

# Comprehensive Program Review Report



## Program Review - Veterans

### Program Summary

#### 2020-2021

**Prepared by:** Ashley Martinez

**What are the strengths of your area?:** The Veterans Services office became the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) in 2015 once we moved towards programming that would provide wrap around services for veteran and military connected students. The VRC is comprised of two full time staff: Ashley Martinez-Veterans Coordinator and Jennie Garcia-Veterans Counselor who are supported by 3-5 student workers each semester.

We believe that the results of the work we have done can be seen in the positive outcomes of our students in the areas of student access and success.

#### Student Access:

1. Veterans Counselor had 566 individual contacts with students which was an increase in contacts
2. We purchased 15 new laptops to increase student access to technology resources.
3. When COVID stay at home orders were enacted the VRC contacted veterans via phone and email to ensure they had access to up to date information and contact information. We made several rounds of calls throughout the remainder of the Spring semester.
4. The Veterans Coordinator had 478 individual phone (222 placed calls, 178 answered calls, 78 text messages) contacts between 3/23/2020 & 7/31/2020.

#### Student Success:

Since our veterans counselor started working at COS in August of 2014 we have seen improvements in outcomes among our veteran students in the area of student success. Below are some success indicators from the 2018-2019 year.

1. 28 Veteran Students graduated with at least one associate's degree which is a 7.7% increase over the previous year (26 graduates) and a 40% increase over our 2014/2015 graduates (20 graduates)
2. 58 Degrees and 1 certificate were awarded to veteran students which shows an 87% increase in the number of degrees awarded over the previous year. 13 students earned 2 or more associates degrees which is a 160% increase over the previous year (5 students earned 2 or more degrees).
3. The average GPA of our associate degree earners was a 3.43 GPA. Though there was a slight decrease (3%) in the average GPA over the previous year, the average GPA of our veteran students was 5.4% higher than the district average of a 3.25 GPA.

**What improvements are needed?:** Chancellor's office compliance:

We have been receiving ongoing funding from the chancellors office to work towards meeting minimum standards. At this current time we meet 18 of the 19 standards. The only standard we do not currently meet is the provision of peer to peer mentoring. In addition we need to increase the mental health services that we currently offer and continue working on securing support from the VA & Vet Center to provide veteran specific mental health providers on campus. We began working with Dr.

Paul Pasion from the VA Community Based Outpatient Center in Tulare on an initial MOU in Spring of 2020 and are still waiting on the VA to complete their review and signature process.

#### Staffing:

There are only two full time staff members in our office and we are supported by student workers who have worked the front desk since before the Veterans Coordinator started working at COS in 2013. Prior to my starting if the interim coordinator was not in the office the veterans office would be closed which led to students not being able to access the services of the Veterans office. When the veterans coordinator started in 2013 it was noted that the position requires the coordinator to be away from the office for meetings, conferences/training and community meetings. Not wanting to reduce student access to our services we have always left student workers alone in the VRC to run the center when full time staff is gone. In addition student workers do not always have stable schedules that provide 100% coverage for the front desk which means that there are times when there are no student workers to man the front desk so the Coordinator must try to complete her work while also providing front end customer service. There are some instances when the coordinator is forced to close the office when there are no students to work the front desk. In addition student workers are not always able to continue working from semester to semester so the coordinator must train new front desk student workers on a semester basis. This is not only tedious and time consuming, it can lead to frustration among the students that we serve. There are 6 different GI Bills that we administer along with a fee waiver program and Department of Defense Tuition Assistance Programs that each have different requirements based on the individual branch of service. Since there is so much information to learn there are times when students get frustrated because the work study students are not content experts on each of the programs we administer and there can be mistakes made. In the most recent mother lode survey one student commented that they were dissatisfied with our program because they were not asked for all the correct items up front which required them to come back to our office a second time in order receive their benefits. This last August the Veterans Coordinator worked on creating a comprehensive training manual to try to cut down on student worker error.

COVID has made it even more apparent the need for a clerical staff as there was a short time when we were not sure if student workers could continue to be paid for remote work. Once we knew student workers could continue to be paid for remote work we encountered challenges that would not have been an issue if we had clerical support. Due to student workers limited access there are many tasks that student workers have been unable to do from home as they are not able to access the same systems they had access to on campus.

**Describe any external opportunities or challenges.:** COVID presented a huge external challenge to our program and the district as a whole. When stay at home orders went in to effect there was little time to plan or prepare for completing the spring semester in a virtual format. Due to the many competing priorities the VRC did not conduct our normal Spring Satisfaction Surveys which did not give us the qualitative data we normally include in our program review. In addition, the VRC had not previously transitioned to electronic documents but in January and February student workers had completed the task of scanning in currently enrolled student files. When stay at home orders went in to effect this effort proved helpful as we were able to review student records. However it also forced the Veterans Coordinator to transition to mostly electronic records. As we move into continued distance learning this process will continue to be refined. COVID also presented an external challenge in that many students had issues with completing PDF documents that are needed to continue receiving their VA Benefits. This was due to students not having access to adobe. This made it challenging to document student consent as required for VA purposes. However in summer 2020 the VRC began working with financial aid who is implementing an electronics form submission software.

The VRC continues to receive on-going funding from the chancellors office to continue working towards compliance with all 19 VRC minimum standards. We will continue working towards coming into compliance with all 19 standards so we can continue to be a model campus within our region. This ongoing funding has presented many opportunities for us to grow the services that we offer to veteran students including the growth of our laptop lending and book voucher programs as well as growing our supply closet and providing grocery cards for students during the COVID Pandemic.

**Overall SAO Achievement:** Based on the areas that we have assessed in terms of access and success we are satisfied with our progress. We have continued to see growth in the area of student success. We have also continued to increase our capacity to provide access to services across the district.

**Changes Based on SAO Achievement:** We currently base most of our decision on data from students who are actively receiving veterans benefits. We also serve active duty students, veterans who are not using benefits and dependents of veterans/active duty service members. We hope to include these other populations in our data next year to ensure that we are equitably serving all military connected students.

**Outcome cycle evaluation:** The VRC has still shown positive outcomes in terms of student access, success. While we are happy

with the continued positive outcomes there is still work to be done in the area of equity to ensure that all military connected students have similar outcomes as those who are actively receiving benefits.

## Action: 2020-2021 Peer Mentoring

Develop Peer Mentoring Program utilizing VA student workers

Leave Blank:

Implementation Timeline: 2020 - 2021

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**Identify related course/program outcomes:** District Goal 3: College of the Sequoias will strategically tailor and implement academic programs and student services that match the unique needs of its student population and the demands of ongoing changes in workforce development.

**Person(s) Responsible (Name and Position):** Ashley Martinez-Veterans Counselor

**Rationale (With supporting data):** The Chancellors office has put forth a set of minimum standards that must be worked towards or accomplished in order to continue receiving ongoing categorical funding for veteran specific mental health services on campus. At this time the VRC currently meets 18 of the 19 minimum standards with Peer Mentoring being the only standard we do not have in place.

**Priority:** Medium

**Safety Issue:** No

**External Mandate:** No

**Safety/Mandate Explanation:**

### Update on Action

#### Updates

**Update Year:** 2020 - 2021

10/15/2020

**Status:** Continue Action Next Year

Due to competing priorities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic we were not able to get this program up and running. We will continue to work on ways to implement this program while we continue in a remote instruction environment.

**Impact on District Objectives/Unit Outcomes (Not Required):**

## Link Actions to District Objectives

District Objectives: 2018-2021

**District Objective 1.1** - The District will increase FTES by 1.75% over the three years

**District Objective 2.1** - Increase the percentage of students who earn an associate degree or certificate (CTE and Non-CTE) by 5 percentage points over three years

**District Objective 2.2** - Increase the number of students who transfer to a four-year institution by 10 percent over three years

**District Objective 4.2** - Improve organizational effectiveness by strengthening operations of and communication between District departments, divisions, and constituents

## Action: 2020-2021 VA Mental Health

Work with the Fresno VA to develop an MOU to offer mental health services in the VRC to Veteran Students

Leave Blank:

Implementation Timeline: 2020 - 2021

Leave Blank:

Leave Blank:

**Identify related course/program outcomes:** Veteran Students will Complete, Persist, & graduate at rates similar to the district as a whole

**Person(s) Responsible (Name and Position):** Ashley Martinez-Coordinator

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**Rationale (With supporting data):** The Chancellors office has put forth a set of minimum standards that must be worked towards or accomplished in order to continue receiving ongoing categorical funding for veteran specific mental health services on campus.

**Priority:** Medium

**Safety Issue:** No

**External Mandate:** No

**Safety/Mandate Explanation:**

## Update on Action

### Updates

**Update Year:** 2020 - 2021

10/15/2020

**Status:** Continue Action Next Year

In March 2020 Dr. Paul Pasion contacted the VRC to say that he was starting the VITAL program in tulare county and wanted to work with us to set a schedule for him to come on campus and serve veterans through individual therapy ad outreach. We began the process of creating a new MOU with the VA. Currently we are waiting on the VA to sign the MOU before the college is able to sign the MOU and move forward with this partnership.

**Impact on District Objectives/Unit Outcomes (Not Required):**

## Link Actions to District Objectives

District Objectives: 2018-2021

**District Objective 1.1** - The District will increase FTES by 1.75% over the three years

**District Objective 2.1** - Increase the percentage of students who earn an associate degree or certificate (CTE and Non-CTE) by 5 percentage points over three years

**District Objective 2.2** - Increase the number of students who transfer to a four-year institution by 10 percent over three years

**District Objective 4.2** - Improve organizational effectiveness by strengthening operations of and communication between District departments, divisions, and constituents

## Action: 2020-2021 Veterans Clerical Assistant

Request funding for a clerical assistant for the Veterans Resource Center

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**Implementation Timeline:** 2020 - 2021

**Leave Blank:**

**Leave Blank:**

**Identify related course/program outcomes:** District Objectives 1.1-Increase Overall enrollment by 1.75% over three years  
District Objective 2.1-Increase Percentage of students who can earn an associates degree or certificate by 5 percentage points over three years

District Objective 4.2-Improve Organizations effectiveness by strengthening operation of and communication between district departments, divisions, and constituents

**Person(s) Responsible (Name and Position):** Ashley Martinez-Veterans Coordinator, Jenny Saechao-Dean of Student Services

**Rationale (With supporting data):** The Veterans Resource Center front desk has historically been staffed by VA work-study students who function as clerical assistants to the Veterans Coordinator providing assistance in maintaining student files, printing transcripts, data entry into Banner and BDMS, scheduling appointments and assisting with other tasks as needed. Over the years there has been disagreement on the level of access that VA workstudy students should have to student information, but without the assistance of these workstudy students the Veterans Coordinator would not be able to meet the reporting requirements set forth by the VA while also maintaining compliance with federal regulations and maintaining the college's approval to accept GI Bill benefits. In addition to questions about how much information student workers should have access to there are also issues with consistent coverage of the front desk. These students, like many other work study students, are working between classes and their schedules are not always the same from semester to semester which can present a problem when planning for coverage of the front desk. Even with 3-5 student workers each semester there have been many occasions

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where there is no student coverage and the veteran's coordinator must attempt to split her time between supervising the front desk/lounge and coordination/administrative tasks that are required of her by both the college and the Department of Veterans Affairs. In addition there are times when the coordinator is out of the office conducting outreach or other tasks and front desk coverage was an issue the veterans counselor had to close the office in order to focus on her counseling appointments or has had to also provide supervision of the VRC. In addition if both the coordinator and counselor are gone for any reason student workers have been left to run the center without direct supervision so that we do not limit student access to VRC services. The reason that we do this is because each year we have about 130-140 students who make 2,200 individual visits to the VRC and office closures affect their ability to access our services/resources such as the computer lab, printing services, supply closet that many students depend on to complete classwork.

In the 2017-2018 state budget 5 million dollars in ongoing funding was appropriated to support the expansion of VRC's at Community Colleges across the state. These funds were allocated with the understanding that the funds would be used to meet the minimum standards set by the Chancellor's office for high functioning VRC's which include standards around the structure, services and staffing. Though the VRC met many of the minimum standards in terms of structure, the office was not built in a manner that was conducive to serving the needs of our students.

At the end of 2018 the COS Veterans Resource Center applied for and won a one-time grant to renovate the center to create a space that was not only more functional than the previous layout but also helped the college further meet the structural and service requirements set forth by the Chancellor's office minimum standards. The renovation took place in the summer of 2019 and while more conducive to the needs of veteran students the veteran's coordinator is no longer able to maintain visual supervision of the reception and lounge area from her office. In the past the veteran's coordinator had visual supervision of a majority of the center from her desk so if there was a gap in student coverage she was able to complete her work and assist students as needed. Now if there is a gap in the work study student schedule the coordinator must either close the veterans resource center, which limits other student's access to the VRC, or she must leave her desk and sit at the reception counter to provide supervision of the students in the VRC and clerical assistance to the Veterans Counselor (i.e. Checking in/scheduling appointments, answering phones).

This additional staff member would also assist the VRC with supporting the following district objectives:

District Objective 1.1: The District will increase FTES 1.75% over the three years.

Often times the Veterans Resource Center is a Veteran or military connected students first contact with College of the Sequoias and we typically help guide students through the matriculation process from application to enrollment. Having a high turn over of student staff means that student workers, though trained are not always confident in address all the concerns that brand new and returning students may have. Having a consistent and well trained clerical assistant can ensure that our veteran and military connected students are guided through the matriculation process in a way makes them feel confident in their decision to attend COS. We believe this can contribute to the districts plan to reduce attrition rates from application to enrollment for our veteran students.

District Objective 2.1 Increase the percentage of students who earn an associate degree or certificate (CTE and non-CTE) by 5 percentage points over three years.

If we are able to hire a clerical assistant it will allow us to ensure that we can limit the amount of interruptions to students access of the Veterans Resource Center services. Student access to our computer lab, printing services, supply closet and other resources play a role in their overall success. The VRC not only provides access to physical and material resources, we also provide veteran students with assistance in completing financial aid applications and appeals, resolving residency issues and with understanding district policies and procedures. All of these things contribute to a students overall success and ability to complete their associate degree or certificate goals so if we can reduce barriers to accessing our services it can have a positive impact on student success and completion.

District Objective 4.2 Improve organizational effectiveness by strengthening operations of and communication between District departments, divisions, and constituents.

In the last motherlode survey a student complained that they were not given the correct information the first time they came in to the which required them to come back another time to complete the benefits process. Hiring a clerical assistant will allow

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the VRC to improve effectiveness and strengthen operational capacity of our department. Though our student workers receive intensive training on the services we provide and the benefits we administer there is no way for them to be content experts in the span of a semester. The VRC administers 6 GI Bill programs, tuition assistance programs for each individual branch of the military and a fee waiver program. Having a clerical assistant who can be a trained content expert will allow the VRC to improve communication regarding benefits eligibility between our department and the students we serve. This will also improve effectiveness as the coordinator will not have to spend as much time retraining or directing the work of the front desk staff and can focus on other administrative responsibilities.

**Priority:** High

**Safety Issue:** Yes

**External Mandate:** No

**Safety/Mandate Explanation:**

## Update on Action

### Updates

**Update Year:** 2020 - 2021

09/29/2020

**Status:** Continue Action Next Year

Funding was requested through the appropriate district governance process. Funding was not approved.

**Impact on District Objectives/Unit Outcomes (Not Required):**

## Resources Description

**Personnel - Classified/Confidential** - 24 Hour Part Time Veterans Clerical assistant or Technician dependent upon allowable work duties (Active)

**Why is this resource required for this action?:** The VRC does not have consistent Front Desk Support/Coverage

Every year we have approximately 130-140 students who make 2,200 individual visits to the veterans resource center to access our services/resources. When we do not have front desk coverage current staff's workload is affected or the VRC must close which limits students' ability to access VRC services. COVID-19 has also brought to light the problem with relying on student workers as they are not able to access the same systems they were able to access from campus which limits their ability to provide clerical support to the veterans coordinator and counselor.

Hiring this additional staff can mitigate student barriers to accessing services and support which also supports District Objectives 1.1, 2.1 and 4.2. When we are able to provide students with accurate and timely access to information it allows them to make informed decisions about their education which can help reduce veteran student attrition from application to enrollment (District Objective 1.1) and help increase a students likelihood of persisting to completion of their Associates Degree or CTE program (District Objective 2.1). An additional personnel will assist the VRC in strengthening our operational capacity (District Objective 4.2).

**Notes (optional):**

**Cost of Request (Nothing will be funded over the amount listed.):** 45000

**Related Documents:**

[SARS 18-19.PDF](#)

## Link Actions to District Objectives

District Objectives: 2018-2021

**District Objective 1.1** - The District will increase FTES by 1.75% over the three years

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