Veterans Education and Transition Services

In 2019 our Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) program rose 34 spots to No. 18 overall in the Military Times’ annual "Best for Vets" ranking while NAU and ASU ranked 53rd and 106th respectively. The continued phenomenal support from SSFAB is critical for the University of Arizona to keep up with our rapidly growing military-connected student population (Active Duty, Guard/Reserve, Veterans, Spouses, and Children) and to stay proactive, cutting edge, while fostering an environment for success.

We’ve built on VETS’ success by taking a holistic approach in working with our veteran and military-connected student population. We first focus on health care, employment, and housing all before the student first sets foot on campus. This was possible with the addition of a second graduate student position focusing on “First Year Experiences.” This student position has been integral in the success of our newly integrated military-connected student freshman and transfer orientation sessions. The University of Arizona’s VETS Center is also fortunate to have the full-time services of Dr. Michael Marks, former Lead Psychologist, PTSD Outpatient Clinic Director at the SAVAHCS and co-creator of the Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV). In this role, Dr. Marks teaches the SERV classes, provides mental health counseling, serves as a mentor to student veterans, and as a consultant to faculty and staff throughout the UA community.

Our two VETS Military Connected Student Centers remain the hub for student engagement and success with our military-connected student population. During the Fall of 2019 there were 1,538 student veterans attending UA, while the total military-connected population was 3,958. Spring 2020 and future forecasts indicate an increase to the total military-connected student population and arriving at approximately 10% of the student body. During any given semester we also offer 40+ military-connected student’s jobs as VA work studies. Through their experiences transitioning successfully into higher education, VA work studies unite military-connected students who frequent the VETS Center with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for students to be successful. In addition to these duties, work studies pick from a wide selection of projects that provide leadership and experiential learning opportunities for 100% engagement credit such as mentoring, student outreach, social media, tutoring, and many more. To expand on tutoring, work studies tutor in specific high demand areas such as Math, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, English, Writing, and Spanish and are available during our center’s hours of operation providing 6-10 hours of tutoring per day.

With VA work studies and the VETS Centers at the core of our success, we strive to maintain a grass roots philosophy of empowering our students, which often leads to innovation and accomplishment. Our students have created many career preparation opportunities; résumé writing workshops, interview practice, and career fairs with employers targeting students from our population. Our dedicated space in the VETS Center allows us to invite on and off campus partners, including advisors who have used the opportunity to discuss academic planning and degree plans to decided students. Peer Advocacy Liaisons (PALs) provide mentoring to new and seasoned students with questions ranging from how to apply to what scholarships and financial aid opportunities we have available.

Significance of Maintaining Veterans Education and Transition Services

The depth of services currently provided by VETS would not be possible without the continued support from the Student Services Fee. Currently VETS is supported solely by SSFAB. In addition to current and previous funding, VETS is

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1 Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV) incorporates five college credit courses designed to increase retention, succeed in college, and increase employability.
2 University Analytics and Institutional Research (UAIR)
3 The VA work study program is an educational benefit that provides students using GI-Bill tax-free, minimum wage income as long as they are enrolled in at least ¾ time
4 Peer Advocacy Liaisons is an experiential learning opportunity for students who want to provide face-to-face mentoring to our population
5 Warrior Scholar Project is a two-week humanities and STEM boot camp for currently serving military personnel and veterans who are interested in attending the university. We provide this program along with 19 other top American universities such as Yale, Notre Dame, Princeton, MIT, and Harvard.
requesting an increased operational budget to now include funding for Warrior Scholar Project \(^5\), stole ceremony for graduates, increased IT costs through SASG, and funding for an administrative assistant and academic learning specialist. In Fall 2018 our Tuition Assistance (TA) population increased by 51\% over Fall 2016. Students using VA benefits have increases by 16\% in that same time period but the increase is even more staggering if you compare Fall 2018 to Fall 2010—100\%. UA staffing and programs are not aligned to meet the needs of this growing population and we are understaffed in comparison with our peer institutions.\(^6\) In addition, changes are necessary if we are to remain compliant with The Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We need an administrative assistant (1.0 FTE) to maintain a physical presence in the VETS Center to manage student workers and serve as an additional school certifying official for GI-Bill benefits. The administrative assistant would also answer basic questions about military benefits, schedule appointments for students with a benefits counselor if they require more complex information, and supervise the student work studies. We also need an (1.0 FTE) Academic Learning Specialist. This position will be tasked with developing and implementing individualized and group academic support plans. This position will monitor academic progress for military-connected students on a regular basis. This position will track time-to-degree completion and assist with a comprehensive assessment plans and coordinate student retention efforts.

Assessment Success for Veterans Education and Transition Services

**Two Primary Goals** have been identified to measure the success of VETS.

**Primary Goal #1:** *Increase Retention and Graduation Rates of Student Veterans.*

The primary measure of success will be comparing overall retention rates of student veterans and military-connected students through University Analytics and Institutional Research (UAIR) data acquisition.

**Primary Goal #2:** *Increase VETS Military Connected Student Center usage*

Current center usage hovers around ~150 unique visits per day averaging 11.5K visits over the course of a semester. Consistently through SSFAB progress reports we have shown that veterans that frequent the VETS center at least once per week during a semester were 15-20\% more likely to maintain student success and retention than student veterans who do not use the center and 10\% more likely than the overall student body. Our goal to enhance our programs, initiatives, and staffing will allow us to bring more students in to access these of our services.

**VETS Support of the Student Services Fee Initiatives**

VETS priorities have been to meet and exceed the standards of SSF Initiatives in service to the university and our population. This is evidenced by the national recognition of UA’s exemplary VETS program, services, and resources and our drive to foster engagement and camaraderie with our students and community at large. The Student Services Fee Advisory Board has continued to shape our business ethos at VETS and has allowed us to maintain amazing growth and opportunity to meet 7/8 of the initiatives surveyed from three-quarters of the overall student population and 20/25 of the total most important surveyed initiatives. It is our charge to find ways to incorporate other initiatives into our programming by engaging our population and granting ease of access to resources and leadership opportunities.

SSFAB funding will allow VETS to continue developing long-term strategies to address the specific needs of the ever-increasing military-connected student population at UA. Military-connected students comprise a growing population in higher education and at the University of Arizona. These students are also diverse in terms of demographic characteristics and service backgrounds, placing an important role on VETS, SSFAB, and the university at large to develop comprehensive, targeted, and meaningful support services to encompass the needs of these unique students. It is our hope SSFAB will agree to fund this grant proposal for three years in our joint effort to continue to lead the nation and Arizona in military-connected student programs, services, and resources.

\(^6\) Peer institutions with similar military-connected student population sizes have upwards of twenty university staff to meet the needs of their students.