

# How Do Schools Ensure Veterans Succeed?

A Case Study of Five Northern California  
Colleges & Universities

Institute for Veteran Policy 2019



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

## Acknowledgments



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Amy Fairweather, JD, Director

Megan Zottarelli, MPA, Assistant Director

Victor Inzunza, Policy Analyst, Lead Investigator

Tyler Solorio, Policy Analyst

Julianna Friis, Research Fellow

Thomas Rowland, Research Fellow

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Swords to Plowshares

San Francisco, CA

(415) 252-4788

[www.swords-to-plowshares.org](http://www.swords-to-plowshares.org)

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This project is no longer operating and was not included in Swords to Plowshares' current study.

# Executive Summary

Swords to Plowshares’ Institute for Veteran Policy conducted case studies in five California colleges in the Bay Area, Santa Cruz County, and San Joaquin County to assess how these institutions address the needs of student veterans and provide vital supports to ensure academic success.

Schools are most capable of achieving institutional change when they are supported by campus leadership and have identified areas of need as a community. While there is public goodwill in the form of the GI Bill and other education benefits, our colleges have a responsibility to use those GI Bill dollars as an investment to ensure veterans succeed in school. Overall, our goal is to shed light on effective programs, resource needs, and how colleges can coordinate services and institutionalize their commitment to support student veterans.

This study took place from Spring 2018 to Spring 2019, and complements findings from our previous study, “The Path Forward: What Universities Need to Know to Help Student Veterans Succeed.” The schools included in the study were San Joaquin Delta College (SJDC), University of the Pacific (UOP), California State University, East Bay (CSUEB), California State University, Stanislaus (CSUS), and University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC).

Our research design was a case study approach using mixed methods, including survey instruments to veterans and educational professionals, individual interviews with 15 campus staff and faculty, school observations, and secondary data analysis.

Our findings indicate all schools studied have an intention and commitment to support student veterans but lack training and awareness of services, and too often work in silos without interdepartmental coordination or support from administration. Recommendations to institutionalize supports follow our findings.



## Main Findings

86 percent of campus staff and faculty had not received training on veteran and military culture that would help improve their ability to work with this population; almost none of the faculty in our sample had received training

Nearly 76 percent of staff and faculty said they would like their college to provide training in veteran culture

Faculty feel unable to proactively engage veterans to better understand their needs, and veterans perceive that faculty lack an understanding of veteran needs and services

Interdepartmental referrals show many go above and beyond to support veterans, but often without coordinated efforts

Almost half of veterans sampled who have service-connected disabilities have not applied for disability accommodation; disability services cite stigma, privacy concerns, and misunderstanding of how their disabilities are tied to the need for accommodation as the primary inhibitors

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# Background & Methods

Between the Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters, Swords to Plowshares' Institute for Veteran Policy conducted a case study of five Northern California colleges and universities. Our previous study, "The Path Forward: What Universities Need to Know to Help Student Veterans Succeed" found that challenges with transition from military to school can be worsened by inaccessible resources and inadequate information. Veterans resource centers (VRCs)<sup>1</sup> were under-resourced. Veterans felt faculty and staff lacked cultural competency in military and veteran experiences, and that they provided mixed levels of support. These challenges highlighted the lack of institutional commitment to serve veterans.

We continued our research with the understanding that every school is unique and has different strategies to support their student populations. That said, many of the themes we discovered in our previous research were true in the current study as we will discuss in our findings. While the previous study focused on student veteran perceptions of service, this study explored education professional motivations, challenges, and best practices using survey research and increased interviews with campus staff, faculty, and administration officials. In addition, we further examined outreach

and engagement strategies, faculty and staff motivation to respond to veteran needs, and interdepartmental referral and coordination.

We applied a case study approach to our research using mixed methods design, including: two survey instruments, one to 78 veterans from all schools and one including 91 educational professionals from all schools; individual interviews with 15 campus staff, faculty, and administration officials with three interviews from each school; school observations; and secondary data analysis using publicly available data.<sup>2</sup> We believe this is a more balanced approach to evaluating each school, because a greater number of school staff and faculty were able to provide their perspectives. We also used multiple methods of investigating service gaps, variations among each school, and achievements, which provided several areas of inquiry.

San Joaquin Delta College, University of the Pacific, California State University, East Bay, California State University, Stanislaus, and University of California, Santa Cruz all participated in the study. We chose these schools because they represent a diverse school type and geography within Northern California. Unlike the previous study, we included both

urban and rural schools. Also, different from our last study, all have a VRC—an office on campus that provides an array of support and services including veteran space, study areas, peer support, and other assistance. As a result, our aim was to see how services are coordinated both in and outside of veteran-specific services. Originally, we planned on studying two additional schools, yet after exhaustive outreach we were unable to secure adequate participation from one school's employees and student veterans, and another college was heavily impacted by the Northern California fires during our survey and interview outreach, and thus couldn't fully participate.

A raffle was used to incentivize participation in the survey for student veterans, with gift cards as the primary form of compensation. Education professionals who took the survey received no compensation for their participation.

Interviews were conducted solely through phone calls scheduled with certifying officials, disability offices, financial aid personnel, and faculty who had direct contact with student veterans on campuses. Campus staff were informed of their rights as participants of the study. Informed consent was given and obtained prior to the interviews. Recordings, transcripts, and survey

responses remained confidential and files were secured by Swords to Plowshares staff. Participant recruitment focused on campus fliers and in-person canvassing at schools, social media, email distribution using Hunter.io, referrals, and small group meetings at veterans resource centers on the campuses studied.

Survey questions included Likert-scaled responses and other close-ended data, and also allowed the opportunity for many open-ended responses. We employed a sequential explanatory strategy by first disseminating the survey instrument to staff and faculty, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative interview data to build on the initial survey results. All interviews used a one-on-one format guided by a script, but the investigator encouraged the interviewees to speak freely and remain conversational.<sup>3</sup>

The data collected from the interviews was inductively analyzed and coded with Microsoft Excel and Dedoose software to identify common themes. Survey instruments were developed in SurveyMonkey software and analyzed in Microsoft Excel.

<sup>3</sup> Because we allowed interviews to be conversational, some of the quotes we include in this report have been edited slightly for grammatical clarity. Quotes that have been heavily edited for grammatical clarity are included in our endnotes in their entirety.

<sup>1</sup> While the umbrella term is Veterans Resource Center, many schools call their centers by a different name: UCSC has a VETS Program, CSUS has a Veterans Affairs Office. To be consistent, we will refer to all veterans centers in our study as veterans resource centers.

<sup>2</sup> Data was analyzed from American Community Survey American Fact Finder, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, the US Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill® Comparison Tool, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and information from school websites.

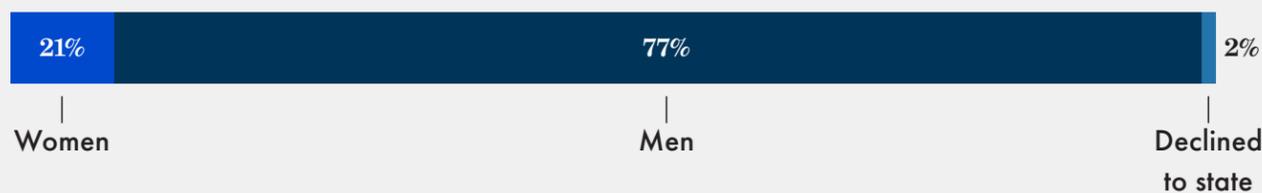
# Demographic Overview of Veteran Survey Participants

Student veterans who participated in the survey were representative of the overall veteran population. All military branches, with the exception of the Coast Guard, were represented. The majority of respondents were classified as Post-9/11 veterans, having served on or after September 11, 2001. The most common deployment locations were Iraq and Afghanistan.

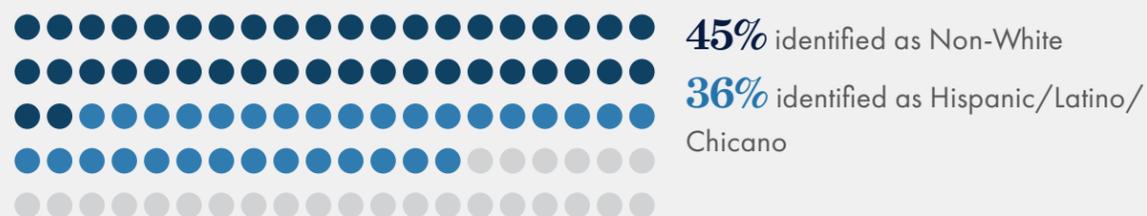
Women veterans made up 21 percent (national average is approximately 10 percent) of the respondents compared with 77 percent of men identifying as veterans (2 percent of the sample declined to disclose their gender). While specific outreach was conducted to LGBTQ+ groups on campuses, transgender and non-binary veterans were underrepresented with no participants in the study. Overall, veterans of color were highly represented with 45 percent identifying as Non-White and 36 percent identifying as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano veterans, yet were underrepresented at some schools compared to others. Thirty-eight percent of all college students are over 25, compared with 85 percent of our sample over 25, with the majority 25–34 (45 percent) or 35–44 (27 percent).<sup>i</sup> Thirty-three percent of all CSUEB students are over 25, compared with 95 percent among CSUEB veterans in our sample.<sup>ii</sup> Thirty-seven percent of our sample were married, and 9 percent were divorced. One in five veterans in our sample were unstably housed or homeless.

## Demographics

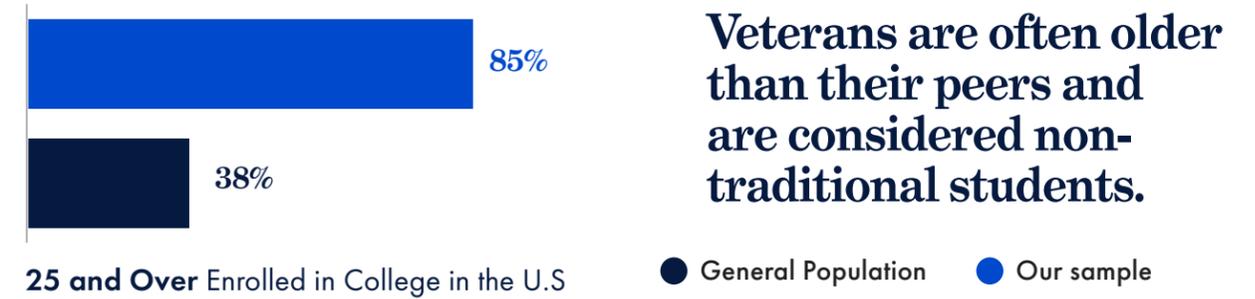
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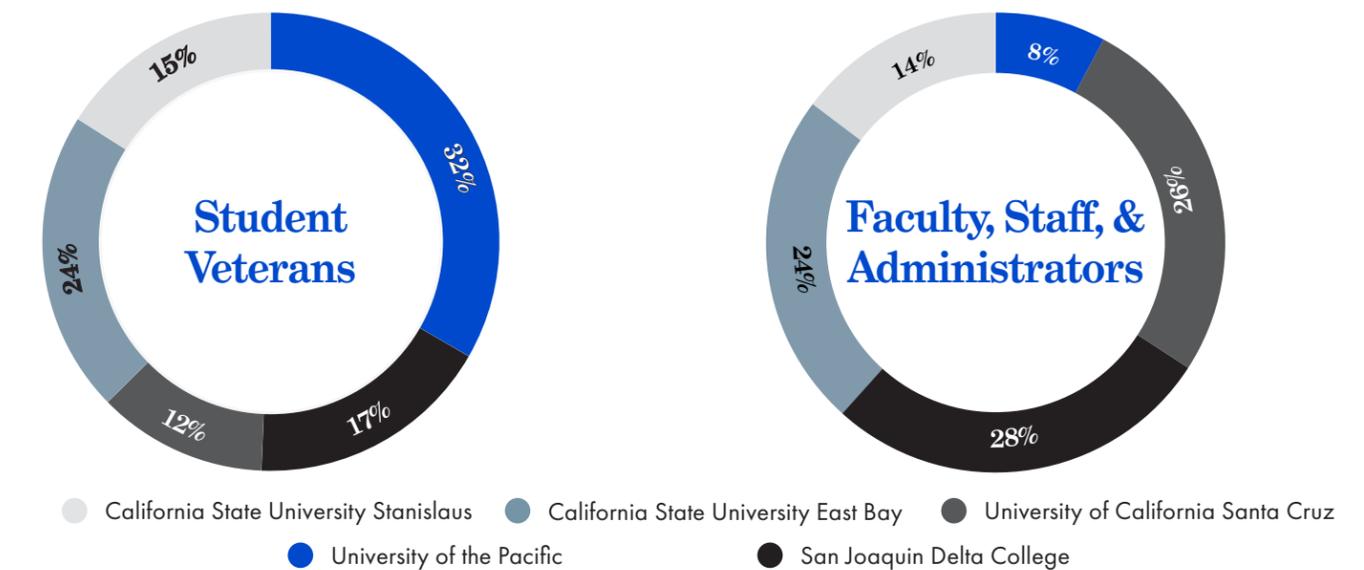
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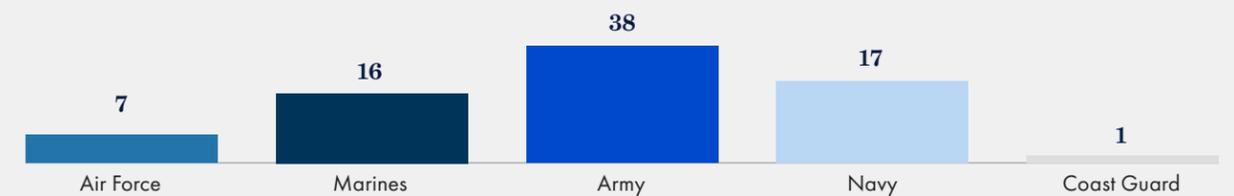
### AGE



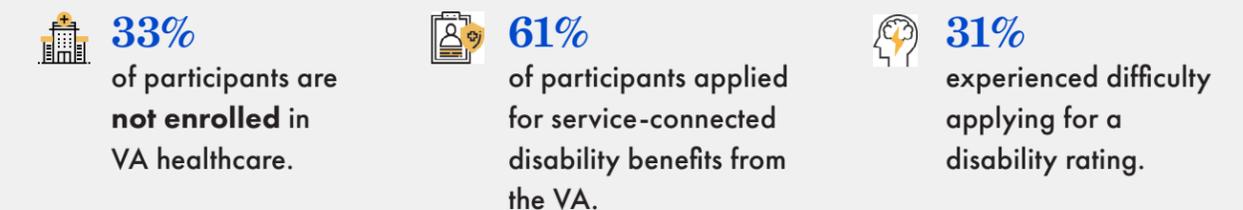
### PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPATION BY SCHOOL



### BRANCH OF SERVICE



### HEALTHCARE



# Finding One

*Most outreach is focused on getting veterans to attend, but veterans aren't aware of many needed resources nor do they know how to navigate services once in school*

In this section we highlight progress and challenges in accessing information about veterans and veteran services on campus. Services and supports are available on all campuses through the VRCs, certifying officials (who are responsible for ensuring that paperwork and eligibility requirements of the GI Bill are satisfied so that students get their financial aid), disability offices, academic counseling and student success programs, mental health and wellness counseling, and individual faculty resources. However, findings suggest that students and staff alike may not have a clear understanding of the availability or function of these separate supports. To be clear, our findings prove there is a demonstrated effort to meet student veteran needs, many with impressive outreach strategies to engage potential veteran students. Gaps in services are identified so that schools may improve systems and institutionalize a comprehensive strategy.

## Outreach and Engagement

The first step in outreach and engagement is identification. Our previous study found that some schools only track the veteran status of those who apply for veteran education benefits, which excludes veterans who are not eligible for GI Bill and those who have exhausted their benefits. All schools in this study identify military/veteran/dependent status at

school enrollment application. It was difficult, however, to determine through our research the actual numbers of veterans in each school, and sometimes staff gave different unverifiable numbers. Tracking veteran status through programs is important so staff and faculty can proactively engage and identify needs.

Schools varied with regard to when and how outreach to veteran students begins. Some have transition advisors who work with incoming students throughout application, acceptance, and matriculation. UCSC's VRC staff contacts veteran students who self-identify on applications to explain veteran education benefits and resources on campus, and is also planning to work with local community colleges to recruit veterans. UOP has a checklist for incoming students on their website and hosts veteran events on campus, primarily led by their Student Veterans Organization (SVO). These efforts are commendable, especially considering many departments are short-staffed. However, most schools lack a systematic coordinated outreach and engagement strategy, and from what we learned, outreach tended to focus on getting veterans enrolled rather than on supports once veterans are in school.

Educational Attainment Among US Veterans and Non-Veterans				
Total:	Veterans	% of overall POP	Non-Veterans	% of overall POP
Less than high school graduate	1,226,822	7%	26,208,187	13%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	5,318,740	28%	53,693,378	27%
Some college or associate's degree	6,931,138	37%	55,622,749	28%
Bachelor's degree or higher	5,200,875	28%	61,446,875	31%

While some websites are easy to navigate with well explained veteran resources and benefits, others simply list resources with no explanations of what the VRC is or how they serve veterans, and some lists have too many external links that can be confusing for veterans to navigate. Only two schools disclose how many veterans are in the school, and none post retention or graduation rates (although SJDC posts theirs on the VA GI Bill Tool website).

Despite veteran education benefits and programs that appeal to veterans, veterans are underrepresented at the schools we studied. While veterans represent 8 percent of the US population<sup>iii</sup> and 6 percent of the overall California adult population,<sup>iv</sup> they represent 1-3 percent of the overall school population in the five schools we studied.<sup>v</sup> This is due partly to veterans being older than the traditional US population. Veterans do pursue college and obtain degrees at similar rates to other Americans (see chart above)

Veterans explained that when entering college, they had to seek out services on their own, and veterans from schools without veteran-specific orientations stated that veteran services were never explained at orientations or otherwise. One VRC staff highlighted this problem as well, stating: "There is no mention of the VRC. And if we don't have the veteran counselor sitting in

those sessions, and if they don't self-identify, then nobody ever finds out about this place. That's what we've been finding out. We have issues of people even finding out that we have a veterans resource center on campus."

	UCSC	CSUEB	CSUS	UOP	SJDC
Veteran Student Population	225*	400	500	102*	500
Total Student Population	19,457	12,557	9,000	6,500	23,000
% of Total Student Population	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%

Source: school websites as of May 2019, USDVA GI Bill Comparison Tool, and interviews with VRC staff.  
 \* These numbers are reported on USDVA GI Bill Comparison Tool and only include those who have received education benefits from the USDVA. Actual numbers of veterans were not reported on the school website or by the VRC.

Once they are enrolled, outreach to veterans to engage in veteran services tends to be minimal. A veteran surveyed explained: "Some of my encounters include not much information or non-existent [information] about veteran specific/campus-related events, benefits, and [it's] hard to find on the school website as well." And another professor cites the need for veterans to actively seek out services: "If they haven't signed up for things, they haven't identified. You can't reach them and that's difficult."

VRCs, disability services, and certifying officials that we reviewed do provide an array of services to veterans, but there are students who don't learn of them—or learn about them later in their academic career and consequently miss opportunities. VRCs lack adequate staffing to go out into the school community and discuss resources. As one veteran states, "It [the VRC] has been helpful, however sometimes feels as if not much participation has been put into our campus as far as informing veterans of campus-specific benefits; i.e. how priority registration is working out for us, no kind of orientation for incoming students regarding veterans' benefits/general campus veteran-specific activities. It just does not seem active with the school and is just more of a placeholder. Otherwise the gentlemen working there are very helpful with answering questions."

In addition, only SJDC VRC described any additional efforts to reach out to specific veteran populations such as women or LGBTQ+ veterans. They attend women veteran events, employ current women veteran students as work study staff, and host women veteran events. They also establish partnerships with LGBTQ+ and minority groups identified on campus. Women and LGBTQ+ veterans in general are less likely to identify as veterans and seek services from veteran-specific providers. It follows that intentional efforts to conduct outreach is warranted.

Financial aid offices, certifying officials, and disability services did not distribute information on veterans benefits and accommodations

consistently. Many cited an inability to outreach and engage veterans, a lack of information specific to veterans on their website and in materials, and the challenge of self-disclosure of veteran status as impeding their efforts to distribute information. However, it was clear in our interviews with staff that they are not proactively engaging veterans to participate in services, and many assumed that any needed services can be coordinated through the VRC.

Our previous study found that challenges with transition from military to school can be worsened by inaccessible resources and inadequate information. This holds true in our current study as well. There are lost opportunities to support student veterans, and the veterans in our sample who reported very little or no engagement in veteran services and benefits were more likely to state that they are struggling to complete their degree. In addition, engagement limited to veteran-specific environments may exclude some veterans who may be less inclined to self-identify, including women and LGBTQ+.

An interdepartmental approach to outreach may increase veteran engagement in non-veteran specific campus services and overall participation in campus life. Disability services, for example, can visit VRCs to provide information on applying for disability accommodation and how a service-connected disability can be tied to the need for such a service. Academic advisors, tutors, and mental health services can have office hours inside the VRCs. Some school VRCs already do this.

## Student Awareness and Utilization of Campus Services

Ongoing service utilization appears to revolve around the VRCs, which offer veteran-specific services, space, and culture. Almost all veterans stated they use the VRC, and those who do visit VRCs appear to do so every day or multiple times per week. All but one school have a system to track veterans who come to the VRC, either using an online database for veterans to sign in and out or an ID card swipe system. Only two schools identify and track veterans who self-disclosed veteran status at school enrollment but who aren't going to the VRC in order to engage them.

### 58 percent of veterans surveyed have used on-campus academic counseling.

Over half of our sample of veterans have used on-campus academic counseling. Academic counselors are in a unique position to ensure that front-end services are provided to students and that their coursework meets their needs to succeed in school. Academic counselors can provide information on military transfer credits, priority registration for veterans, disability accommodations, GI Bill time-limit impacts on coursework and course load, as well as veteran services on campus. As one VRC stated: "They're the first ones that have to interact with that student before they get into class. We have to make sure that their benefits are taken care of. We have to make sure that they're in the classes that they have to be in, because if they're in the wrong classes, VA is not going to pay for them. So we want to make sure that as student services, we provide the best that we can."

Academic advisors we surveyed noted the difficulties that occur when veterans don't self-disclose their needs. A CSUS academic and career counselor stated: "In my experience, this population may not ask for assistance or share that they are struggling to find what they need. They tend to be very self-sufficient and may be under-utilizing services available to them."

## + Highlight Of Successful Services

UCSC offers tours for veterans interested in attending the school, led by peer counselors, as well as a veteran-specific orientation for incoming students.

SJDC VRC has a food pantry, which is vital given that a significant amount of college students are food insecure.\* As one veteran mentioned: "They receive donations for a pantry which helps us eat when we're broke."

Despite having only one staff person, CSUS' VRC staff comes to orientations, gives veterans tours of the VRC, and introduces them to services.

CSUEB has an enrollment counselor who meets with prospective veteran students. If a veteran contacts their office, they'll work with them on the application process, and if a veteran indicates veteran status on the application, the department pulls the data and sends these veterans information on veteran-specific services.

\*A 2019 survey by Hope Center for College, Community and Justice indicated that 45 percent of student respondents from over 100 institutions said they had been food insecure in the past 30 days.

**Students from all schools indicated their school offers priority registration, though a third of the student veterans said they weren't aware if their school offers it.**

Priority registration allows student veterans to register for classes before they open up to all students, which allows veterans using the GI Bill greater access to impacted classes—discouraging them from taking unneeded classes and wasting their benefits—and gives them the opportunity to stay on track for graduation. We were pleased to find that all schools offer priority registration to veterans, however, it is critical that all veterans are made aware of this service.

**Only two veterans stated they received help from housing assistance programs. All other veterans were unaware of housing resources, and almost all stated they would benefit from such a resource.**

UCSC offers guaranteed housing to veterans for two years, yet many veterans did not appear to use such a service: "I never sought help from staff [for housing assistance]. I can find housing, but the housing market here is terrible, and I have considered leaving this school because of that." Given that a recent study found 50,000

California CSU college students could be homeless,<sup>vi</sup> and that one in five veterans in our sample were unstably housed (temporarily living with friends or family), homeless housing resources are key. The GI Bill provides a basic housing allowance, but as our previous research indicated, it's often not enough. The monthly basic allowance for housing (BAH) rate in Santa Cruz is \$2,541 compared to \$3,465 for CSUEB. While both are substantial, as the veteran above mentioned, the rental market in Santa Cruz is competitive and expensive. Landlords often don't consider BAH as income, which exacerbates the challenge of finding housing. And not all veterans are using the GI Bill as our current study indicates: 14 of the 78 veteran survey respondents are not receiving GI Bill benefits, and the number of veterans reported at each school we studied is as much as 60 percent more than those reported by the VA that receive veteran education benefits. We can't assume that housing needs are met by the GI Bill. Also, while we didn't specifically ask about food insecurity, this is a significant problem among college students. The SJDC VRC provides a food pantry to veterans, and other schools should consider offering the same service.

Student reports of not knowing about resources, including priority registration, mentors, or housing services, demonstrate a need for a more defined outreach and engagement strategy.

**21 of 47 veterans with service-connected disabilities have not applied for disability accommodation in their classes.**

Students in our sample listed a number of conditions for which they had VA service connection. This means that they have undergone a process to determine that they live with injuries or illnesses that occurred or were exacerbated during service, some with significant impacts to their health and well-being. Yet 21 of 47 veterans with service-connected disabilities have not applied for disability accommodation in their classes, despite many of their disabilities listed being among those that could possibly interfere with their classroom accessibility.

The majority of faculty (90 percent) surveyed stated they provide information about disability and accommodation in their syllabus, but as one instructor mentioned, "not everyone reads the syllabus."

**Service-Connected Conditions Listed**

- AC Tear
- Anxiety
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Clinical Depression
- Diabetes
- Fibromyalgia
- Gout
- Hearing Loss
- Hip Fractures
- Hypertension
- Fertility Related
- Insomnia
- Knee Pain
- Lower Back/Spine Pain
- Neck Pain
- Pancreatitis
- Plantar Fasciitis
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Shoulder Injury
- Sleep Apnea
- Tinnitus
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Vertigo

We cannot determine exactly why more veterans in our sample have not sought accommodations. They may be reticent to ask for help due to stigma or privacy concerns. They may not know about the types of accommodations available. And of course, some may not need accommodation. But this is an instance where military and veteran cultural competence is helpful in crafting outreach and engagement as evidenced in our interviews with disability offices. Some state that veterans aren't aware of how their disability ties into the need for accommodation. One disability office staff from CSUS explained why it is important to work closely with the veteran so that they understand accommodations: "Oftentimes students will come through, especially transfer students, with a whole bunch of accommodations and not understand why they have them. Or a whole bunch of accommodations, and they don't use them. So, we try to make sure that they understand why they have the accommodations that they have. That they understand how they work. That when they get out into the work world, they don't have an office like mine to help them. They have to [be able to] have a conversation with a supervisor or with human resources about...what accommodations they need. If they know what accommodations they need, and they know why it's effective, it makes it easier for them to be able to articulate that in the workplace."



## Examples of accommodations that schools may offer to veterans:

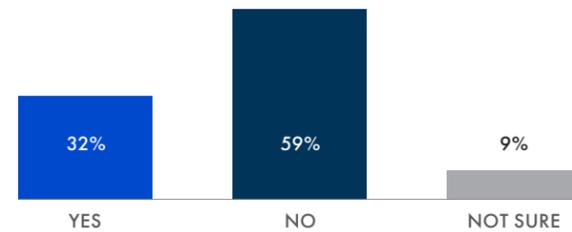
Extended test time, small group or room alone for testing, noise cancelling headset while testing, consideration for absences, consideration for extensions, ability to take short breaks in class/while testing, consideration for alternate content, consideration for alternate to oral presentation, consideration for alternate test day/time, preferential seating, ability to audio record lecture, housing accommodations, support animal in class

Disability service staff cite stigma in seeking support as well as privacy concerns as additional inhibitors among veterans who need accommodations: "We have to make sure that they understand that services are available and really understand that using services isn't going to follow them. I have students that think that if they come get services from my office, that somehow everybody on campus is going to know, and when they graduate their boss is going to know. It doesn't work like that. It doesn't say anything on your diploma. No one knows that you get services from my office unless you tell them."

### One in three veterans was struggling to complete their degree.

A significant number of veterans were struggling to complete their degree at the time of our study. This is true among all veteran subpopulations, including men, women, and veterans of color (who were slightly more likely to report they are struggling; and was consistent among four of five schools: (26 percent of CSUEB veterans stated they were struggling to complete their degree). Students who reported less awareness of resources were more likely to report they were struggling.

#### AT THIS TIME IN YOUR PROGRAM, DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE STRUGGLING TO COMPLETE YOUR DEGREE?



Peer mentorship and tutoring is a great way to engage veterans who might struggle with school, and also helps them connect to others in their community. As one VRC staff put it: "It's easier for veterans to tutor with another veteran....When it's a veteran helping another veteran, there's a different connection there. It's like speaking a different language." Similarly, CSUEB's VRC offers free workshops for required tests. As one veteran stresses, "It is super awesome that the veterans office can provide free help when others are charging a ridiculous amount of money for it." All schools offer peer mentorship programs with faculty, staff, alumni, or students who have served in the military, to offer guidance and support. Yet 59 percent of the veterans in our sample were unaware of such a service.

"Some of my encounters include **not much information or non-existent about veteran specific/campus-related events, benefits are hard to find** on the school website as well. At orientation, **no representation of a veterans panel or PowerPoint.**"

*Student, California State University Stanislaus*

## Student Perceptions of Quality of Services

Student perceptions of the VRCs are generally positive, and students rely on those staff to assist them with a variety of issues. One veteran gave a forthright response when asked about their VRC: "The VRC has the most valuable staff for veterans on campus. They work hard to address my issues even when the other departments are slacking. It is safe to say that in my opinion the VRC is pulling all of the weight when it comes to actually caring for the veterans."

### 3 of 4 veterans surveyed stated their VRC is helpful.

When we asked for a narrative response to "How helpful is your VRC?" many veterans responded specifically about how VRCs have assisted them with education benefits claims. Yet many of the veterans we surveyed expressed that the VRC was critical to their educational success: "I don't know what I would do without the staff at the veterans resource center. During my time at SJDC, they have made me comfortable and made sure that all of my needs are addressed immediately." Another: "Could not be successful without the support provided by the veterans resource center."

However, in some cases, students cite the following concerns about their VRC as impeding consistent or timely services: small space with no quiet study areas, lack of capacity, only one or two staff members, student veteran staff who are unable to help with education benefits paperwork, and staff turnover. One veteran stated: "I've been here less than two years and there have been four different people in that position." Most women in our sample use VRC for help with benefits paperwork, and while many women did characterize VRCs favorably (particularly women veterans at SJDC), they were more likely to cite problems with the VRC helping them with their education benefits paperwork than veteran men in our sample. Yet in most cases it was not easily discernable whether these problems were due to timeliness or errors, or whether they were the fault of the VA processing the claim, the certifying official submitting the claim, or the VRC staff's help with paperwork. It is important to note, however, that veterans cited problems with their benefit claims and that this impacts their ability to take coursework and succeed in school. And further, let's be clear: the majority of veterans sampled attributed their success not to academic advising, GI Bill, or good instructors, but to the VRCs that are there specifically to meet their needs.

### **3 of 4 veterans sampled stated communication with their certifying official is clear and responsive.**

When interviewing and surveying certifying officials, there were several common threads. As we discovered in our previous research, certifying officials often share duties in the Registrar's Office on top of processing GI Bill benefits claims. When asked whether this challenge is consistent with our previous findings, one certifying official responded: "To be a certifying official is very time consuming.... And there are always adjustments that need to be made. It's challenging. I feel like I don't have extra time to be over there assisting every single student. For giving them the attention or [fulfilling the] needs that they want because I have other financial aid or other things on my desk that need to be attended to as well." Some schools have certifying officials co-located in VRCs, and some VRC staff assist veterans with paperwork to apply for education benefits. Veterans were more likely to state that communication with certifying officials was clear and responsive if they were attending schools that coordinate benefits paperwork with the VRC.

### **1 in 4 veterans who've used academic counseling services said the counseling staff are well trained in veteran issues.**

Over half of the students had used on-campus academic counseling, but only one in four stated that the counseling staff were well trained in veteran issues. Because we surveyed this question, it's unclear whether veterans perceive either a lack of knowledge of issues related to veteran-specific benefits and resources or whether this perception pertains to veteran-related issues overall. A couple of the veterans in our survey stressed the importance of having an academic counselor who could respond to their needs: "I feel like veterans would benefit more from a veteran's academic counselor that is aware of their academic program and needs, both on and off-campus, to help them navigate through this period." Another emphasized how this position could be a point-person for veterans navigating resources, describing that position in this way: "A veterans counselor that can act as an advisor or liaison between academic planning, tutoring, VA educational benefits, job-search support as well as advise or assist with housing, transportation, and physical and mental health/wellbeing." There are lost opportunities if veterans aren't informed about possible military transfer credits, impacted classes that can affect their veteran education benefits, disability accommodations, and veteran-specific resources. Many VRC staff currently act in this role, but they often don't have the capacity to case manage hundreds of veteran students.

### **The majority of veteran students agree (84 percent), and notably, all women veterans agree that a trained VA therapist who gives regular office hours would be a useful resource to veterans on campus.**

Our previous study highlighted successful partnerships with the VA and Vet Centers to provide mental health services on-site in VRCs through regular office hours in private spaces within the centers. During this study, we did not specifically ask veterans whether they've sought mental health support on campus as we didn't want them to be concerned about privacy, but we did ask whether they believe having a trained VA therapist with regular office hours on campus would be a useful resource, and the majority agreed. While we only surveyed two mental health professionals from two separate schools in our current study, neither had received training to help them provide services to veterans. Veterans in our previous and current study noted the importance of having access to a therapist who understands their service-connected issues. The VA has made such arrangements with University of California, Berkeley and City College of San Francisco, schools included in our previous study.

UCSC currently offers veteran-specific counseling and the campus is already working towards creating a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with their local Vet Center. Veterans from all other schools gave insight as to why a VA therapist would be a useful resource. A SJDC student stated: "This would help so much as I always have questions, and the VRC staff is not obligated to address the issues, nor should they be." Another SJDC student cited: "Yes, it's extremely difficult to get an appointment with a therapist through the VA. Having one on campus would be [a] very important resource for veterans." A CSUEB student emphasized: "I think a trained VA therapist would offer specific VA-related services that others on the campus are not familiar with or even aware of." Another CSUEB student stated: "I think there is a great need for this. I think a lot of veterans don't feel well-integrated into the student population." A CSUS student added: "This would be super helpful with school issues and personal issues." A UOP student observed: "Yes please; we have heavy burdens that tradition[al] students don't have. Veterans need more help and support in this campus."

## Finding Two

*Staff and faculty value veterans on campus, but may not have the tools to respond to veteran needs*

A UOP professor stated: “They [veterans] bring a unique and indispensable worldview and perspective to the classroom.” A majority of faculty felt that veterans are engaged and prepared for classes. Narrative descriptions of veteran students describe them as “exceptionally motivated and dedicated to coursework” and valued for their “variety of perspectives and experiences, discipline, and confidence.”

While faculty and staff value the perspectives and academic diversity that veterans bring to their schools, support can fall short if faculty and staff lack knowledge of veteran culture, needs, and of how to best respond.

### Knowledge of Veteran Culture

Serving in the US Armed Forces is a unique experience unknown to most civilians. The military has its own cultures, hierarchies, teaching methodology, code of justice, and social norms. It also exposes all personnel, regardless of branch, duties, combat, or other experience, to situations that carry significant physical and mental health risk. It is important that professionals serving this population understand their unique experiences, otherwise myths, stereotypes, or misunderstandings can create barriers to important services.

### 3 of 4 respondents believe their school should provide training on veteran culture.

A very small number of faculty, staff, and administrators have received training in veteran culture and experiences and resources to help them serve student veterans. Certifying officials represented most of those who have received previous training from the VA. While faculty and staff may not have received training, they do however acknowledge the challenges student veterans face, and observed some unaddressed mental health needs, challenges engaging with non-veterans, family and work obligations, and reserve duty obligations.

But gaps in knowledge may give rise to clichéd or stereotyped perceptions that frustrate opportunity to teach and provide student services. One CSUEB instructor stated: “Faculty need more training, more information about this population, and especially help in understanding what the student veterans, who are typically more mature and advanced over their peers in courses, need that is specific to the veteran experience.” This lack of cultural competency and knowledge concerning veteran resources on-and-off campus does not go unnoticed by the veterans themselves.

Acknowledgment of these gaps and military-civilian disconnect is summed up by a UCSC veteran: “I feel I’m the only one who has worked in veteran advocacy spaces. People either are afraid [of] or just don’t know military culture.” This veteran perceives fear on behalf of non-veterans. This impression is not unique, is consistent with our previous findings, and may cause veterans to isolate themselves, as expressed by another veteran: “I don’t like to interact with much of anyone outside the veterans service center, unless I am in tutoring.” And another states: “It is no cliché; nonmilitary really do not understand us, just like we can struggle to understand them.” Many veterans express a feeling of otherness.

### 14 of the 16 academic counselors (student services, academic advisors, admissions counselors) didn’t receive training. Only 1 in 4 veterans who’ve used academic counseling services say the staff are well trained in veteran issues.

While some of the veterans surveyed stated that they self-identify as veterans in classes, veterans may also resist disclosing their status for fear of being called upon as a spokesperson for all veterans, being asked to comment on politically charged questions about war, or for fear of judgment over cultural misconceptions about military life. Some resist disclosure due to their desire to blend in. In fact, veteran perspectives vary as widely as student perspectives, and veterans are as diverse as the civilian student population.

As non-traditional students, veterans are far more likely to be older and care for dependents. Thirty-eight percent of all college students are over 25, compared with 85 percent of our sample over 25, with the majority being 25–34 (45 percent) or 35–44 (27 percent).<sup>vii</sup> Thirty-three percent of all CSUEB students are over 25, compared with 95 percent among CSUEB veterans in our sample.<sup>viii</sup> One in three were married, and 71 percent of our sample had dependents. Faculty and staff familiarity with these practical and social differences improves veteran student life and academic success.

### 86 percent have not received training to help them work with student veterans.

Adequate education in cultural competency provides context to understanding and identifying need, to communicating more effectively, and to recognizing what services and benefits should be offered. One instructor from UOP stated: “Ultimately what I would like to see on campus would be, at the very least, one of the kinds of online trainings that we have to do for sexual harassment. To understand cultural competency within that realm; what is or isn’t appropriate. Ideally, workshops that professors, at the very least, have the option to attend but ideally are mandatory—as was done recently with a mandatory session on what to do if there’s an active shooter on campus. There is precedent on campus for mandatory training.”

## Staff and Faculty Awareness of Veteran Services

Inconsistent levels of staff and faculty knowledge of veteran resources may contribute to misunderstandings and underutilization of services. Veteran students also rely on nonveteran-specific services, but this need is shaped by different factors than other nonveteran students may experience.

Among faculty and staff, ratings of access to and quality of resources as well as institutional commitment to serve veterans varied. Most of the poor ratings were from those in veteran services, while the majority of faculty didn't know the level of services or access.



**56%**

of participants feel that veteran students are prepared and engaged in the classroom.



**95%**

of participants had positive interactions with veteran students.

Veterans recognize when faculty aren't aware of veteran-specific resources, as one CSUEB student indicated: "All my interactions with faculty have been good, and when I tell them of my military service, they always thank me for the sacrifice. However, some faculty don't even know where our VRC office is located on campus. I don't fault the VRC office for faculty not knowing very basic information about our school. Perhaps during faculty meetings/trainings they could be informed of this knowledge." There is a disconnection between faculty observing issues and knowing where to send veterans to access resources.

## Finding Three

*Interdepartmental referrals show many go above and beyond to support veterans, but often without coordinated strategy*

An overarching finding of our research is that schools have demonstrated commitment and have instituted very good programs and services for veterans. But among all schools, services can be disconnected, siloed, or not well understood. This is reflected in faculty and staff expressing a lack of understanding of resources, difficulty making referrals, and also student veteran service utilization.

As one case shows, reported by a VRC, veterans may receive misinformation if staff in other departments don't know how to respond to their needs: "A student went to a different department and asked about VA benefits, and the person in the HR department told the student we did not have a VA department on campus. Which, she is correct, but she should have referred her to the VRC for any VA questions. The student ended up meeting with a counselor and asked about VA benefits and the counselor said the same thing to the student: that we did not have a VA department and she had no knowledge of any kind of benefits. She ended up at financial aid service windows and someone there told her the same thing, that we did not have a VA department. Finally, the student ended up at our e-services lab and one of the staff members connected her with the VRC. She was finally relieved that she got her questions answered and found out about the VRC."

There are many excellent examples, though, of interdepartmental coordination. Such coordination has streamlined responses for individual veterans, but it also demonstrates a higher level of commitment to veterans as members of diverse campus communities.

### Disability Services Coordination

We examined disability offices coordination with both faculty and VRCs. While faculty expressed feeling unable to assist veteran students proactively, disability offices discussed working with faculty to explain how specific accommodations work. The CSUS Disability Office, for instance, stated: "When we do our accommodation letters at no time do we divulge what the disability is. 'Registered with our office with a verified disability.' That's it. Every single letter goes out with that. We go through and list accommodations. But then we also explain a little bit of how the accommodations work. And that's probably where we don't get much difficulty with faculty because we provide that explanation." All disability offices stated they make themselves available to faculty for any questions or concerns related to the accommodation. The challenge according to faculty, though, is that they receive very

little information on what needs the veteran might have beyond the accommodation, and, as a result, faculty can do very little beyond acknowledging that there is a needed accommodation.

Another disability office we spoke with mentioned how some instructors may struggle to understand how or why the accommodation should be awarded: "The disability office makes it pretty clear. Instructors get a copy of the letter. And there's that open door to ask questions if necessary. But the unfortunate thing is there have been situations where teachers did not seem to understand or know why this was valid or if there needed to be an accommodation for specific people. Which is frightening to say the least. It does happen. We try to make sure that we stay on the front of that. We don't disclose anyone's veteran status in our accommodation letters. We encourage faculty to let us know if they have a question about it. Typically [the question] is how am I going to make this accommodation award given that I run my class this way?"

Some schools showed great interdepartmental coordination between the VRC and disability office. SJDC, for instance, will take veterans who would like to apply for accommodation over to the disability office, then explain the process to the veteran along with the disability office staff. Some disability offices expressed that they would like to begin outreach to VRCs to decrease stigma of accessing needed accommodations, to better explain how the process works, and why accommodations can help them.



Student Veterans of America is proposing that schools create a Disability Services Liaison (DSL), a VA work study-funded student veteran who helps their peers connect to underutilized campus resources, especially disability services and academic accommodations. DSLs connect fellow student veterans to services and help normalize help-seeking behavior.

A DSL Toolkit, online training modules, and Student Veterans of America staff are available to support the implementation.

More info on the DSL position can be found at <https://studentveterans.org/aboutus/disability-in-education>.

### Faculty Coordination

Our findings show many instructors have a real desire to engage with student veterans proactively in advising, guidance counseling, and with mental health issues, but haven't coordinated efforts to do so. As one UOP instructor echoed during an interview: "We do have some faculty who have a real interest in helping our veterans and working with our veterans, guiding counseling and advising, and they will do that on an individual basis. My challenge is that we haven't coordinated the effort." Another instructor from our survey stated: "Many of my veteran students suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and/or other mental health conditions. Some are also physically and learning disabled. There are times they

"All my interactions with faculty have been good and when I tell them of my military service they always thank me for the sacrifice. However, **some faculty don't even know where our VRC office is located on campus.** It would be beneficial for them to at least know where the VRC office is located."

*Student, California State University East Bay*

'disappear' from class, but they are also really good about checking in with me and being open with me. And they are a tight-knit group on campus, which gives me a community of people I can go to for help in learning how best to support them."

Some faculty expressed that veterans don't approach them for services and support, implying that it might not be needed because veterans are not actively seeking support from faculty. It is also true that many veterans do not need significant support beyond the needs of other students: "The student veterans I've had in my classes have done very well and been great to work with. They already knew of many resources, so they did not seek my help or get to the point where they needed referral." Many of the faculty in our sample, though, assume that veterans can receive adequate help elsewhere, but as nontraditional students, and as a group that has dedicated services specific to their needs, it's important for faculty to recognize when there may be a need and how to respond, even if it's not they who are providing the support.

**Less than half of faculty have worked with veterans in need of accommodation. Of the veterans who requested accommodation (33), all but two veterans stated that faculty respected their needs for accommodation.**



## Highlight of Successful Services

UOP's Student Referral System serves as a hub, or central point for campus staff to refer students in need of guidance and support. Upon referral, a staff member reaches out to the student to help them identify and access services needed to attain their academic goals.

Outcomes of a referred student may include, but are not limited to:

- Connecting with a campus academic resource
- Connecting with a campus support service
- Ongoing meetings with a Student Success Coach
- Assistance dropping or withdrawing from a failing class
- Wellness check on students who have been absent from class(es)
- Connecting with an appropriate community resource

Faculty also discussed their inability to address what may be disability issues unless the student first shares a need and asks for assistance. This is unavoidable, given privacy considerations and privacy law. Privacy issues preclude faculty from instigating disability accommodation for individual students or from knowing why students receive accommodations.

As one disability services staff from CSUS stated: "On the faculty side, they're given accommodations for a student who they of course want to see succeed, but they don't know exactly what it is they need aside from what's in the letter. Like, what caused this to happen? But maybe it's not necessarily who needs to know what. Maybe they give you the accommodation letter, you see what they need, you give them the accommodations and you leave it at that. Then, if they want to reach out to you for more support in some way or if they want to disclose things to you because they feel comfortable doing so, then you can maybe assist them a little more." A SJDC instructor stated: "We are not permitted to ask [about disabilities]. But if the student comes to us and says, 'Hey, I have dyslexia and I'd like to know if you can help me get some assistance with that,' then I can refer them to disability services. But I am not allowed to sit there and say, 'If you're a veteran and you have a disability, let me know and I can do that.'"

Nevertheless, it is helpful to understand how veteran disabilities manifest generally and may interfere with academic success. For example, PTSD can cause difficulty concentrating,

agitation and anxiety in crowded places, and exaggerated startle response. Accommodations such as a small room or lone test-taking and noise canceling headphones address these issues. Preferential seating can also be helpful, as veterans may prefer to sit in the back of the room with full view of entrances and exits to reduce possible anxiety.



## Highlight of Successful Services

UCSC has a Services for Transfer and Re-entry Students (STARS) program that helps non-traditional students get acclimated to life on the campus. They provide housing and other critical resources as well as a course on transition to school. STARS shares space and resources with the UCSC VETS program and VRC, and identifies veterans who come through the STARS program.

CSUEB has a shared note advising system where staff can share information on student progress. If there is a veteran who is struggling with coursework or who needs other resources, staff can notify the veteran counselor.

The SJDC's VRC staff offered an interesting example of interdepartmental coordination, helping to clarify the unique needs of student veterans to faculty: "I've also had a couple of veterans who came to me with certain things, and I tried to get their instructors to understand that sometimes they had anxiety attacks, or there's something else going on, and there's a trigger that happens. I worked with a couple of instructors to let them know, 'They don't mean to leave on purpose. There's something else going on. You need to understand they're not just walking out of class for whatever reason you think it might be, there are other reasons.' And a lot of our instructors understand."

## VRC Coordination

Overall, despite limited staff, VRCs are going above and beyond to respond to the needs of veterans, but as we found in our last study, they are stretched beyond their capacity to serve. Many veterans and VRC staff view VRCs as a hub for access to resources, and VRC staff are the coordinator of services. As SJDC stated, "We try to be the middle person at our veterans resource center. That way the veteran doesn't get frustrated if we just keep passing them off to somebody else. It's more like they have one point of contact, and that point of contact would be me at the veterans resource center." As noted, while VRC staff go above and beyond, they are stretched beyond capacity, and this is not sustainable when they have hundreds of veterans accessing their VRC.

It's not enough for veteran-related resources to be only at VRCs. While VRCs should educate other departments about their services, those departments need to know where veteran services are located, what they include, and how to receive veteran benefits. As we found through our interviews, too often other departments aren't aware of VRC services and don't know how to explain them to veterans. As one respondent from UOP put it: "UOP recently opened a veterans resource center and hired a veteran's academic advisor. So, I feel positive about the moves the university is making to help student veterans. At the same time, these services aren't fully advertised to faculty, so it's difficult for many faculty to know how they can use them for help in advising and supporting veterans on campus." One VRC staff had a solution: "Every month when there are new hires, we need to have a brief presentation about the VRC and services that we offer." Student service staff, who are often on the front end of providing services, need to be aware of veteran education benefits and understand how to refer veterans to certifying officials and to the VRC.

## Certifying Official Coordination

Overall, certifying officials and VRCs both state that certifying officials are stretched beyond capacity and have trouble with the sheer volume of veteran education benefits processing along with other financial aid matters that fall under their duties.

Despite small staffs, certifying officials and VRCs find ways to streamline the claims process. Two schools use an interdepartmental approach by enlisting the help of staff in the VRC to help veterans prepare their documents prior to sending them to the certifying official. The added benefit of this approach is that the veterans don't always need to visit the certifying official to process paperwork.

Clear lines of communication between VRCs and certifying officials are vital. Another VRC staff stated they need to have a part-time certifying official housed in the VRC as a way to streamline the claims process and give VRC staff who are assisting with paperwork greater access to the certifying official. Of course, this can't be done if existing certifying officials are also processing additional financial aid claims from non-veteran students.

Clearly overburdened certifying officials is a problem among all schools and is consistent with our findings from our previous study. Resources for certifying officials need to be considered, especially when we know that veterans depend on these benefits to attend school and to live well.

## Academic Counseling Coordination

As we highlighted, 14 of the 16 academic counselors (student services, academic advisors, admissions counselors) in our study have not received training to help them work with student veteran populations, and most were unable to evaluate the access to and level of services provided to veterans. We can assume this makes

it difficult for academic counselors to identify the needs of veterans and refer them to services appropriately.

Despite the challenge of lack of training, there are some great examples of interdepartmental coordination when advisors or staff identify veteran needs. A CSUEB Associate Dean mentioned that they have a shared note advising system where all advisors enter notes from appointments, and administration can pinpoint if students are struggling and if they have a veteran counselor that can be contacted. Administration can ensure advisors and veteran counselors are checking in, and as they put it, it's "at least another person looking out for them."

UOP has a referral service called the Student Success Team that will follow up with faculty who initiate referrals using their online portal. If a student is having academic difficulties, adjustment difficulties, mental health issues, financial concerns, or even if an instructor is unable to locate the student, the Student Success Team will follow up with the student. One instructor mentioned: "The Student Success Team follows up with faculty on referrals. Lots of collaboration. Easy to reach them with a click from various portals including Canvas." Another stated: "Pacific has a fantastic referral service for all students. I trust that if I had a veteran in class and she/he needed support, that the Student Success Team has the training and resources to assist them." This is a great example of coordinated efforts among departments. It is unclear based on our research and discussions with interviewees whether veterans can initiate a referral to the Student Success Team, but having a service like this that veterans can directly access is highly recommended.

## Administration Buy-In

Coordinated efforts are not possible without support from administration. We spoke with two education administrators from separate colleges but were unable to get a clear picture of institutional commitment to serve veterans among all schools. In our survey to staff and faculty, we asked about their school’s level of commitment to serve veterans.

**54 percent of college faculty and staff are satisfied, and 10 percent are dissatisfied with their school's commitment to serve veterans.**

**29 percent don’t know the level of their school’s commitment to serve veterans.**

Where staff were unaware of institutional commitment, we may assume, at the very least, that there is a lack of communication amongst all departments. Both commitment and concrete planning should be visible. This includes considering veterans in institutional strategic plans, in orientations for prospective students, and in training materials for staff.

Four of the five schools studied were featured in Veterans Education Success’ 378 “Best Instructional Bang for the GI Bill Buck” schools that spend at least 50 percent of overall gross tuition and fees on instruction, while also showing that at least half of their students complete and earn more than the average high school graduate after attending (See Table \_\_\_).<sup>ix</sup> This is commendable and shows these institutions are committed to ensuring that their students will succeed.

Institution name/ Sector /Type	Funds Spent On Instruction					
	Gross Tuition and Fees (including Discounts)	Total Amount Spent on Instruction in 2017	Percentage of Gross Tuition and Fees Spent on Instruction in 2017	Total GI Bill Tuition and Fees 2009-2017	Total GI Bill Tuition and Fees 2017	Completion Rate
CSU East Bay	\$137,122,149	\$89,745,067	65%	\$7,475,406	\$1,211,470	64%
CSU Stanislaus	\$76,770,903	\$69,446,383	90%	\$2,667,884	\$439,780	68%
San Joaquin Delta College	\$30,986,793	\$46,892,224	151%	\$3,348,388	\$431,124	24%
UC Santa Cruz	\$333,920,794	\$196,164,517	59%	\$5,836,969	\$959,850	81%
University of the Pacific	\$304,749,128	\$146,720,435	48%	\$8,693,592	\$694,392	77%

SOURCE: VETERANS EDUCATION SUCCESS REPORT (APRIL 2019)

\* Four-year college transfers are counted as non-completed

None of the schools we’ve researched include veterans in their strategic plans, though some include a plan for nontraditional students. Having a VRC is a great step toward supporting veterans, but colleges need to go beyond this to effectively serve veterans and allocate resources to stand up, sustain, and coordinate services. As a CSUEB professor stated: “The number one reason people fail to persist in college is the sense that they don't belong there. The sense that it isn't a space that's welcoming to them. And so creating that identity cohort is a part of what a good college administration does in order to help combat that problem.” Strategic planning ensures that schools are proactively engaged, and their engagement is clearly reflected to educational professionals, the student body, as well as funders and the public.

When all departments are not engaged in strategic planning and cross-coordination, it can cause them to be reactive to veteran needs. One Associate Dean we interviewed stated: “I think probably like most offices on campus we end up being kind of reactive. And it would be, I guess, nice to kind of be able to put a little strategic planning and some more support systems in place, rather than just helping people when crises come up....It would be nice to maybe have a mechanism to catch these problems a little earlier.”

In the absence of administration buy-in, staff are left to advocate for veterans’ needs. One staff member whose name and institution we withhold, expressed a lack of support: “The barriers are that they're not going to allocate the resources. I’ve been up and down with admissions, I've been there with the provost office, and there's just a refusal to allocate

resources, and part of the real problem was our vice president at the time would not champion the initiative. He would talk a good game, but he would not champion.”

Another spoke of lack of support for an event when departments are unaware of veterans and aren’t actively involved in planning veteran services and engagement within their programs: “One of the department [cochairs] wrote [me] and said, ‘Well I'm not sure we have any veterans, so I don't know if we're interested in supporting [the event].’ We're talking about veterans across campus not just whether there are veterans in your department. And in fact, [a cochair] from that department chipped in and said, ‘Well I don't know if that matters. We should support the event anyway.’ That just sort of compartmentalized the vision of the role of veterans within their department like ‘well, are they in our department? well then, that matters’ as opposed to what matters is that we have student veterans across the campus. But that was the only person out of all the departments.”<sup>x</sup>

Overall, though, all schools studied demonstrate a notable commitment to supporting veterans, and schools have progressed significantly in standing up services. The strategy needed now is to organize and institutionalize coordinated student services for veterans. As one CSUEB instructor put it: “I believe it is crucial to our mission as an institution of higher education to support veterans in advancing their education and building successful civilian lives.”

## Recommendations

### Track veterans and dependent status at enrollment and throughout their college experience.

Schools should effectively track the number of veterans in their school beyond those who are receiving veteran education benefits and post these numbers in their materials so veterans can better understand the size and scope of their community in relation to the overall student body. Colleges should know how many veterans are accessing services and should tailor outreach to engage those who may be struggling or who aren't receiving support. In addition, if veterans received a less than honorable discharge or served for a short period of time, they are not eligible for veteran education benefits (though they can receive other financial assistance). These veterans may need extra assistance in accessing services.

### Engage in outreach to incoming students early and often.

Deliver veteran-specific welcome materials outlining veteran services on campus as well as other services, including housing resources, disability accommodation, financial aid, peer mentoring, and tutoring. Add veteran-specific materials and workshops to incoming student orientations to familiarize the overall student body with the campus veteran community. Conduct student veteran orientation break-out sessions for veterans at the beginning of each term. Invite student veteran affinity group leaders, members of the VRC staff, disability staff, and peers to these orientation sessions. Present not only the available campus services but also how they practically connect to veteran needs. For example, present practical examples of disability accommodations for conditions common to service such as hearing loss, tinnitus, and PTSD. Continue to engage student veterans once they've entered college. Present to student groups, VRCs, classes, and at school-related events. SJDC is planning to have student veterans who frequent the VRC visit classrooms and present information on veteran resources. UOP has their Student Veteran Organization table at student events to increase their visibility on campus. Whenever possible, co-locate services by holding office hours at VRCs so veterans can access services from multiple departments easily.

### Conduct specialized outreach to specific veteran populations.

While it is important to engage all veterans in services, specialized outreach should be targeted to those who are less likely to identify or seek veteran-specific services for fear of judgment or nonacceptance, such as women, those with less than honorable discharges, and LGBTQ+ veterans. Veterans should also be included in the characterization of nontraditional students and specialized outreach, such as resources for student parents, first generation students, older students, etc.

### Provide staff with cultural competency training.

This training should include basics of the arc of service, the culture and demands of service, common risk as well as resiliency factors, issues student veterans may face, and the availability and eligibility for campus and community-based supports. Ensure these trainings occur regularly and particularly among new staff. Online trainings are particularly helpful for those who have competing campus responsibilities. Ensure that all campus staff who address education benefits and other financial aid, academic counseling, disabilities, and mental health issues receive veteran cultural competency training.

### Consider providing a veteran's academic counselor.

Academic counseling needs to consider the unique needs of those who are receiving GI Bill benefits and how it impacts their coursework. Further, they need to advise about military transfer credits, priority registration, tutoring, accommodations, housing and transportation, mental wellness, and post-college careers. Having a veteran-specific academic counselor would be a great resource for veterans as they enter college and pursue their degrees.

### Explain how disability accommodation works.

Disability offices can visit VRCs and explain how accommodations work. Faculty can include information in their syllabus and go one step further by providing an explanation of the process and how to access disability services. One disability office said it well: "Requesting accommodation doesn't mean that you're weak. That you're not capable. It means providing equal access to what you need. We reframe that question to say the accommodations are to provide equal and meaningful access, because as a student here you deserve the same rights as everyone else equal to meaningful access."

### **Engage veterans in class in meaningful and practical ways.**

Do not rely on veteran students as the spokespeople for commentary on war or global policy, but if they choose to disclose their status and their experience, then connect their military experience to the course in practical ways. As a SJDC instructor who is also a veteran stated: “The more salient elements of the course material I tie into military experience because that’s my background. I will say for example, ‘Joe, you were in the Air Force. I know in the Army we do this; in the Air Force do you do it the same way?’ He will say, ‘yes,’ and I’ll say, ‘Look. That’s an example of this management principal.’ I will bring their experience out in the classes rather than ask them to tell me about their experience. Because when a veteran tells you about their experience—particularly in a classroom environment—they get the feeling you’re looking for a war story. But if you’re looking for a practical example of something that may apply to the coursework and it helps illustrate that principle, then it seems like a good way to ask a question about it.”

### **Partner with the VA to make VA mental health services available on campus.**

Our previous study found this is a best practice that streamlines access to mental health services for veterans who are unable to go to the VA or a Vet Center, or those who are less likely to engage in services proactively due to stigma or other factors. Having a therapist specifically trained to treat veterans with trauma or issues stemming from their military service is crucial to their treatment plan. Providing regular office hours in VRCs allows veterans to access counselors when they are in crisis or when they are simply struggling with coursework and other obligations.

### **Engage in interdepartmental collaboration.**

Consider an interdepartmental veteran collaborative body that includes all veteran student services and faculty representation which would coordinate and institutionalize comprehensive veteran supports on campus. Survey campus services and student veterans to determine needs and best practices, and then share information and recommend veteran-friendly systems. Members should also collaborate as needed to assist individual veterans and respond to requests from the overall veteran student body. While staff members who are veterans are valuable members of these boards, ensure a balance of non-veteran membership in order to expand cultural competency and welcome veterans into the overall diverse student population.

### **Organize and institutionalize coordinated student services for veterans.**

Add veteran services into the existing organizational structure of outreach, tracking, interdepartmental coordination, orientations, and trainings for staff. All schools should make planning for non-traditional students a priority and explicitly stated in their strategic plans. And in their planning, they need to identify effective systems in place as well as targeted needs for the student veteran population.

### **Make investments in veteran services transparent.**

Overall, public school systems do not always provide information about costs and spending. Expenditures are often reported as “student services” or “institutional support,” which makes it difficult for policymakers, taxpayers, and students to understand how their tuition dollars are supporting the needs of veterans. Providing line item explanations of expenditures means that connections between investments and student outcomes can be attributed. Including information on student veteran retention, graduation rates, and other successes can highlight these successful outcomes and increase transparency. This is an effective strategy to recruit veterans and to demonstrate impact.

## Limitations of Our Study

While we conducted extensive targeted outreach to reach all veterans at the five schools, some may perceive our sample of 78 veterans to be small. In addition, while 15 campus staff and faculty may be a small sample size for our interviews, we made sure to target certifying officials, disability services, financial aid offices, and faculty who could represent their departments, and we sampled three participants from each school. Our survey to campus staff and faculty received 91 responses and was representative of staff from all schools studied.

The experiences with campus services by women veterans and veterans of color in the student population were explored further in this current study compared to our previous research. However, transgender and non-binary student veterans were not represented in our study as we intended. Our strategy of a survey approach rather than focus groups allowed us to gather perspectives from those who may have been inhibited to speak in a group setting. However, transgender veterans are a significant community within the larger veteran population; almost 20 percent of all US transgender people have served in the military, a rate twice that of the overall US population,<sup>xii</sup> and their perspectives as student veterans are important to our study.

Further, similar to our previous study, almost all of our sample (70 of 78; 3 received less than honorable discharges and 5 are still in the military) received an honorable discharge from the military. While this allowed us to explore perceptions of support among those who have

received GI Bill benefits (which are available only to veterans with an honorable discharge) and engagement with certifying officials, we received minimal information from veterans with less than honorable discharges who are precluded from education benefits. These veterans tend to be isolated and excluded from care systems, and thus may not seek veteran-specific supports at school. One veteran in our survey summarized it well: “The resource center is extremely communicative and seems friendly, but for obvious reasons I keep to myself when it comes to all things veteran. The bias and compromised judgment leveled at me when people find out the character of my discharge can be disconcerting.” Again, further research on these veterans is needed.

While we made thorough attempts to reach campus staff from VRCs, certifying officials, disability offices, financial aid personnel, and faculty, not all staff were responsive or open to an interview or were able to be reached. We plan to engage in further discussions with campus officials and staff and will update our findings and continue to bring resources to each campus.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

In summary, it is heartening to see that the schools studied have all instituted veteran support systems on campus. There are many best practices that should be highlighted and replicated. That said, there are inconsistencies with regard to the level of support, knowledge of veterans and veteran services, and coordination.

Now is the time to assess, identify gaps, improve and institutionalize campus systems for veterans.

Systems should begin well before students arrive on campus. Veterans pages on the school website must accurately and clearly reflect all services and programs available to veterans. Recruitment and application materials should accurately capture veteran or military status. Departments should track veteran status so they can be aware of their student populations.

Without training, it would be unfair and unlikely to expect that faculty, staff, and administrators possess the skills or knowledge to understand military culture due to its many complexities. Colleges across the country have a purpose and a valuable opportunity to educate the public, which includes elevating the understanding of unique cultures, and veterans must be part of this national commitment. The most effective plans will include regular, ongoing trainings in veteran culture, experiences, veteran-specific resources, and care approach.

Providing a VRC on campus is central to supporting student veterans, and its importance cannot be overstated. Having a center goes beyond providing resources. It helps veterans reclaim their military past and their veteran identity at a time when they may be struggling with school, work, and family obligations. But it should never stand alone. VRCs can fall short if they aren’t given enough resources to effectively address veteran needs. Strong support for VRCs is vital and should include adequate staffing, space and activities. It is important that veteran students have a hub of information, support, and a place of their own. That said, VRCs should

not be considered the only place for veteran support.

Student service information should not silo veteran service but rather be presented as an overall menu of services including VRCs. Outreach and engagement should continue when veterans are in school. An interdepartmental veteran student collaborative should maintain communication with institutional leadership, staff, and faculty as well as students themselves to ensure that veterans are woven into the overall institutional systems. In this way, there will be no wrong door to students accessing both what they need to achieve academic success and what they need to balance military-civilian transition and the obligations related to their non-traditional student status.

Veterans represent 1–3 percent of the student body in the schools we studied, yet their needs are just as significant as other students. Further, a GI Bill investment in schools—at a time when state appropriations to UC and CSU have not kept up with enrollment increases—is a significant benefit.<sup>xiii</sup> Increasing the number of veterans in school and providing necessary services is a return on taxpayer investment and honors Congress’ intent. All of the schools studied have made bold strides in support of their veteran students, and while much more can be done, we commend their dedication and support of the veteran community. Now comes the time to organize and institutionalize coordinated student services for veterans.

## List of Abbreviations

**BAH:** Basic Allowance for Housing

**CSUEB:** California State University, East Bay

**CSUS:** California State University, Stanislaus

**DSL:** Disability Services Liaison

**HR:** human resources

**LGBTQ+:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others

**MOU:** memorandum of understanding

**PTSD:** post-traumatic stress disorder

**SJDC:** San Joaquin Delta College

**STARS:** Services for Transfer and Re-entry Students program

**SVA:** Student Veterans of America

**SVO:** Student Veteran Organization

**TBI:** traumatic brain injury

**UCSC:** University of California, Santa Cruz

**UOP:** University of the Pacific

**USDVA, or VA:** United States Department of Veterans Affairs

**VETS:** Veterans Enrollment and Transition Services program

**VRC:** veterans resource center

## Sources

<sup>i</sup> In 2018, a projected 12.3 million college and university students will be under age 25, and 7.6 million students will be 25 years old and over. The number of college and university students under age 25 hit a peak of 12.2 million in 2011 and has remained steady since that time. The number of students 25 years old and over hit a similar peak in 2010 (of 8.9 million) but the overall enrollment for this age group declined from 2010 to 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics. Accessed: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_303.40.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_303.40.asp).

<sup>ii</sup> US News. "Most Students Age 25 or Older." Accessed: <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/most-over-25>.

<sup>iii</sup> National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, estimates for 9/2018.

<sup>iv</sup> American Community Survey 2017 1-year estimates.

<sup>v</sup> School websites as of May 2019, USDVA GI Bill Comparison Tool, and interviews with VRC staff.

<sup>vi</sup> Now This Reports. "How Homeless College Students Get by at California's Humboldt State." January 2019. Accessed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ck-89phIXsM>.

<sup>vii</sup> In 2018, a projected 12.3 million college and university students will be under age 25, and 7.6 million students will be 25 years old and over. The number of college and university students under age 25 hit a peak of 12.2 million in 2011 and has remained steady since that time. The number of students 25 years old and over hit a similar peak in 2010 (of 8.9 million) but the overall enrollment for this age group declined from 2010 to 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics. Accessed: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_303.40.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_303.40.asp).

<sup>viii</sup> US News. "Most Students Age 25 or Older." Accessed: <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/most-over-25>.

<sup>ix</sup> Veterans Education Success. Should Colleges Spend the GI Bill on Veterans' Education or Late Night TV Ads? Which Colleges Deliver the Best Bang for the GI Bill Buck? April 2019. Accessed: <https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/FsCBCo29RmCDR8Ku1yO3L?domain=v-e-s.squarespace.com>.

<sup>x</sup> This quote was heavily edited for grammatical clarity. The original quote follows: "In one of the departments, somebody wrote back and said, 'Well I'm not sure we have any veterans, so I don't know if we're interested in supporting.' We're talking about veterans across campus not just are there veterans in your department. And in fact, somebody else from that department they were cochairs chipped in and said, 'Well I don't know if that matters. We should support the event anyway.' That just sort of compartmentalized vision of the role of veterans within their department like 'well, are they in our department? well then, that matters' as opposed to what matters is that we have student veterans across the campus. But that was the only person out of all the departments. Every one of them contributed to the event."

<sup>xi</sup> Public Policy Institute of California. "Higher Education in California: Institutional Costs." NOVEMBER 2014.

<sup>xii</sup> National Center for Transgender Equality. 2015 Transgender Survey: "Military Service by Transgender People." Accessed: <http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-VeteransDayReport.pdf>

<sup>xiii</sup> Public Policy Institute of California— "Higher Education in California: Institutional Costs." NOVEMBER 2014.

## VISIT OUR OFFICES

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1060 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
(415) 252-4788

### OAKLAND OFFICE

2719 Telegraph Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94612  
(510) 844-7500

## CONTACT INFORMATION

### EMAIL US

[supportvets@stp-sf.org](mailto:supportvets@stp-sf.org)

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