial Veterans Programming Coordinator
- **Derek Tyson, Olive-Harvey College:** Veterans Services Specialist
- **Marcus Williams El, Harold Washington College:** Veterans Services Specialist
  
- **Amy Sherman, CAEL:** AVP of Innovation and Policy
- **Iren Raye, CAEL:** Temporary Project Specialist