

# **Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group Meeting**

**McCormick Foundation and CAEL  
February 6, 2013**

Meeting Summary

## **Introduction**

The seventh meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group was held on February 6, 2013 in CAEL's office at 55 E. Monroe in Chicago. There were 21 attendees, including representatives from 15 colleges and programs serving the Chicago area. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

## **Best Practices Survey**

Becky Klein-Collins explained that CAEL is surveying institutions in the affinity group about the ways in which each is serving student veterans. There are two main purposes for the survey. The first is to give all members of the affinity group a snapshot of the policies and programs in place at other institutions. The second is to provide us with a way to measure the impact of the affinity group. In addition, CAEL hopes to use the survey to learn more about what members of the group would like to see the group do in the future. Becky said that she would email a link to the online survey to the group and asked group members to complete the survey within a week.

## **Mental Health Workshop Debriefing**

Amy Sherman asked the group for additional feedback on the mental health workshop that was held in December. The conversation focused on the presentation that was given by Dr. Eric Proescher and Dr. Holly Passi from the Jesse Brown VA Hospital because they had asked for additional feedback. The consensus of the group was that the presentation provided a very helpful overview of mental health issues, but most group members would have liked to hear more about how non-clinicians can respond to, and be proactive about, mental health issues. The group agreed that learning more about how to respond in emergency situations would have been very valuable. One or two group members also thought that the presentation was too long.

James Flagg announced that he had shared information about the workshop with administrators at Robert Morris University and that he had been invited to give a brief presentation on mental health issues and student veterans to high-level members of the administration. He asked for suggestions on the group about what should be included. Suggestions focused on the importance of providing concrete suggestions for administrators, including lists of next steps and of resources. Kendrea Atkins and Annette Wright said that they had done similar presentations and that they would share those presentations with the group.

## **Illinois Joining Forces Update**

Amy Sherman provided the group with an update on Illinois Joining Forces (IJF), which is a network of public and nonprofit institutions, supported by IDVA, working to develop a coordinated approach to veterans services in Illinois. Members of IJF coordinate their activities through working groups, including an Education working group that is chaired by Amy Sherman and Jennifer Timmons from the Illinois Community College Board. The Education working group's first project is developing faculty training. The group would benefit from more representatives from colleges and universities; affinity group members are encouraged to join the group. Anyone interested in joining IJF and the Education working group should register on the IJF site: <http://www.illinoisjoiningforces.org/> The next meeting of the Education working group will be on April 15 at CAEL's office.

Cindy Rathunde shared that IDVA Director Erica Borggren has been working with the group to schedule a meeting with the American Council on Education (ACE) to discuss the use of ACE military credit recommendations at Illinois colleges and universities. A meeting will be held in the Chicago area on April 23 or 24.

## **Program Showcase**

### ***Robert Morris University***

James Flagg provided information about services for student veterans at Robert Morris University (RMU). The presentation focused on the program's structure, their budget and outreach to student veterans, and the highlights of their services.

Services available to student veterans were limited when James began working at RMU as an admissions counselor in 2009. However, he used a list of recommended services for military students available at GIJobs.com to begin making changes at the university. He works closely with the school certifying official and has slowly gained support from the administration, a change that James believes is largely due to the Valuing Veterans event. The Provost and Vice President for Enrollment Services are now involved in programming for student veterans. James remains the staff member who has the most daily contact with student veterans at RMU.

Funding comes from the office of Student Life, which generally provides a stipend of a few hundred dollars per year to support a student veterans' club. It is possible to request additional funds if needed, and these requests are generally approved. In addition, James has organized fundraisers, partnering with groups like the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Chicago Firefighters' Union.

Outreach efforts include:

- A question on intake forms about whether a student is eligible for veterans benefits, which helps identify more veterans than simply asking a student if he or she is a veteran
- Monthly pizza parties
- Presentations at the City Colleges about transferring to RMU
- Regular contact with IDVA and Vet Centers
- Education and resource fairs
- Social media campaigns

Other services for student veterans at RMU include an SVA chapter, an on-campus veterans center, and a student veterans' advisory council.

### ***Northeastern Illinois University***

Cynthia Rathunde's presentation on services at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) focused on its Military Departure Policy, which provides guidelines for military-connected students who have been called to active duty or who require medical treatment. The aim of the policy is to ensure that students are not penalized academically as a result of military service or medical treatment.

The policy makes NEIU's Veterans Services office the point of contact for affected students so that students do not have to work with individual professors. The single point of contact is also useful for faculty because it relieves them of the responsibility for vetting military orders or determining reasonable accommodations. For students who will miss one to three weeks of classes, the policy specifies that staff in the Veterans Services office will work with faculty to help a student make up missed work. In cases of extended absence, professors may assign a letter grade based on work already completed, or a student may receive an incomplete or a grade of "W" (withdrawal).

The policy covers medical issues, including VA appointments, as well as calls to active duty. Cindy noted that she would like to see military spouses and dependents, who may be primary caretakers for veterans, covered under the policy, but the policy currently only applies to students who are themselves either active-duty military or veterans.

Cindy noted that there are two major advantages to using policies such as this to improve services for student veterans. The first is that policy changes are generally free for an institution, so it is possible to pursue such a change even without a budget for veterans services. Second, this change required coordination beyond the Veterans Services office, which helped raise awareness about student veterans in other offices at NEIU.

Cindy also noted that her office receives some funding through a stipend for VA certifications. The VA automatically sends this stipend, which is called a “VA reporting fee” and is based on the number of certifications at the institution, to colleges and universities. Regulations state that this fee must be used to fund an office for student veterans (not a student veterans club), so this may provide an additional source of funding for some affinity group members.

In response to questions from the group about the implementation of the policy, Cindy said that assigning grades of “W” has not yet created a significant problem for students hoping to go on to graduate school. Cindy noted that most grad school applications provide space in which applicants can explain anything on their transcripts that may require elaboration. The Military Departure Policy has also been vetted by financial aid staff at NEIU, who have developed language that ensures that this policy does not conflict with financial aid regulations. Cindy said that she would send this language to the group.

## **Prior Learning Assessment**

Amy Sherman, Becky Klein-Collins, and Joan Ryan provided information to the group on prior learning assessment (PLA) options for student veterans. The presentation discussed CAEL’s involvement with PLA, different types of PLA and their costs, and the Illinois Military Credit Initiative.

### ***PLA options and their costs***

### ***Military transcripts and ACE credit recommendations***

Military transcripts document training and coursework completed during military service. The Department of Defense contracts with ACE’s Center for Lifelong Learning to implement the ACE Military Evaluations Program. This program evaluates formal military training in terms of academic credit. ACE publishes the *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services*, which provides the results of these evaluations, course descriptions, learning outcomes, and recommendations for the award of academic credit. The guide is available online at: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Military-Guide-Online.aspx>

Colleges and universities use these guides and the military transcripts developed through the program to award college-level credit for learning acquired in the military.

The military transcript system currently varies according to service branch, but a Joint Service Transcript (JST) is scheduled to launch on March 1, 2013. The JST will use the same format as the current SMART transcript system.

There is no charge for military transcripts, but colleges may charge a transcription fee in order to post credits to a student’s transcript.

### *Credit by examination*

Veterans may demonstrate that they have acquired college-level learning by taking examinations that test their knowledge of content usually taught in postsecondary courses. The four main types of examinations through which veterans can earn academic credit are the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DSST, Excelsior College Examinations, and challenge exams.

CLEP, DSST, and Excelsior College examinations are associated with ACE credit recommendations that help colleges and universities determine how much credit to award students who pass the exams. Challenge exams are developed by academic departments and faculty members at individual institutions, rather than by a national organization.

Costs for the standardized national exams range from \$77 to \$375. Students may generally take challenge exams free of charge, but colleges may charge a transcription fee in order to post credits to a student's transcript.

### *Portfolio Assessment*

The portfolio assessment process requires students to submit a set of written documents that document college-level learning and skills. A portfolio usually includes the following:

- A cover letter outlining the student's credit request
- A statement of educational, personal and career goals
- A chronological record of college-level learning experiences
- An explanation of the student's knowledge in a specific area of learning and how it relates to the content and learning objectives for a specific college-level course
- Documentation, such as writing samples, of the learning claimed
- Other supporting materials such as reference letters, transcripts, recognitions, and certificates

Portfolios are generally assessed by faculty according to quality standards established by CAEL.

The process of creating a portfolio varies from one postsecondary institution to another. Colleges determine for which specific courses a student may earn credit by portfolio and offer varying levels of support to students completing portfolios. Some offer courses in which all students are guided through the process of creating a portfolio, while others provide various types of advising during the portfolio process.

The portfolio process allows students to earn credit for more varied types of learning and experience than other academic credit options, but it is also a lengthier process than other options. Completion of a portfolio generally takes approximately two months, after which a student must wait several weeks to learn with the portfolio has been approved for credit.

There is a fee, which varies by institution, for the portfolio process.

## ***Military Credit Initiative***

Joan Ryan shared information about this initiative, which is a collaborative effort among IDVA, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and Illinois Community College Board, working with u.select Illinois and five community colleges. The goal of the project, for which they are currently seeking funding, is to increase college-completion rates among military and veteran students. The pilot phase of this initiative began about ten months ago, starting with community colleges with large veteran populations.

As part of the initiative, IDVA will gather information from the military about the content of military training and coursework, as well as on the ACE credit recommendations relevant to that training. IDVA will work to make that information available to postsecondary institutions within Illinois and to provide military and veteran students with information about transferring military credit into academic institutions.

In addition, IDVA will work with postsecondary institutions to determine the military training most likely to correlate with existing certificates and degree programs. The initiative is currently focusing on technical and vocational fields, in which the credit transfer process is likely to be relatively straightforward, that are popular with Illinois veterans.

IDVA hopes that this initiative will lead to a statewide articulation agreement in which Illinois institutions automatically award credit for certain types of military training and coursework.

## **Next Steps**

- Best practices survey
  - Group members to complete the survey
  - CAEL to collect and analyze the results and share them at the next meeting
- Presentations
  - Kendrea Atkins and Annette Wright will supply copies of short presentations about student veterans that they delivered at their institutions.
  - Charlotte Cahill will forward the presentations to the group.
- Cindy Rathunde will supply an example of the language regarding course withdrawals and financial aid used in NEIU's military deployment policy.
- Contact Sharron Irvin-Williams if your institution would like to participate in the transfer fair at Olive-Harvey College on March 6.
- Next meeting:
  - Discuss how the group might use the results from the best practices survey to continue engaging college and university leaders
  - Debrief on the February CCME meeting in San Diego and the April ACE meeting in Illinois

## Dates to Remember

- **February 22:** Veterans Upward Bound black history Jeopardy game for student veterans at the Pritzker Military Library
- **March 6:** Transfer Fair at Olive-Harvey College
- **April 15:** IJF Education Working Group Meeting at CAEL's office
- **April 23 or 24:** Meeting with ACE on credit recommendations
- **April 29:** Affinity group meeting from 11 am to 2 pm at Roosevelt University

## Meeting Attendance

NAME	INSTITUTION
Ivan Hernandez	American Intercontinental University
Charles Goodrum	Chicago State University
Kendrea Atkins	City Colleges of Chicago - Daley College
Robert Thompson	City Colleges of Chicago - Malcolm X College
Sharron Irvin-Williams	City Colleges of Chicago - Olive-Harvey College
Tim Davis	City Colleges of Chicago - Truman College
General McArthur	Morraine Valley Community College
John Dill	National Louis University
Cynthia Rathunde	Northeastern Illinois University
Julia Jenkins	Northwestern University
James Flagg	Robert Morris
Asia Mitchell	Roosevelt University
Pete LaHaie	Roosevelt University
Annette Wright	UIC
Chris Chalko	Veterans Upward Bound
Charlotte Cahill	CAEL
Becky Klein-Collins	CAEL
Amy Sherman	CAEL
Anna Laubach	McCormick Foundation
Joan Ryan	IDVA