

The State of Veteran Students in California Community Colleges

2018 STATEWIDE STUDY

Nancy L. Montgomery, RN, MSN — Lead

Daniel Avegalio, MS

Eric Garcia, EdD

Mia Grajeda, MSW

Ezekiel Hall, BA

Patricia D'Orange-Martin, MS

Glen Pena, MSW

Todd Steffan, MS

March 2019

www.ivc.edu



Acknowledgements

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) would like to express its gratitude to Nancy Montgomery, Assistant Dean of Health, Wellness, and Veterans Services at Irvine Valley College, whose dedication to the academic success of both the California Community College Veteran student population and the centers that support these students was the impetus for this project.

We would also like to recognize the participation by the California Community Colleges (CCC) who provided their time and resources, in terms of staff and students, in order for us to obtain the data and information needed to conduct this study.

Lastly, we would like to thank the Veteran students themselves for sharing their experiences so openly with us.

The Research Team from RP Group who analyzed the data and wrote the report include the following dedicated members:

Project Team

Tim Nguyen
Ileri Valenzuela
Andrew Kretz
Alyssa Nguyen

Editors

Darla Cooper
Priyadarshini Chaplot

www.rpgroup.org

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Table of Contents	3
Executive Summary	6
Background	6
Findings and Recommendations	6
Concluding Remarks	9
Introduction	10
Military Transition Theory	10
Veterans Transitioning into Higher Education	11
Reader’s Guide	14
Study Methodology	14
Study Findings	15
Veteran Students in California Community Colleges	15
Veteran Student Characteristics	15
Military Service	16
Health	18
Health Coverage	18
Service Connected Disability	18
Health Issues	20
Education Profile	22
Veterans Affairs Education Assistance	22
First-Generation Status and Highest Degree Attained	23
Current Grade Point Average (GPA)	24
The Current State of CCC Veteran Resource Centers	24
VRC Size and Staffing	24
VRC Resources and Supports	25
Veteran Students’ Educational Experiences	27
Transitioning from Military to Civilian life	27
Structure to Little Structure	28

Learning to Navigate the VA and the Community College Systems	28
Veterans Resource Center Staff Help with Navigation	29
Being a Veteran Student	30
Struggles to Balance Responsibilities	30
Financial Struggles	31
Benefits are like Paychecks	32
Interactions with the College as a Whole	32
Campus Climate	34
VRC Staff Advocate for Veterans	36
Interactions with Faculty	36
Politics in the Classroom	37
Veterans Resource Centers	38
Veteran Resource Centers as “Safe” Spaces	39
Experiences with VRC Counselors and Staff	39
Mental Health Counseling	41
Evening Hours Needed	42
Services and Resources	42
Physical Space	43
Discussion of Findings and Recommendations	44
Key Finding #1: Unmet mental health needs	44
Recommendation 1.1	44
Recommendation 1.2	45
Key Finding #2: Lack of understanding of Veteran students’ unique challenges among non-VRC staff and faculty	45
Recommendation 2.1	45
Recommendation 2.2	45
Key Finding #3: Need for student-friendly business hours and spaces	45
Recommendation 3.1	45
Recommendation 3.2	46
Key Finding #4: Need for increased capacity to support Veteran students’ education planning and benefits	46
Recommendation 4.1	46

Recommendation 4.2	46
Recommendation 4.3	46
Key Finding #5: Need for stronger partnerships between the VA and VRCs to support Veteran students' transition	46
Recommendation 5.1	47
Key Finding #6: Lack of consistent and reliable data about Veteran students	47
Recommendation 6.1	47
Concluding Remarks	47
Appendix A: Best Practices and Important Considerations	49
Appendix B: List of Colleges from 2018 Site Visits	51
Appendix C: Colleges from Student Veteran Surveys	52
Appendix D: Position Descriptions	54
Veterans Affairs Certifying Official	54
Veterans Counselor	55
VA Vocational Rehabilitation (Vet Success on Campus [VSOC]) Counselors	55

Executive Summary

Background

This report provides a snapshot of the state of the Veteran Resource Centers in the California Community College system, and of the Veteran student population and their unique academic experiences in that system. In July 2018, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) awarded a \$2M innovation grant to Irvine Valley College (IVC) to enhance the success of student Veteran programs throughout the state of California based on the successes experienced from the college's Objective Rally Point 2 Veterans Resource Centers (ORP2VRC). The goal of this grant is to develop trainings for California Community College staff who support Veteran students, and develop a "best practices" toolkit that will assist these staff in implementing, enhancing, and/or maintaining comprehensive student supports that are typically centralized at each college's Veterans Resource Center (VRC). To inform this work, Nancy Montgomery, Assistant Dean of Health, Wellness, and Veterans Services at Irvine Valley College, coordinated a team of community college Veteran services representatives along with researchers from the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to collect data on VRCs and Veteran students throughout the state.

The Military Transition Theory provides a framework for understanding the multiple factors that can impact a veteran's transition back to civilian life. The theory's components have been adapted to evaluate Veteran students' transition to the education system as a way to help inform efforts to improve their educational experience in the California Community College (CCC) system. A mixed-methods evaluation model was used to collect data and information to provide a snapshot of VRCs in CCC. These methods include: a student survey, student focus groups, VRC staff interviews, and observations at the VRCs.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings from the aforementioned activities revealed the following six key themes and served as a foundation for a set of recommendations, both which can inform IVC's efforts to advocate for and develop a best-practices toolkit and resources tailored to enhancing, developing, implementing, and maintaining a comprehensive Veteran student-centered program.

Key Finding #1: Unmet mental health needs

Based on staff interviews and experiences shared by students, it appears that most mental health services accessed by veterans are provided through community partners, and many VRCs throughout the state do not have any dedicated mental health services on campus.

Recommendation 1.1

Identify ways for colleges to provide more on-site mental health services. Possible options include community partnerships where the mental health specialist comes to the college, partnering with psychology programs at four-year universities that could place interns at the college with supervision, or support groups in the form of group counseling with a trained professional.

Recommendation 1.2

Study VRCs that have effectively implemented mental health services and disseminate these findings as effective practices to help inform VRCs throughout the state.

Key Finding #2: Lack of understanding of Veteran students' unique challenges among non-VRC staff and faculty

Focus group participants shared mixed experiences with faculty, staff, and students specifically citing a lack of sensitivity to the disabilities of Veteran students, the triggers Veteran students may experience in the classroom, and a lack of flexibility and willingness to work with Veteran students' schedules.

Recommendation 2.1

Identify college-wide professional development/training opportunities to help administrators, faculty, staff, and students understand the unique culture and experiences of Veteran students and develop the skills to respond to the specific needs of Veteran students that affect their ability to successfully reach their educational goals.

Recommendation 2.2

Provide resources and information to faculty that can be embedded in their course syllabi as a way to raise awareness among faculty and students about the needs of the Veteran students, and as a way to raise awareness with Veteran students about the resources/supports available to them.

Key Finding #3: Need for student-friendly business hours and spaces

Veteran students noted that more often than not, VRCs are not open in the evening and therefore not serving Veteran students who work full-time and/or take evening courses. In addition, both VRC staff and students noted that some of the VRC spaces are not large enough to provide very many services for students.

Recommendation 3.1

Provide VRCs with resources and information for how to analyze Veteran student enrollment trends in order to identify the most optimal business hours that best align with their students' schedules that can include extending hours into the evening, or even weekend options.

Recommendation 3.2

Study VRCs that have maximized the use of their spaces based on resources and supports and disseminate effective practices to help inform VRCs throughout the state.

Key Finding #4: Need for increased capacity to support Veteran students' educational planning and benefits

The two biggest challenges cited by students in the VRCs was the lack of available counseling appointments when they need to complete their education plans and lack of trained counselors who could effectively help them navigate the VA benefit system.

Recommendation 4.1

Identify training opportunities for college staff and counselors to emphasize the need for 100% accuracy between students' education plan on file at the college and VA certification submission.

Recommendation 4.2

Develop a checklist protocol that lists common VA education plan certification errors (see Appendix A: Best Practices and Important Considerations) that counselors and Veteran students can go through together during their appointment to ensure that the VA education plan submission is as accurate and complete as possible.

Recommendation 4.3

Examine how technology can improve and streamline Veteran students' education planning needs.

Key Finding #5: Need for stronger partnerships between the VA and VRCs to support Veteran students' transition

There appears to be missed opportunities to strengthen partnerships to support a smoother transition from the military to education between the Department of Veterans Affairs and VRCs. As noted, VRCs play an important role in helping veterans learn how to navigate the policies and procedures of community colleges as well as the additional requirements placed on them when accessing VA benefits.

Recommendation 5.1

Advocate for stronger partnerships between the VRCs and VA offices across the state to coordinate and co-identify practices and processes to streamline the onboarding process for prospective and current Veteran students to ensure successful transition from the military to the educational setting.

Key Finding #6: Lack of consistent and reliable data about Veteran students

The lack of consistent and reliable data on Veteran students is a nationwide issue. Having an accurate count of veterans, active duty military personnel, and military beneficiaries on a college campus is fundamental to providing support for these students.

Recommendation 6.1

Advocate for data-sharing agreements to be made between the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the United States Departments of Veterans Affairs and/or Defense to have Veteran students identified more systematically, rather than relying on students' self-reporting or using proxies such as whether a Veteran student utilizes VA education benefits.

Concluding Remarks

As noted, it is not always easy for veterans to transition back to civilian life or into higher education after their service in the military. Veterans' physical and mental health concerns can impede their success in college—particularly when these problems intensify challenges already faced by non-Veteran students: financial barriers, housing, transportation, family responsibilities, work, time management, study skills, learning to navigate college policies and procedures, and connecting with college culture. However, more often than not, community college administrators, staff, faculty, and non-Veteran students may not be aware of the impact having served in the military can have on the ability of Veteran students to cope with and overcome many of the challenges mentioned above. In spite of these challenges, only a third of the Veteran students who responded to the survey had thought about dropping out of college. Despite this resiliency, VRCs and colleges can do more to support Veteran students with their transition from the military to an academic life. As the entire CCC system explores using the Guided Pathways framework to redesign the comprehensive student experience, this very framework may serve as a useful model for transitioning Veteran students to and from college successfully. A focus on new student intake and a structured onboarding process, along with continuous assessment of personal, educational, and career needs could help Veteran students during their transition to college life, connect them with other support services on campus, and lead to the successful achievement of their goals.

Introduction

Many US Veterans separate from the military and encounter difficulties in transitioning to civilian life. Military separation represents significant shifts in personal and social identity, purpose, culture, relationships, and living situations in the lives of veterans. Research studies conducted by the USC School of Social Work Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR)¹ have found that many service members separate from the military ill-equipped to begin their civilian lives by not securing housing and/or employment. Additionally, service members may be contending with physical and/or mental health issues, and these issues may be compounded by Veterans need to adjust their self-identity and transition to civilian culture.

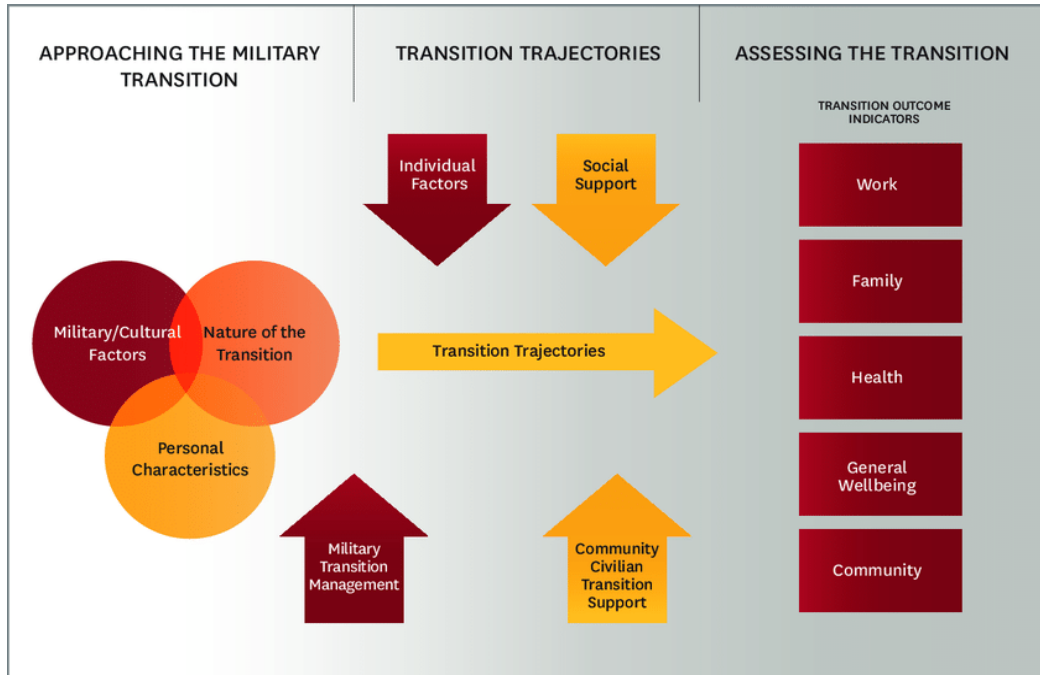
Military Transition Theory

Military Transition Theory² (Figure 1 on the next page) postulates that there is an interaction and overlap among three components that impact successful transition from military to civilian life: 1) the interplay between the service member's personal characteristics along with their military cultural experiences, and how they exited the military; 2) service members' adjustment styles and support systems (e.g., social, military, community, civilian); and 3) outcomes associated with transition that include work, family, health, general wellbeing, and community.

¹USC School of Social Work Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR): <http://cir.usc.edu/publications>

² Castro, C.A., Kintzle, S., and Hassan, A. (2015). *The State of the American Veteran: The Orange County Veterans Study*. Retrieved from: http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/OC-Veterans-Study_USC-CIR_Feb-2015.pdf

Figure 1. Military Transition Theory (MTT) from *The State of the American Veteran: The Orange County Veterans Study*



Veterans Transitioning into Higher Education

Military Transition Theory (MTT) provides a useful framework for understanding the various factors that affect a successful transition to civilian life, and is applicable to different subgroups of transitioning veterans. This study adapts that framework to an educational setting. Table 1 on page 11 provides a crosswalk mapping the components of both the MTT and the study as a way to assess veterans’ successful transition from military to postsecondary life. As more Veterans separate from the military and enroll in higher education, colleges and universities can utilize this framework to further understand and develop programs to better serve their Veteran student populations.

Table 1. Crosswalk of MTT Components and Study's Components

MTT Component	Study Components
Approaching the Military Transition	Veteran students' self-reported demographics, military history, and reported physical and mental health.
Managing the Transition	Veteran students' self-reported information on their support networks and military transition management, including Veterans Affairs benefits. Veteran student support from the student and college perspectives.
Assessing the Transition	Veteran students' reported college experience.

According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, there are 1.7 million veterans living in California³ and close to 94,000 veterans and their beneficiaries receiving education benefits to further their education in the state. In the 2017-2018 academic year, California Community Colleges (CCC) enrolled 2.1 million students, of which 54,368 (annual unduplicated headcount) students were currently on active duty, a veteran, or a member of the Active Guard Reserve or National Guard.⁴

Historically and continuing to present day, California Community Colleges have had difficulties identifying their Veteran student population, and measuring their progress in completing a certificate or degree, and/or transferring to a four-year university. While knowing Veteran student completion of these academic milestones is important, colleges can be better informed by more immediate data on their Veteran students in order for college staff can assist these students before they stop out or drop out of college.

To address this issue, the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) at Irvine Valley College (IVC) began collecting additional data on its students by developing a student intake form (see Appendix A). The information gathered through the intake form is used by VRC staff to ensure they are providing the appropriate services required by their students. Furthermore, the college also monitors its students' progress along specific program pathways.

In 2014, after IVC opened its VRC, college staff conducted a needs assessment to examine potential barriers students were facing in their educational journeys. College staff were

³ Summary data for California during the 2016-2017 fiscal year were extracted on 2/1/2019 from the US Department of Veterans Affairs website: <https://www.data.va.gov/dataset/state-summary-california-fy2017>

⁴ The estimated 54,368 annual unduplicated headcount (2017-2018) for Veteran students attending California Community Colleges is a new calculation that was published by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office on the Student Success Metrics on 1/31/2019. These estimates are new, and work continues to refine these figures. A detailed discussion on Veteran student data is provided in the California Community Colleges Veteran Student Data section of this report.

concerned with what they uncovered. Almost half of their Veteran students screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 40.5% expressed concerns about depression, and 36.5% indicated they had anxiety. Additionally, IVC Veteran students needed more remediation in math and English coursework than non-Veteran students, lacked personal support systems, had limited financial resources, and exhausted much of their GI Bill education benefits due to high unit accumulation.⁵

In order to better serve their Veteran students, IVC implemented the Objective Rally Point 2 Veterans Resource Center (ORP2VRC) framework in fall 2015 which emphasizes a holistic student-centered approach. Following the Guided Pathways model, ORP2VRC incorporates best practices along Veteran students' academic pathways that include:

- New student intake process
- Continuous assessment of personal, educational, and career needs
- Structured onboarding process
- Accelerated remediation
- Intervention resources and tracking
- Individualized program maps and transfer pathways
- Proactive academic and career advising
- Milestone nudges based on course and/or unit completion
- Veterans-trained psychologist (hired with grant funds)

As a result of Irvine Valley College's ORP2VRC program, the college saw improvements in its students' outcomes. There have been increases in the number of visits to its VRC, transfer-level math completion, certificate and degrees attainment, transfer to universities, and a decrease in excess unit accumulation. In addition, IVC observed decreased issues of suicide ideation, depression, and PTSD amongst its Veteran students. IVC's work to improve the success of its Veteran students was recognized by the Chancellor's Office, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, and the Legislature when it was awarded the \$2M Chancellor's Higher Education Innovation Award grant. With this grant award, IVC plans to develop a toolkit and professional development program to train other colleges on the practices that have been effective for IVC Veteran students. To inform this work, Nancy Montgomery, Assistant Dean of Health, Wellness, and Veterans at Irvine Valley College (IVC), coordinated a team of community college Veterans services representatives along with researchers from the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to collect data on VRCs and Veteran students throughout the state.

⁵ Information from the Irvine Valley College's Innovation Grant Award application

Reader's Guide

This report begins by describing some of the issues many veterans face after they separate from the military as they transition to their civilian lives. A framework for understanding this transition process, Military Transition Theory (MTT)⁶ is described to outline the multiple factors that can impact a veteran's transition. This study adapts the MTT components to evaluate Veteran students' transition in the California Community Colleges. Next, the research methodology for this study is described, followed by the Study Findings section. The Study Findings section is divided into three parts: the state of Veteran students, the state of CCC Veteran Resource Centers in CCC, and the educational experiences of Veteran students attending California Community Colleges. Finally, key findings are discussed and recommendations are proposed.

Study Methodology

In order to examine the state of Veteran Resource Centers and the experience of Veteran students across the California Community College system, a mixed-methods research design was employed. The data collection methods used for this study are listed below, along with brief descriptions of the types of data collected.

1. **Veterans Resource Center Documented Observations:** Between October 2018 and February 2019, a team of eight California Community College Veterans services professionals conducted site-visits to 106 California community colleges (see Appendix B for list of colleges). An observation protocol was utilized to note characteristics for each VRC such as square footage, office and counseling spaces, types of services provided, and resources such as computers and printing. Observation protocols were only completed and reported for 99 colleges.
2. **IVC's 2017 Survey of CCC Veteran Resource Centers:** IVC collected similar data to the aforementioned observation protocol through e-mail inquiries of VRCs and phone interviews ($N = 75$) (See Appendix C for list of colleges).
3. **Veteran Student Survey:** Between October 2018 and January 2019, online and paper surveys were administered to Veteran students across 75 California community colleges ($N = 1,365$). Survey information collected included student characteristics, military background, and students' access, usage, and experiences with services at the VRC and the college.
4. **Veteran Student Focus Groups:** Between November 2018 and January 2019, five student focus groups were conducted at five California Community College campuses in northern, central, and southern California. An RP Group researcher facilitated these sessions based on a consistent focus group protocol that asked Veteran students the services and resources currently used on campus, unmet needs, and their overall

⁶ Castro, C.A., Kintzle, S., and Hassan, A. (2015). *The State of the American Veteran: The Orange County Veterans Study*. Retrieved from: http://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/OC-Veterans-Study_USC-CIR_Feb-2015.pdf

educational experiences at each of their respective colleges. A total of 23 Veteran students participated in focus groups sessions.

5. **Veteran Service Staff Interviews:** At the same colleges where the student focus groups were conducted, staff at the Veterans services centers were also interviewed by the RP Group researcher. These staff hold job titles such as Certifying Official, VRC Director/Coordinator, Veterans Counselor, and Program Specialist. A consistent interview protocol asked these staff about their perceptions of the Veteran students' experiences, challenges, resources, and continuing needs. Seven Veterans services professionals participated in these interviews.

Study Findings

The study findings are divided into three parts: (1) who are the Veteran students in CCC, (2) the state of Veteran Resource Centers in CCC, and (3) the educational experiences of Veteran students attending California Community Colleges.

Veteran Students in California Community Colleges

Results from the Veteran student survey inform the following snapshot of Veteran students attending California Community Colleges. This section provides more details about: Veteran students' characteristics such as age, gender, employment and living arrangements; involvement in the military; health information; and educational background.

Veteran Student Characteristics

Figure 2 on page 16 provides a snapshot of the characteristics of Veteran students and their military service background based on the completed surveys of 1,365 students across 75 CCC.⁷ The overwhelming majority of survey respondents are male (81%), and overall Veteran students are between the ages of 21 to 40 years of age, with 34 being the average. Moreover, 60% respondents indicated being either single, divorced, or separated and the majority of Veteran students reported living with family (58%). Lastly, when asked about their employment status, 46% of survey respondents indicated they were unemployed, 34% reported working part-time, and 20% worked full-time.

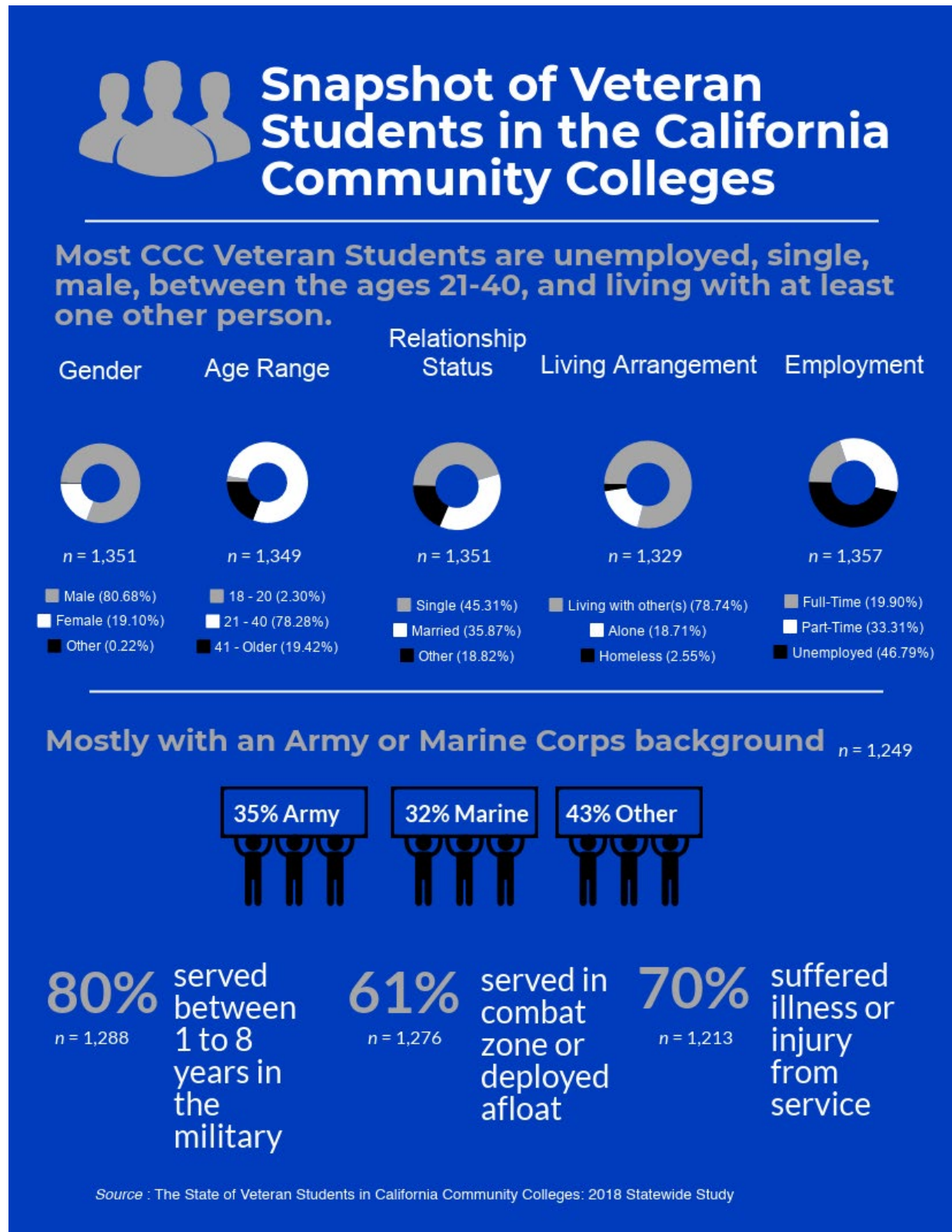
⁷ While survey results are detailed in this section, it is difficult to determine how representative these 1,365 students are to the population of all Veteran students in California Community Colleges due to the lack of disaggregated Veteran student information. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) published a research summary that highlighted the issue of higher education institutions not having consistent and reliable approaches to identify military-connected individuals on their campuses (<https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Military-Connected-Undergraduates-Research-Convening-Summary.pdf>). Data from the Chancellor's Office and the Department of Veterans Affairs, show roughly 34,000 (unduplicated) veterans were enrolled and received VA education benefits in fall 2017 and with 1,365 Veteran students completing the survey, the survey response rate would be approximately 4%.

Military Service

The military is made up of five branches: Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy. When people in the military talk about their “military” status, they will typically refer to themselves as: being on active duty, being in a reserve and/or guard forces, or being a veteran.⁸ The overwhelming majority (91%) of students identified as veterans, and 9% identified as active reservists/military or members of the National Guard. Furthermore, a little over two-thirds (68%) of these students served in either the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps. When Veteran students were asked how long they had served in the military, 80% reported serving eight or fewer years, and 9% served between nine and 12 years. Lastly, 61% of Veteran students indicated having served in a combat zone or having been deployed afloat.

⁸ <https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/us-military-overview.html>

Figure 2. Snapshot of CCC Veteran Students



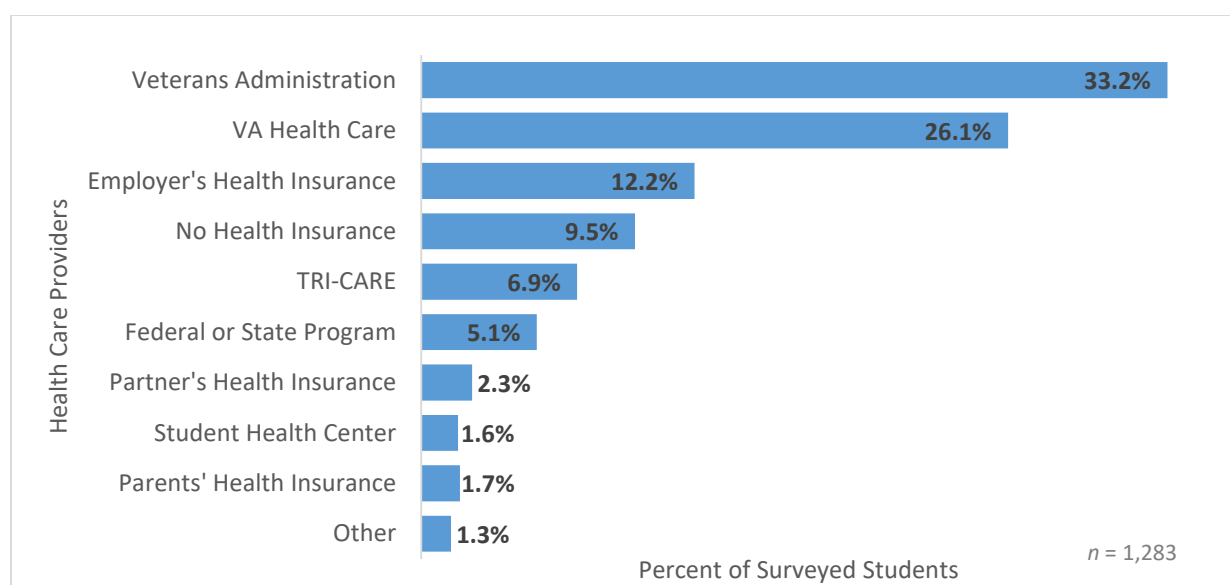
Health

Many veterans separate from the military with physical and mental health issues. This section provides information on Veteran students' self-reported health coverage, disability, and physical and mental health issues.

HEALTH COVERAGE

Nearly 60% of Veteran students who responded to the survey indicated receiving either Veterans Benefits Administration or VA Health Care services. Over 90% of surveyed students reported having some form of healthcare—although almost 10% indicated having no health insurance (Figure 3). Roughly 60% of students noted that they receive healthcare either through the Veterans Administration or VA Health Care. Students who indicated “Other” and then provided a write-in response noted private health care providers (e.g., Kaiser Permanente, Blue Shield).

Figure 3. Veteran Students' Health Care Providers

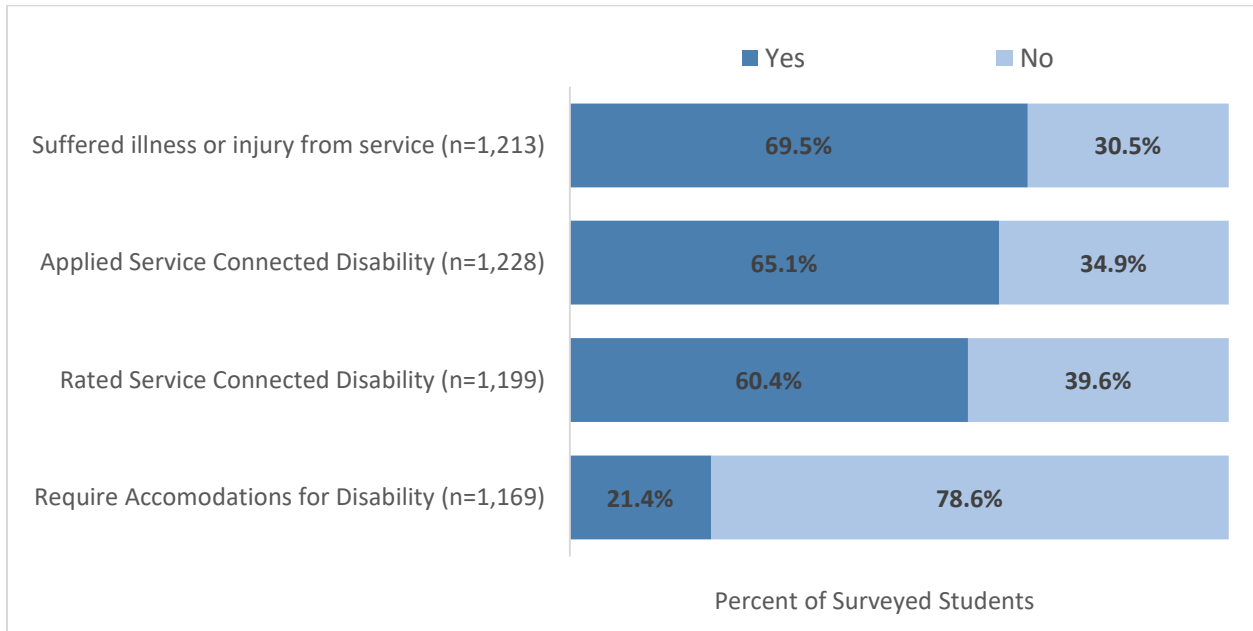


SERVICE CONNECTED DISABILITY

Figure 4 on page 19 displays information provided by students concerning illness or injury stemming from their military service. About 70% of Veteran students reported sustaining illness or injury from their service, and 60% are rated for service-connected disability.⁹ Despite a high percentage of respondents reporting an illness or injury, only 21% reported requiring accommodations for a disability.

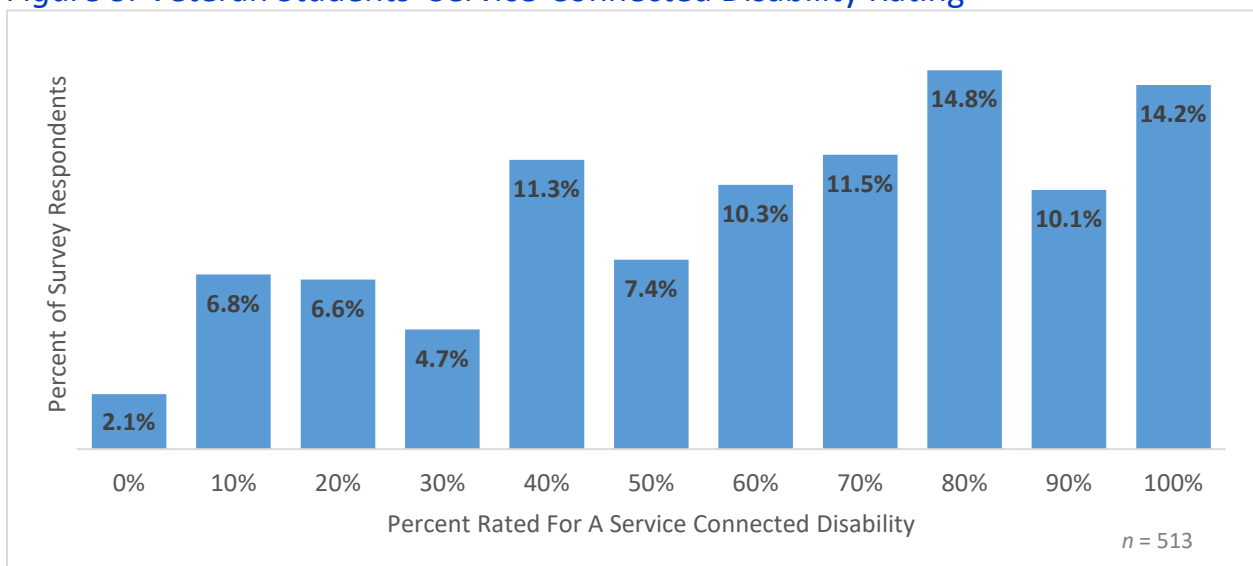
⁹ Service-connected disability rating is used to determine the monthly rate applied for VA disability compensation. For more information, visit: https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/benefits_chap02.asp

Figure 4. Veteran Students' Service-Connected Disability



The Department of Veterans Affairs rates a veteran’s disability by its severity, where a 0% disability rating indicates that the veteran’s condition does not negatively impact them at all, while a 100% disability rating indicates that the veteran’s condition prevents them from properly caring for themselves. As indicated in Figure 5 below, a little over half of these students reported a disability rating of 70% or more, and almost all students (98%) reported a disability rating of at least 10%.

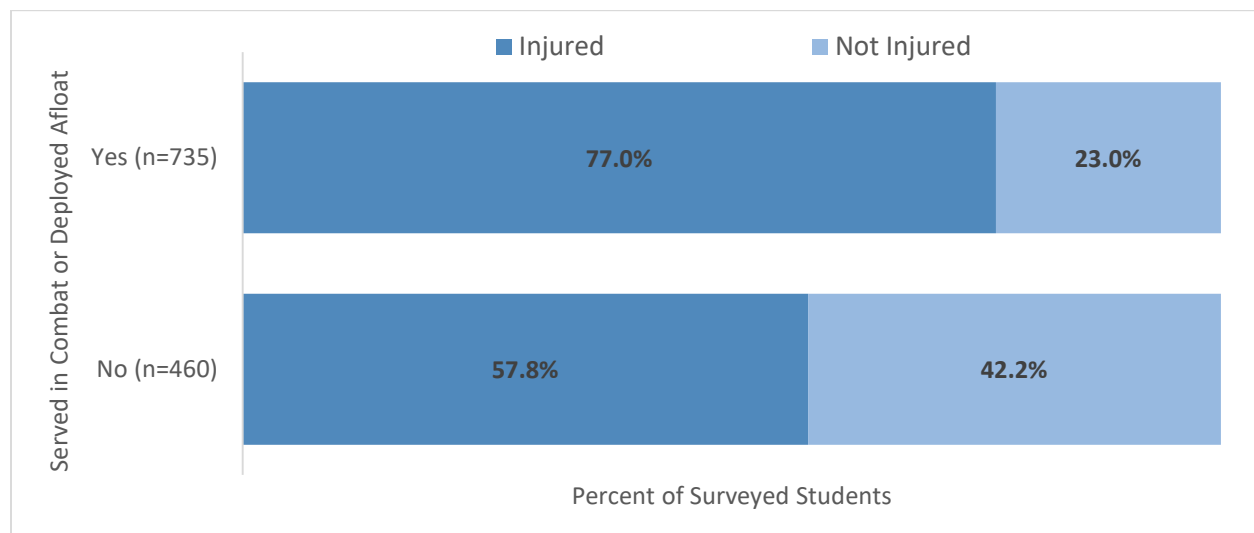
Figure 5. Veteran Students' Service-Connected Disability Rating



HEALTH ISSUES

As mentioned, 70% of Veteran students reported sustaining injuries from their time in service (Figure 5). A comparison of survey respondents who indicated whether they served in a combat zone or were deployed afloat found that although larger proportion of those students sustained injuries during their service than their peers who did not, there was still a large percentage of survey respondents who sustained injuries despite not serving in combat or being deployed afloat (77% and 58%, respectively) (Figure 6).

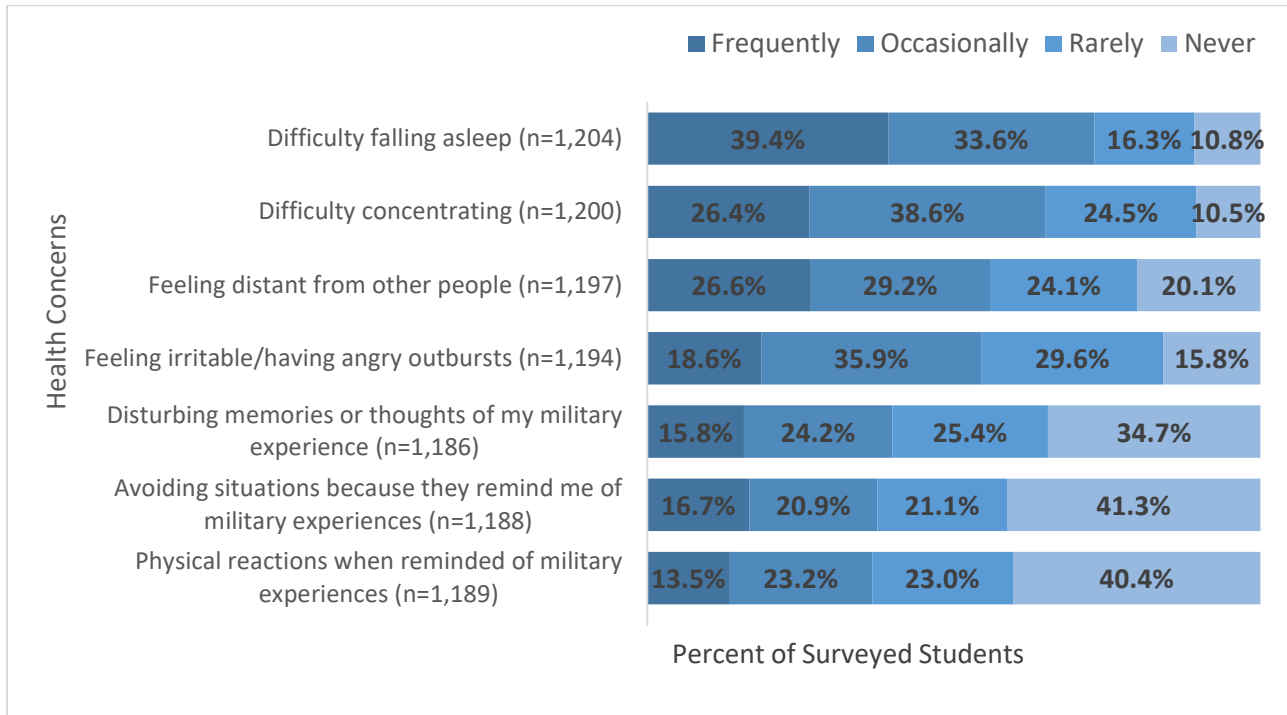
Figure 6. Veteran Students' Served in Combat or Afloat Status by Service Injury



The most frequent mental health issues mentioned by survey respondents were post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Figure 7). Students also reported sustaining physical injuries to their backs, knees, shoulders, feet, and ankles, and/or sustained hearing loss from the sound of explosions.

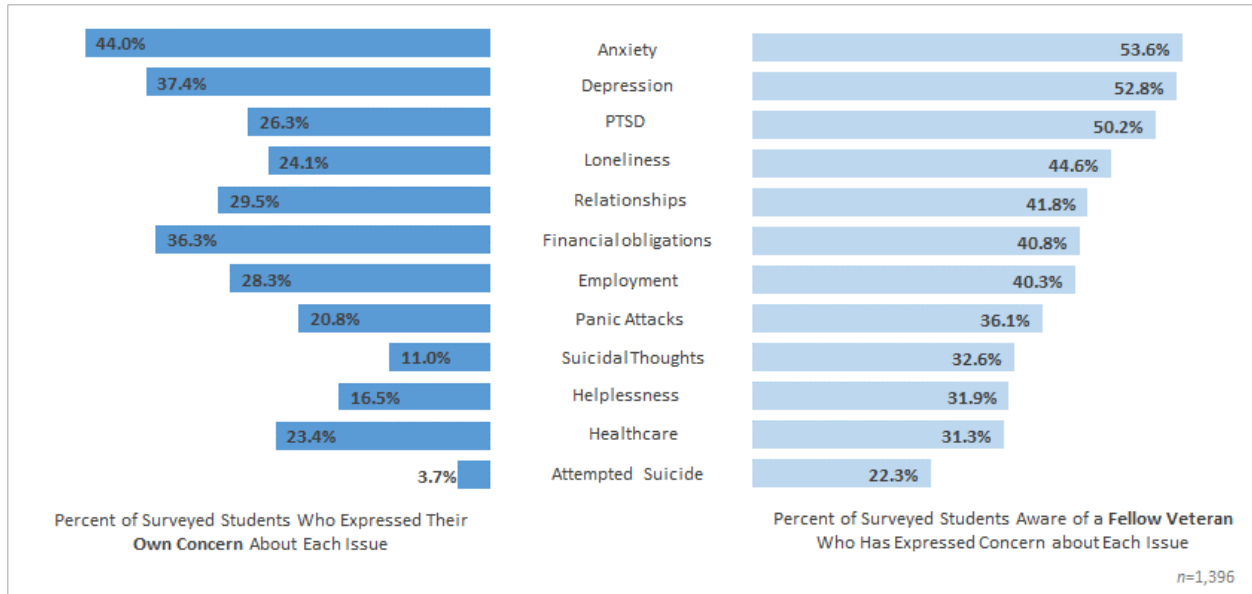
Moreover, surveyed Veteran students were asked to rate the frequency with which they experience various health concerns. Students reported that they most frequently experience difficulty falling asleep (39%) and concentrating (26%), followed by feeling distant from other people (27%). While not a majority of survey respondents, a sizeable number (30% to 40%) of Veteran students indicated that they frequently or occasionally experience disturbing memories or thoughts of their military experience, physical reactions when reminded of their military experience, and/or the urge to avoid situations that remind them of military experiences.

Figure 7. Veteran Students' Reported Health Concerns



Surveyed Veteran students were also asked to select from a list of health concerns and potential stressors they have concerns about for themselves, and whether they are aware of a fellow Veteran experiencing or expressing those concerns (see Figure 8 on page 22). Many students noted knowing a fellow Veteran who has experienced or expressed concerns related to anxiety (54%), depression (53%), PTSD (50%), and loneliness (45%)—these concerns were also among the most frequently indicated by the student themselves.

Figure 8. Veteran Students' Concerns Over Issues: Self and Fellow Veterans



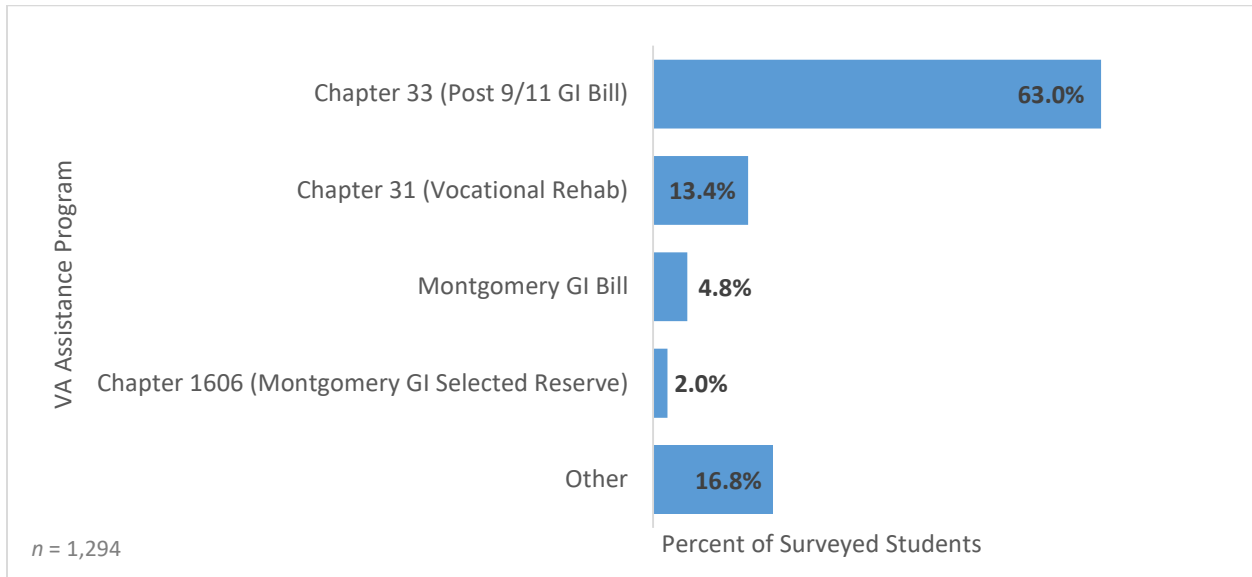
Education Profile

The Education Profile section provides survey results reported by Veteran students that detail which VA education assistance benefit they are utilizing, their highest degree attained, and their current grade point average (GPA).

VETERANS AFFAIRS EDUCATION ASSISTANCE

Approximately 80% of Veteran students reported using some form of Veterans Affairs education assistance benefit (Figure 9). Nearly two-thirds of students noted using the Chapter 33 (Post 9/11 GI Bill) program. Students selecting “Other” and writing in a response generally listed other sources of financial assistance, such as federal financial aid (e.g., Pell) and fee waivers.

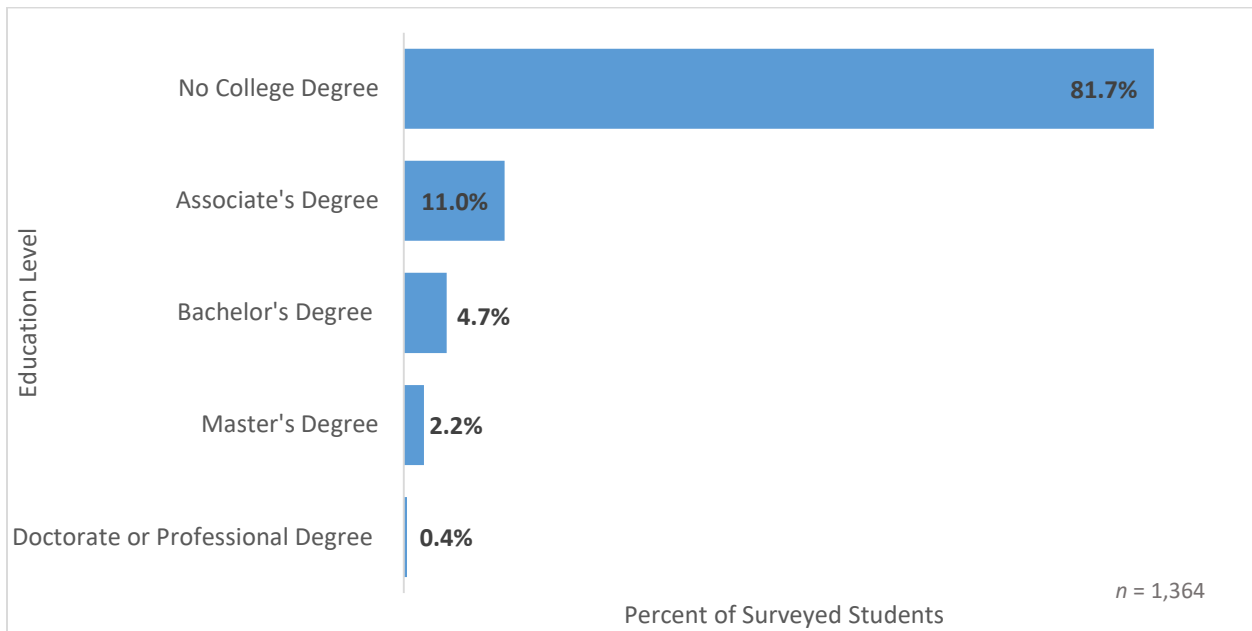
Figure 9. Veteran Students' Use of VA Education Assistance



FIRST-GENERATION STATUS AND HIGHEST DEGREE ATTAINED

Thirty-one percent of the Veteran students surveyed identified themselves as a first-generation college student. Eighty percent of Veteran students are progressing towards their first college degree, while 11% have already attained an associate's degree, and 7% have already earned a bachelor's degree or higher (Figure 10).

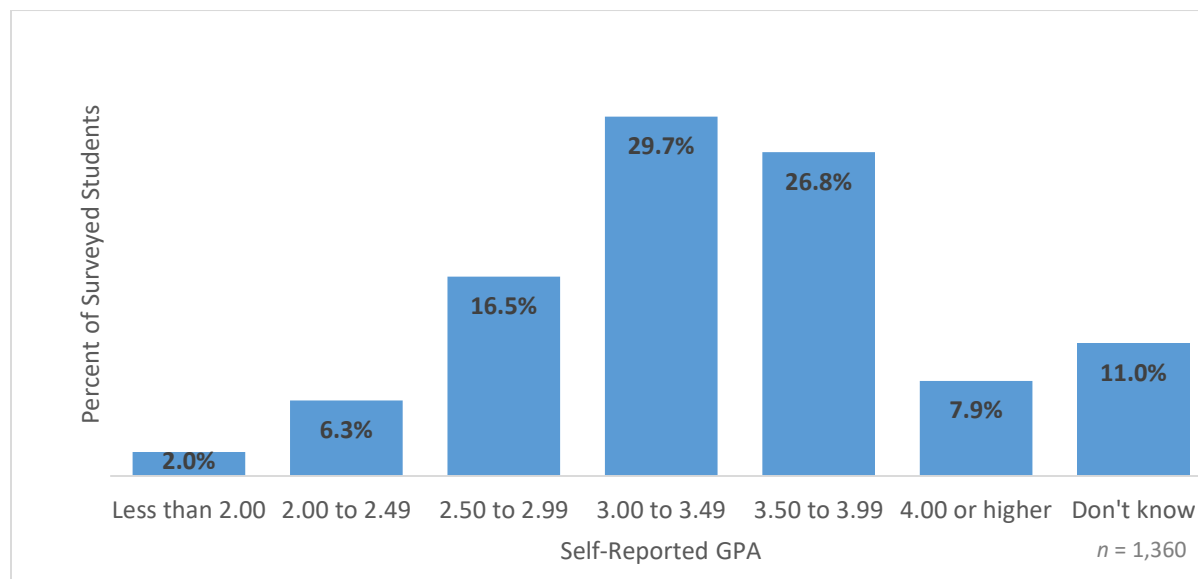
Figure 10. Veteran Students by Education Level



CURRENT GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA)

Over 60% of surveyed Veteran students reported having a GPA of 3.00 or higher (Figure 11), while 2% indicated having a GPA less than 2.00.

Figure 11. Veteran Students' Self-Reported Grade Point Average



The Current State of CCC Veteran Resource Centers

Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) provide a welcoming and permanent setting where Veteran students can be supported as they transition and acclimate to life as a college student. At many community colleges, VRCs have become one-stop centers, where Veteran students can receive student support services that are embedded into the center. Between October 2018 and February 2019, IVC team members conducted 106 site visits and found that 96% (95 out of 99) of these community colleges in the state had a dedicated Veterans Resource Center (Figure 12 on page 23 for snapshot of VRCs). This section provides a snapshot of CCC VRCs based on size and staffing as well as resources and supports available to Veteran students.

VRC Size and Staffing

VRCs across California Community Colleges vary in size and spatial configurations. The average VRC (based on data from 58 colleges)¹⁰ is 1,014 square feet with the smallest reported at 100 square feet and the largest at 2,900 square feet. In 2018 site visits, IVC project team members completed an observation protocol that asked them to note the size, location, staffing, and their perceptions of each center. One protocol item asked team members to mark “yes” or “no” as to whether the environment in the VRC appeared to be welcoming, and whether it was easy to locate the VRC at the college. Based on IVC project team members’ observations, 98%

¹⁰ Data from IVC’s 2017 Survey of CCC Veteran Resource Centers

characterized the VRCs they visited as welcoming (93 out of 95 VRCs), with two colleges not having a VRC to rate. Most of the VRCs seen as welcoming by site visitors included a welcome desk and lounge area for students.

Additionally, project team members reported 88% (83 out of 94 VRCs) were located in a central location on campus, and that 84% (76 out of 91 VRCs) were easy to find, in or next to the college's Student Services building on a college campus. For the VRCs that were reported to be difficult to locate, insufficient signage was the most frequently reported reason.

The three most common staffing positions in VRCs are Veterans Certifying Official (96 out of 96 VRCs), work-study student (83 out of 87 VRCs), and Veterans Counselor (79 out of 96 VRCs). Detailed descriptions of each of these roles¹¹ are provided in Appendix D.

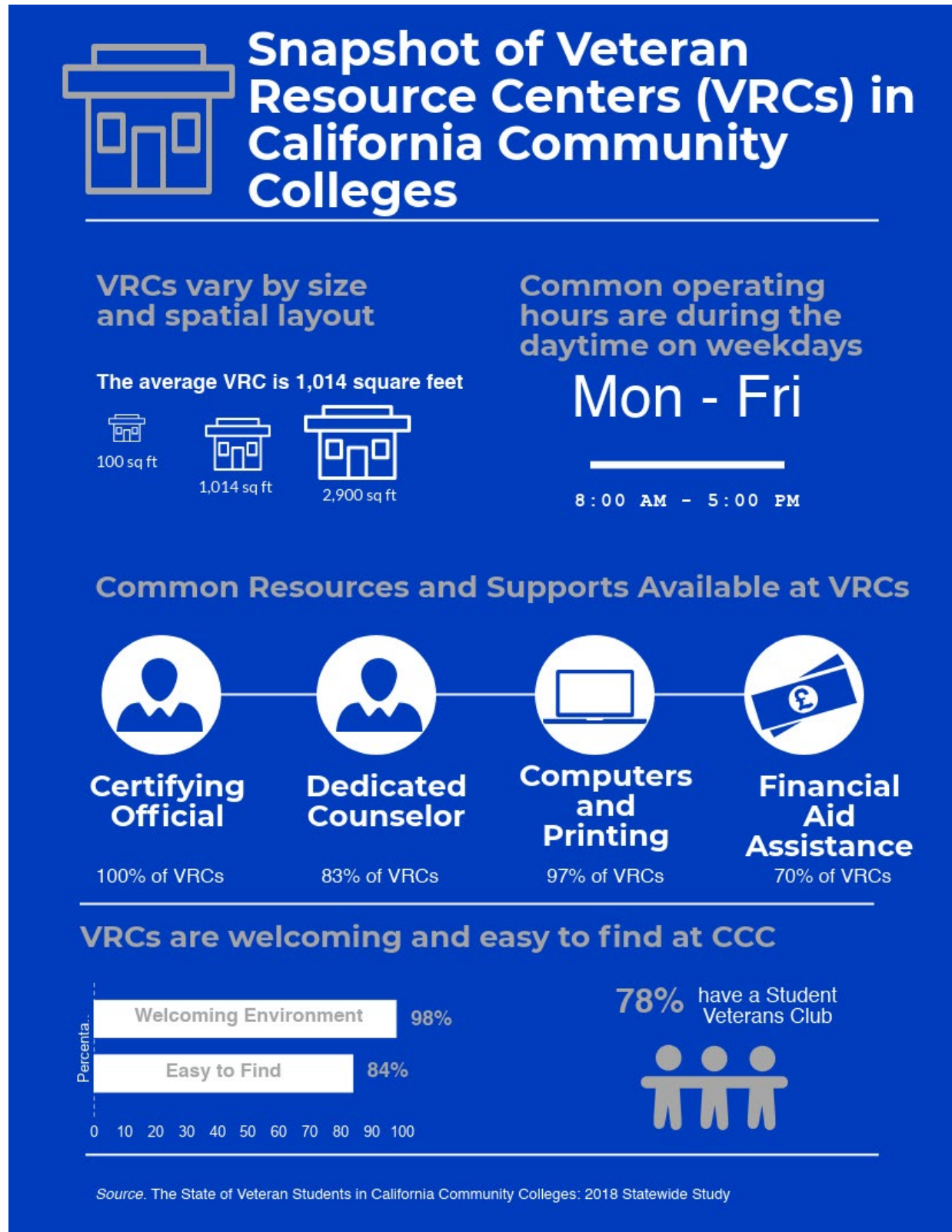
While 20 VRCs had a full-time Veteran counselor, 28 VRCs had a Veterans counselor assigned between 20 and 39 hours per week, and another 14 VRCs reported having a Veterans counselor assigned to their center 14 to 19 hours per week.

VRC Resources and Supports

VRCs provide many resources to help their students succeed academically. Similar to the staffing variances at VRCs, these resources are also provided unevenly across the state. Almost all VRCs that were visited had an average of eight computers and printing available for student use. Less common resources included book-lending (63%, 60 of 95 VRCs) and laptop-lending programs (33%, 31 of 94 VRCs). Moreover, the types of supports also varied. While 70% of VRCs had financial aid assistance services (64 of 93 VRCs), roughly half had services such as psychological counseling (40 of 80 VRCs) or emergency funds (47 of 92 VRCs). Over three fourths of colleges (78%) had a Student Veterans Club (55 of 70 VRCs).

¹¹ Also included in the appendix is a role description for a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor or VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) Counselor. There are fewer instances of these roles within CCC VRCs and it is unknown how many of these counselors assist CCC VRCs.

Figure 12. Snapshot of Veteran Resource Centers in California Community Colleges



Veteran Students' Educational Experiences

The student perspectives presented in this section augment and enrich the information gleaned through the student surveys and VRC observations, ensuring that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strengths of another. Deeper perspectives from Veteran students will provide critical context that can help inform the quality and feasibility of recommendations for policy and program improvement made in this report. The following findings are organized based on themes from the focus groups, VRC staff interviews, and Student Veteran surveys: (1) challenges transitioning from military to military life, (2) the identity and experience of being a Veteran student, (3) interactions with the college and staff/faculty, and (4) perceptions and experiences at the VRCs.

Transitioning from Military to Civilian life

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, it is not always easy for veterans to transition back to civilian life or into higher education after their service in the military. VRC staff, former veterans themselves, shared that while the military provides a transition workshop for military members prior to separation, many of these workshops do little to prepare military personnel to the realities they will face. Two staff members shared:

As a former Marine who experienced transition training firsthand, I can say that this fails to satisfy the needs of service members who plan to pursue higher education after the military. Attention is given to aspects of the GI Bill and vocational rehabilitation, but virtually little is said about what the college admission process is like or how to best prepare for school.

One of the things that students always tell me is that, "This isn't how they [the military] told me it was going to be when I did my transition seminar and getting out." What happens is a lot of times in the Army and the different services is [that] they'll put [service members] in a room for a week or a day and they'll [say], "Hey, these are your resources when you get out, have a nice day." When they come to the college, they're like, "When I went through my transition seminar they said this, this, this, and this was going to happen." I'm like, "They're right, but you have to apply." It takes time, and they're not ready for that.

Students in the focus groups concurred. In the words of one student:

[The military] needs more veterans who have been through the same hardships, who know how the VA system/college system works. Veterans do not get enough information during our transitioning seminar.

Military members who are separating from military service and entering community colleges may initially experience challenges associated with their transition from a regimented military life into a more unstructured and oftentimes ambiguous life as a student. Moreover, veterans must also learn to navigate the complex Veterans Affairs (VA) system to receive their education

and other benefits, as well as the foreign system of community colleges—all before registering for their first class.

STRUCTURE TO LITTLE STRUCTURE

The military is an institution that is highly structured, where specific behaviors are expected, and certain values upheld; in essence, the military is its own culture. Once active military members leave the “comfort” of the military’s structured environment, they need to adjust to institutions and or places of work that may be fairly unstructured. One Veteran student shared that the lack of structure associated with student life can be a difficult transition:

I think a lot of it is the transition from military life to student life; it’s pretty difficult. You’re going from having a driven mission that you’re working on every day—that is your entire life—to get this paper done by Wednesday, but you could probably still turn it on Thursday. [You] are not being told [that Wednesday] is a concrete deadline, I think, is a hard transition; nobody’s telling me when I have to go to bed, nobody’s telling me when I have to wake up in the morning. I think it’s kind of hard to go from somebody totally controlling every aspect of your life to nothing at all.

Another student added that the large numbers of people and activity of a college campus is another area of adjustments for veterans:

[Veterans] come [to college] and there’s all kinds of things happening on campus at any given time. So, for a Veteran coming either straight out of service or [even] if they’ve been out for a little while, they might still essentially [experience] a culture shock; they’re back in huge crowds and there might be a lot of confusion. [Sometimes] they’re just not sure what’s going on or what to do.

LEARNING TO NAVIGATE THE VA AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEMS

Once out of the military “system,” veterans need to learn how to navigate two new and complex systems; the paperwork and process of obtaining benefits and services from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the various policies and processes of the community college system. Two Veteran students shared:

I think normal students, they do the application for the school, they see a counselor, they do financial aid. For veterans, we do that on top of 10 more forms. There’s different forms for your post-9/11 and your vocational rehab, there’s different forms from your Montgomery GI Bill and your dependent form. There’s different forms [if] you[’ve] used [benefits] before or if this your first time. There’s a lot of forms. Then, we have to submit [the forms] six weeks before the semester starts if we want to get paid on time, if we want to get a book stipend and things like that. It’s definitely a long process that you can’t navigate by yourself. And you can’t log on to eServices to find out the status of where your paperwork is.

Signing up for school is way different [because veterans] use different benefits [and] the paperwork is different from the other students. I don't know how to use my benefits. I need help to navigate the VA system to get my benefits. [The benefits] are our income. So, it's a little bit more important to me to get it done right because I use [my benefits] to support my family as well.

VETERANS RESOURCE CENTER STAFF HELP WITH NAVIGATION

The transition for veterans from the military system into the complexity of the community college system is not an easy one as students described above. Subsequently, VRCs play an important role in helping veterans learn how to navigate the often-baffling policies and procedures of community colleges. A few students shared:

The VRC staff continues to do an excellent job in providing assistance to the veterans. I have always received a listening ear, sound advice and direction, and assistance from the VRC staff. I truly appreciate their dedication to all the veterans on campus. [VRC staff] have been invaluable in helping me navigate my path to reach my educational goals. Great advice, Great attitudes, Great SMILES!

A lot of vets don't innately realize they lose that support system [in the military]. Whether they like the system or not, they had it supporting them, whether it was financially or emotionally. [Veterans] get out and then all of a sudden all these real-life factors come in and they're like, "Oh, this sucks, this is horrible." One of the good things about the VRC is that it is a support system in itself. I got them helping me out registering for classes, being that middleman to the VA so that I can get paid, textbooks, Scantrons, and all these little things that you need for your classes.

One thing the office does pretty good is helping with the transition because everyone's at a different point in their life. [Staff] look at, you not just as a student, but as a Veteran, too. [Staff ask], "What is it you really need? Who can we put you in touch with?" They give you a name, not just a place. If possible, [staff will] introduce you to that person, bring them to campus so not always sending people to that office and that office.

A VRC staff member noted:

I try to make faculty/staff aware that veterans are transitioning and they're trying to figure out what they're doing now, what their next steps in life [are]. They're come from a structured environment and they know exactly what they are—they're a Marine or Airman, but when they come out, it's different. Some of them don't have career goals yet, they don't know what they want to major in, so we have to try to figure it out. They're trying to find a new person who they're going to become next outside the military in the civilian world. They also need help understanding the process of college because a lot of them don't understand that process and they're coming in, trying to figure out and navigate the system

and it's different. And then they also have to navigate the VA system, which is another separate process. So, that's why we have the VRC to help support [veterans] and make them understand the college process and also the VA process.

However, as mentioned in the preceding section, the ability of all California Community College VRCs to provide Veteran students with positive experiences like those described above can be severely undermined by the unevenness in resources, numbers of full-time staff, and support for the VRCs by the general college administration, faculty, and staff.

Being a Veteran Student

Veterans' physical and mental health concerns can impede their success in school—particularly when these problems compound challenges also faced by non-Veteran students: financial barriers, housing, transportation, family responsibilities, work, time management, study skills, learning to navigate college policies and procedures, and connecting with college culture. However, more often than not, community college administrators, staff, faculty, and non-Veteran students may not be aware of the impact having served in the military can have on the ability of Veteran students to cope and overcome many of the challenges mentioned above.

STRUGGLES TO BALANCE RESPONSIBILITIES

The difficulty of managing the responsibilities of school in the midst of competing pressures such as work, family, health, and other life issues, is something that a great many Veteran students must face. Comments from VRC staff and focus group participants indicated that students wrestle with how to prioritize their time and attention, particularly in the face of significant financial pressure. A VRC staff member shared:

Being a community college, and particularly this college because it is a commuter school, our students struggle with work/life balance or school/work balance. A lot of our students are working, a lot of our students are married, [and some] have children, and so finding convenient class times, finding time to actually make time for counseling appointments, for workshops [can be challenging]. We have a very low socioeconomic status here and so students are struggling with employment, they're struggling with finances.

Two students added:

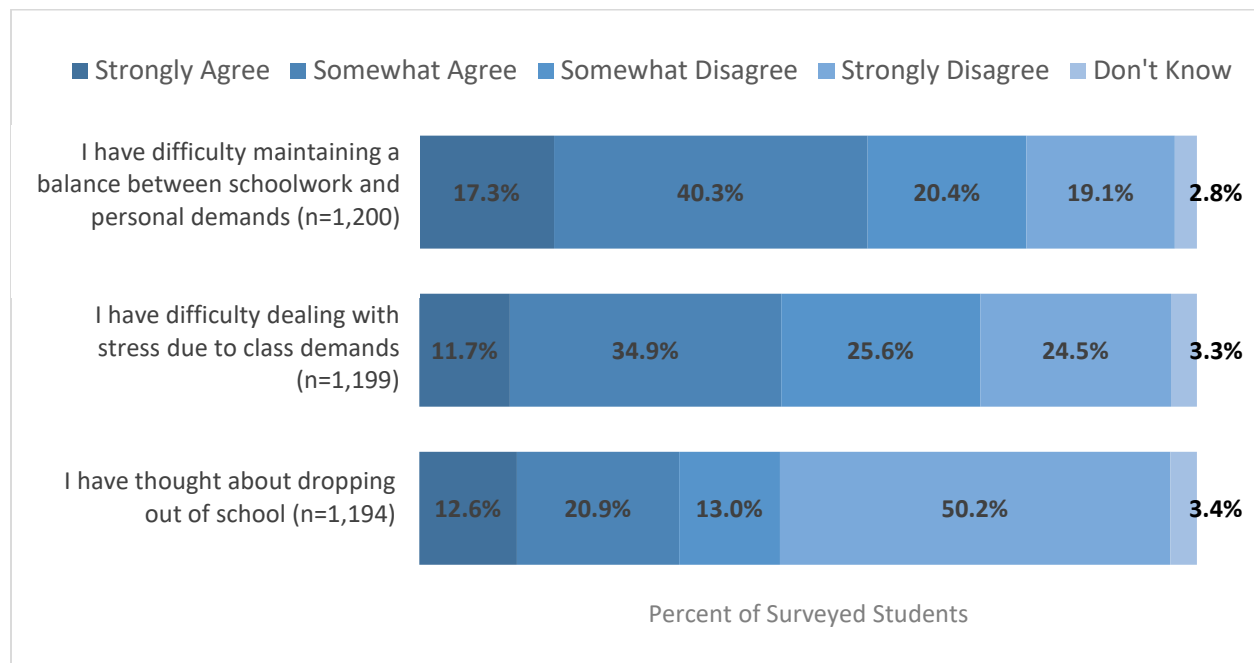
Family responsibilities. You can't take your kid to school when your kid's sick. Life gets in the way. What are you supposed to do? Am I going to do my homework assignment or am I going to take care of my kid? You're going to take care of your kid.

I had to be a full-time student and I was working graveyards. I was coming to school from 8, getting off at 6, spending about four hours at home, and then had my graveyard shift until 7 in the morning. I did that for about a year, and that

burnt me the hell out and it sucked. It was just a pain in the ass and balancing trying to be a parent. I'm still trying to figure myself out, let alone I've got to figure out how to raise my kid and be a dad. So, you're juggling and it's not easy. It's never going to be easy.

Survey data validate what students shared in the focus groups. Figure 13 shows that 58% of survey respondents agree to having had difficulties maintaining a balance between schoolwork and personal demands, while 47% of students reported that they have difficulty dealing with stress due to class demands. In spite of all these challenges, only 33% of students reported having had thoughts about dropping out of school.

Figure 13. Veteran Student Managing College/Life Balance



FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

In addition to the stress caused by trying to balance attending school with family and at times work responsibilities, veterans must also deal with trying to make ends meet with benefits that are not a consistent amount from month to month. Benefit payments are *prorated* based on the number of days in the *month* that a Veteran student is enrolled (see footnote for an example provided by the VA).¹² As one student described:

¹²For example: Your full-time rate is \$800.00; however, your term starts on August 19th and continues through December 14th. Payment for the *month* of August would include the 19th to the end of the *month*. (All *months* are based on 30 days, so *months* with more or less than 30 days would not affect the rate). Thus, your payment for the *month* of August would be approximately \$320.00. Payments for September, October, and November would be \$800.00 each *month* and payment for December would be approximately \$373.36 (*prorated* from the 1st to the 14th). https://gibill.custhelp.va.gov/app/answers/detail/a_id/118/kw/how%20is%20bah%20prorated%20monthly

One thing with the education benefits from the VA is you're not making the same amount every single month. [The amount] differs based on how many units you're enrolled at the time. For the oncoming spring semester [that starts] in mid-January, we're only going to be in school for like [two] weeks? So, instead of getting the entire amount that you normally get, the VA prorates every single pay period into how many days you're actually in class. A ballpark amount, let's just say, you're enrolled in enough units to make [\$]1500 for the month of January, you might only get [\$]700.

BENEFITS ARE LIKE PAYCHECKS

In many ways, VA education benefits are like monthly paychecks for Veteran students. In order to get their “paycheck,” students must go through a certification process at the college and meet certain VA guidelines. While college personnel cannot influence how quickly the VA processes students’ paperwork, they can help to ensure that Veteran students understand their benefits so they can avoid pitfalls that can cause delays or payment reductions. Colleges can also ensure that students’ forms are processed and submitted on time to the VA. In addition, Veteran students can only earn these “paychecks” while they are attending college more than half-time. For most colleges, even if a student attends Fall, Spring, and Summer terms, they can only earn this “paycheck” for 10 months per year due to the breaks between terms. This lack of pay for two months means that Veteran students may need financial planning skills. Summer is a particularly difficult time for these students because in addition to the breaks between term, where they earn no money, any changes to enrollment can have severe financial consequences. Dropping a single class in summer can sometimes result in going from full-time pay, to no pay at all. A number of students across focus groups shared that the college does not always submit their paper work on time thus delaying their “income.” The students noted:

Having counselors that know when/how to turn in GI applications on time, so I'm not living on Uber-driving money for ramen and rent waiting for my benefits when I turned in all paperwork 1-2 months in advance of a semester.

We used to have a vocational counselor here that helped out people with their claims. Now, [veterans] are dealing with a ton of different counselors. Nobody can get a hold of their counselors. They're on hold for six, seven months. My GI Bill is getting to the end, what am I going to do? I have no way of going to school. I have no way of funding myself unless you want me to work at Walmart and that's not going to provide. That doesn't pay the rent. That doesn't pay for your food. That doesn't pay for your kids. [Veterans] need that additional time on their GI Bill, but they can't get a hold of their counselors and that's ridiculous.

Interactions with the College as a Whole

Some Veteran students have unique challenges related to mental and physical health issues, some of which are not always visible, that stemmed from their experience in the military. Focus group participants shared mixed experiences with faculty and staff specifically citing a lack of

sensitivity to the disabilities of Veteran students, a lack of understanding of the triggers Veteran students may experience in the classroom, a lack of knowing how to work with Veteran students, and a lack of flexibility and willingness to work with Veteran students or see them as whole people.

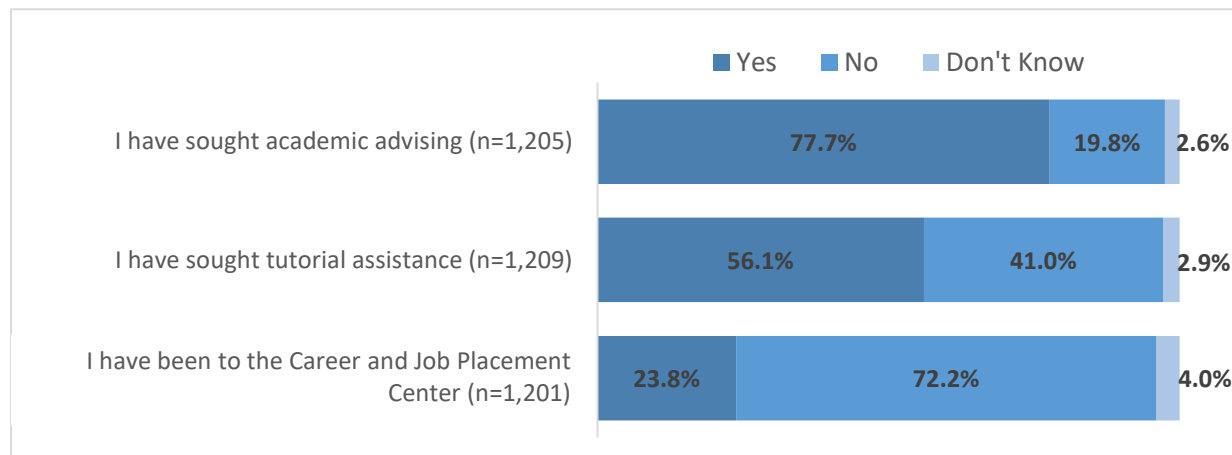
Likewise, they share many of the same hurdles as non-Veteran students navigating the community college in terms of getting inconsistent and conflicting information from college personnel, having to be resourceful to find college resources, and having mixed experiences with general counseling. Two students shared:

When I came to the school a year and a couple months ago, I had no knowledge of the resources [the college] has. I feel it's easy to mess up or take the wrong class and there might not be the right people to help navigate that for you. I feel like you have to do a lot of searching on your own. [The] resources [are there] if you're able to access them.

If we can avoid general [counseling], we'll avoid that place. [Counselors] just put whatever they want on that sheet. They don't care. They don't know what benefits we have and the things that need to happen. They're going to just do what they have to do, but it's just going to ruin our paperwork. And a lot of people rely on the school to get paid; that's their income.

When Veteran students are able to find and utilize academic supports and services offered by the college, 78% of surveyed Veteran students reported seeking academic advising, 56% have sought tutorial assistance, and 24% have visited their college's career and/or job placement center (Figure 14).

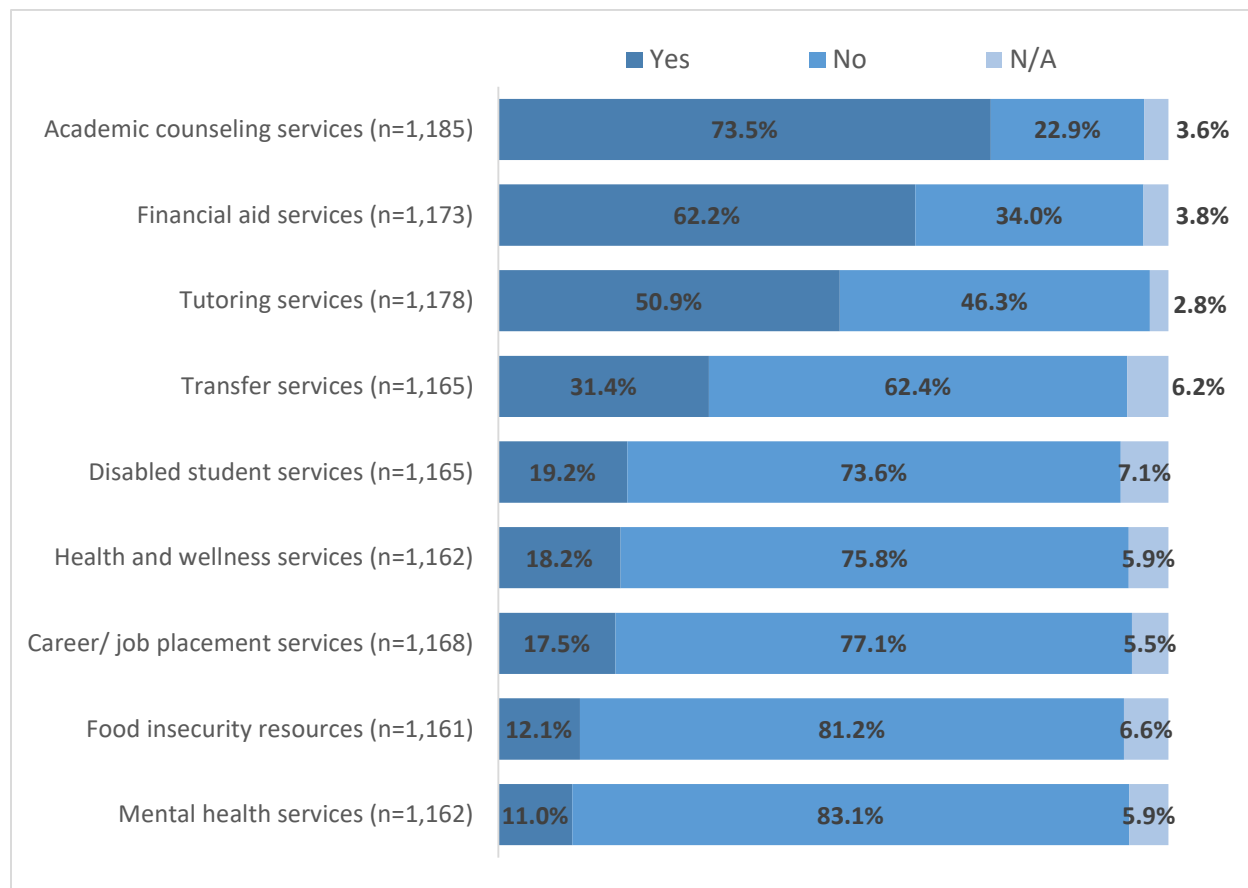
Figure 14. Veteran Students' Use of Academic Resources



Furthermore, Figure 15 on page 34 shows that Veteran students most frequently reported using academic counseling (74%), financial aid (62%), and tutoring (51%). Of all the resources, the lowest usage rates were found for mental health services (11%), food insecurities resources (12%), and career counseling and planning (18%). However, the reasons for the low usage rates

are not clear—whether it is because students did not need them, were not aware of them, or because the VRC and/or college does not offer these resources.

Figure 15. Veteran Students’ Usage of Academic Resources

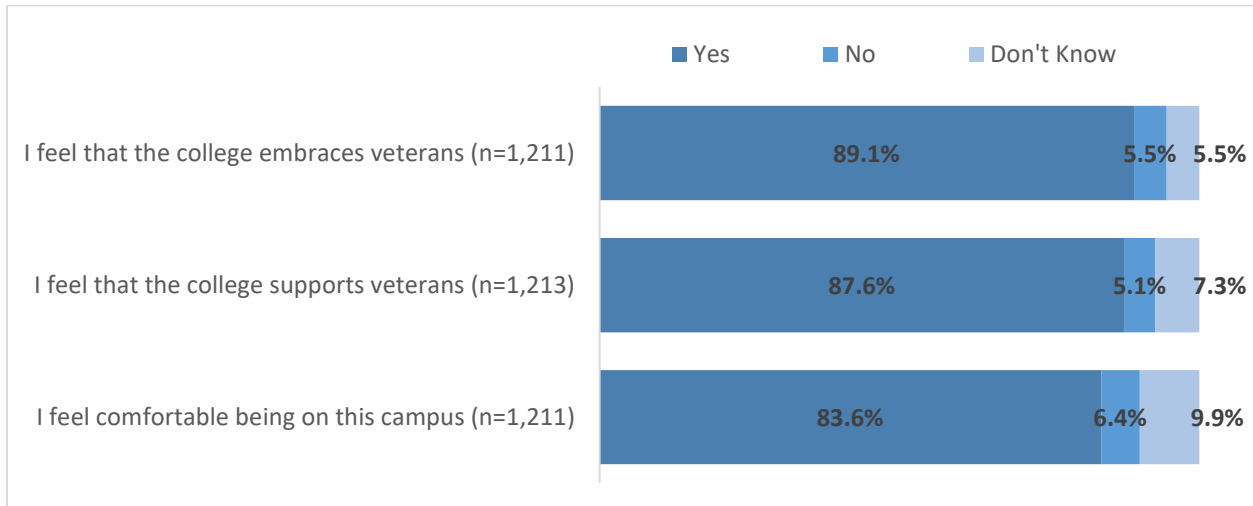


CAMPUS CLIMATE

Similarities aside, Veteran students noted that not all campuses are “Veteran-friendly” and some feel downright hostile. Veterans commented that the most common issues they encounter are stereotypes, politics, and a mixed willingness among college personnel and non-Veteran students to learn about veterans and their specific needs.

Survey data show that a very high portion of respondents indicated feeling positive and welcome on their respective college campus. Figure 16 illustrates that 89% of Veteran students surveyed noted that they feel their college embraces veterans, and similarly high proportions of students reported that they feel that their college supports veterans and that they are comfortable on campus, 88% and 84%, respectively.

Figure 16. Veteran Students' Perceived Campus Climate Towards Veterans



While Figure 16 shows that there appears to be an overall sense that college campuses support Veteran students, there are instances when students do not feel supported or welcomed. In the words of two focus group participants:

I think the school could be welcoming at times. Some staff are Vet-supportive, but then if you have a different opinion that goes against the grain of what administration wants, like for example, gun control. We're around guns, we know how to use them, but there's so much misinformation and a lot of people follow the crowd. There's a [college-wide community space], but if we wanted to give our opinion against gun control, we'd almost be vilified for having that opinion on it. I mean we're an older population [with] a lot of life experience that a lot of people haven't had, so when we try to bring our experiences in, it's kind of ignored, almost.

[People on campus] need to understand [that] if they see a military member, we don't all have PTSD. We're not all just crazy and going to blow up at any second. We just want to get an education as well. I don't mention it in my classes because if I do, then people just act different. I never mention I'm military. I don't do it.

VRC STAFF ADVOCATE FOR VETERANS

When asked about what the college climate was like for Veteran students, a number of VRC staff commented that it is “getting better,” but that they have to constantly keep the needs of Veteran students at the forefront. A VRC staff shared:

[VRC staff] need to constantly commit ourselves to changing that campus culture. There’s new faculty that comes on board all the time, so we present at the New Faculty Academy. There’s always work that needs to be done in advocating for our Vets here and letting people be aware that we have a presence here on campus and to let them know that [veterans] are just like any other normal student. They just got out of the military and they’re just here trying to figure out what their next educational goal and career goals are just like anyone else.

Another staff member discussed his/her VRC’s approach in helping faculty better serve Veteran students:

Part of our faculty training [includes] how a specific student, based on their service, would approach assignments and what they need to know when working with students? What are some trigger words? What are trigger assignments? What do seating arrangements look like? How do you deal with accommodations? How do you deal with a student who may be experiencing a mental health issue in the class?

INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTY

Veteran students offered a range of feedback regarding their academic experiences at different colleges. Students had mixed perspectives on their relationships with faculty, with some describing the powerful benefits of connecting with an instructor who cares, and others sharing the frustration of encountering teachers who they felt were not as interested in supporting their success. Below, a few students share their positive experiences with faculty:

I have this instructor that will explain something and then takes his time to put stuff on the board so I’ll understand it. He says that I see things visual[ly]. I’m doing better than I was doing last semester.

I [told] one of my professors, “I’m struggling here,” and he told me he’ll help me, whatever help I need. He’s an incredible professor and one of the guys that don’t use a book to teach you, so you know he’s well-skilled.

“I was up until midnight last night working. Your class is at 7 am, I didn’t get this paper done, is it okay if I turn it in by 3 today?” If a teacher isn’t understanding of that, that’s hard; “I swear I’m not trying to like pull one over on you.” This is real life gotten in the way. For the most part, I feel like a lot of teachers here are pretty understanding, especially if they know you’re a veteran. At least at this school. They respect that you’re in the military. Even if they’re not agreeing with it, they respect you as an adult.

[I am a] reservist. I still do drills one weekend a month, two weeks a year. It was pretty difficult last year because I had to be gone for a month-long training exercise. Luckily, three out of four of my professors were willing to work with me, so I ended up passing those classes.

Other students shared unhelpful experiences with faculty:

I brought my doctor's excuse to show my teacher the dates that I missed, this is where I was. I was at the hospital or I was at my therapist. He totally disregarded it, just shut me off. [He said], "We got to go by the rule. If you miss three days, you get dropped." But it's like, "We're here to learn." So, it should be, "How can we help you learn? I understand that you have doctor's notes, what can I do to help you learn what you missed." Sometimes it feels like some teachers don't want to go that extra step to help you learn and it's crazy because the whole objective of us being here is to learn.

As veterans, we have different experiences. We have different responsibilities and different triggers. I don't know that overall the professors are understanding to that. Some of my professors just see you like a student; in their minds, the student part comes first. Your responsibility as a student [is] to be at class, be on time, and submit your homework on time, that's what they expect. We all have different things we've got to deal with, but I don't know that I could approach my professors and really tell them if there's issues going on.

I don't think there are a lot of faculty that are veterans, so it's hard for them to relate [to our issues]. There's some who don't realize that going to the VA Hospital, it's not a super-easy thing to do. Once you get an appointment, you don't lose it because it'd take you so long to get another one. It not always easy to tell [instructors] like, "I have some medical issues, and I got to handle those first before I can do anything else, and I'm not going to give up my appointments to come to class."

One student added that Rate My Professor helps him steer away from unhelpful faculty:

You go to Rate My Professor and you get the down-low on the professors that you want to learn from. That's a huge advantage to get that [information] because in some cases, you're going to put off just by the mere way that somebody teaches. So, you're definitely looking for the ones that are friendly to veterans. There are toxic people within the academic community.

POLITICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Sometimes challenging social interactions are unavoidable for Veteran students because issues of war, politics, mental health, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder may be topics of class discussions or assignments. Students also described instances where faculty were not able to check their own political views at the door. In the words of four students:

There's been times where my entire class has been hijacked with politics, and this has nothing to do with my English; my ability to make a sentence. Since [the teacher] made this the topic we're supposed to write about, I don't feel I can bring in a perspective that allows me to take constructive criticism because I feel that [the teacher is] attacking my ideology instead of providing me with an education. I can't bring in an objective emotionless understanding of the grade that [the teacher is] giving me and I don't feel that I'm getting a fair cut.

When it comes to hot topics like politics or when we're talking about mental health or PTSD, in the classroom at times, it almost makes you not want to participate. In fact, even if you did voice your opinion, you almost feel like you're going to be shut out or vilified. Why am I going to waste my time trying to change their mind? I would love to try to have an open conversation and persuade them to see my side, not necessarily to change their mind, but be more open-minded. A lot of times in class when stuff like that comes up, I just kept my mouth shut.

Talking about triggers, sometimes in class, especially like sociology classes or psychology classes, they get into details about things like experiences in the military. I'll go to my professors sometimes, depending on the class, and be like, "Hey, if I need to step out, it's because you guys are talking about something that's very personal and I need to step out and take a break before I just blow up on the whole class. Not really blow up, but like give a very strong opinion." So, I'll step out and gather myself. Sometimes [professors] understand, but I've had one professor who was like, "No, you leave class, you leave class."

In my human services class this semester, we have gone over homelessness in the Veteran community, mental health in the Veteran community, and at one point, we watched a video on the Veteran Crisis Hotline; what it's like, the call center. It was about how they received the phone calls when veterans were calling in. I couldn't leave class because it would be like you left class, you're absent for class and the strict attendance policy.

Veterans Resource Centers

As mentioned in the preceding section, Veterans Resource Centers provide a welcoming and permanent setting where veterans can be nurtured as they transition and acclimate to being a college student. At many community colleges, VRCs have become one-stop centers, where veterans get many of their services met without having to interact with the college's "regular" student support services. One student described:

The biggest thing for me is the fact that [the VRC is] like a one-stop shop. I don't have to go to some other place for a counselor or another place for a certifying official. I can study in the library, but I feel a lot better studying in a place where I have computers and an area where I can just lay out my stuff and just work instead of being bothered by the noise at the library.

What follows are the experiences of Veteran students with their college's VRC.

VETERAN RESOURCE CENTERS AS "SAFE" SPACES

VRCs provides an atmosphere that allows Veteran students to be themselves without the worry of being judged or feeling out of place. A majority of survey respondents reported feeling confident that their discussions with VRC staff were kept confidential (83%) and that they could go to the VRC for assistance or referrals (72%). Several students from the focus groups described:

The "Yes/No" questions [of the survey] cannot begin to describe the competency and effectiveness of [my college's VRC]. I am absolutely confident that I would not be continuing my education if it wasn't for the support of the [college] VRC.

[At the VRC], they do everything in their power to ensure success. Our certifying officials and counselors seem to be the only people on campus that understand me and I trust them completely. If the staff at the VRC were any less than what they are, I would pursue my education elsewhere at a more veteran-friendly campus.

The fact that our staff is veterans or have a relationship to a Veteran is something unique. I feel like if you go somewhere and it's not staffed by veterans or someone who understands our culture, then it's just a bunch of veterans going to another place where we're expected to act a certain way. We don't have those limitations in our Veterans Center. You're allowed to speak how you want to speak. We have students that gather in our computer lab and they talk about their different points of views of religion or politics or things like that. I don't know that we have a place on campus where they could do that openly and not be judged for their opinion as well.

Everybody here served, so that's what the underlying equalizer is we all have [an] understanding [of] what it was to be in the military and what the transition was to get out. That sense of community really helps a lot of veterans push through a hard time that might be happening. You couldn't get that sense with a kid who is 19/20, still living at home with mom and dad. [The VRC] is our true north or our stabilizer.

Recently, it's been getting very busy in here especially, around 10 o'clock. Every seat here is packed. I think it's that sense of community; we all can't fit in with that student population quite as much just due to the age and experience. I think people come in here just to have the comradery.

"Familyhood" as a veteran, that's what [the VRC] gives me and people that I can relate to. It's a safe space.

EXPERIENCES WITH VRC COUNSELORS AND STAFF

Veteran students mentioned that there are a number of different types of counselors available at the VRC, such as academic counselors, mental health counselors (mostly provided via

community partnerships), financial aid counselors, and in rare instances, rehabilitation counselors. In addition, many VRCs employ student workers to work the “front” desk at the VRC. Overall, Veteran students across the focus groups and in open-ended survey questions had positive experiences with VRC counselors and staff. The biggest challenges cited by students were the lack of available counseling appointments, mental health counselors, and the need for the VRC to serve students who work full-time and/or are taking evening courses. Students noted that some VRCs have full-time counselors and staff, while others only have part-time counselors.

As mentioned earlier, veterans have additional requirements and paperwork that are not required of non-Veteran students. Having access to counselors who are well versed with the process is critical for veterans as they depend on the paperwork being accurate and turned in on time in order to receive their benefits, which for some is the sole or primary source of their livelihood. Three students shared the difficulty in getting to see a VRC counselor:

There needs to be more [dedicated] Veterans counselors to do veterans ed plans and they need to be available the same hours as regular counselors. Many times, I've tried to make an appointment with a Veterans counselor, which there's currently only one. [The counselor is] only available on specific days and only in the afternoon when I'm at work; it becomes next to impossible to get my education plan done for my Veterans certifications because Veterans counselors are not available.

We only have one full-time counselor and the occasional adjunct counselor come in for a few hours. Right now, we're booked on counseling appointments until close to the end of next week. About 900 veterans are using benefits. That's 900 students trying to see a counselor before next semester. And with only one full-time counselor and one part-time counselor at any given time throughout the semester, they're still running behind.

[The Veterans counselor] is definitely great when it comes to like assisting with financials. It'd be great like to get him in more days, or at least have this time really dedicated here because he also works at the other Financial Aid office, and sometimes he gets pulled back there, even though he does have a time where he's supposed to be here. So, that would be really helpful for a lot of veterans.

In addition to information gleaned about academic advising and certification obtained through the student focus groups, the Veteran Students Survey asked students if they agreed with statements regarding the assistance VRCs provided to them. Figure 17 on page 41, shows that 86% of respondents received advisement on VA benefits certification and 84% received help to select their courses. Furthermore, 74% respondents cited staff was able to refer them to community resources when needed.

Figure 17. Use of VRC Academic Support and Resources

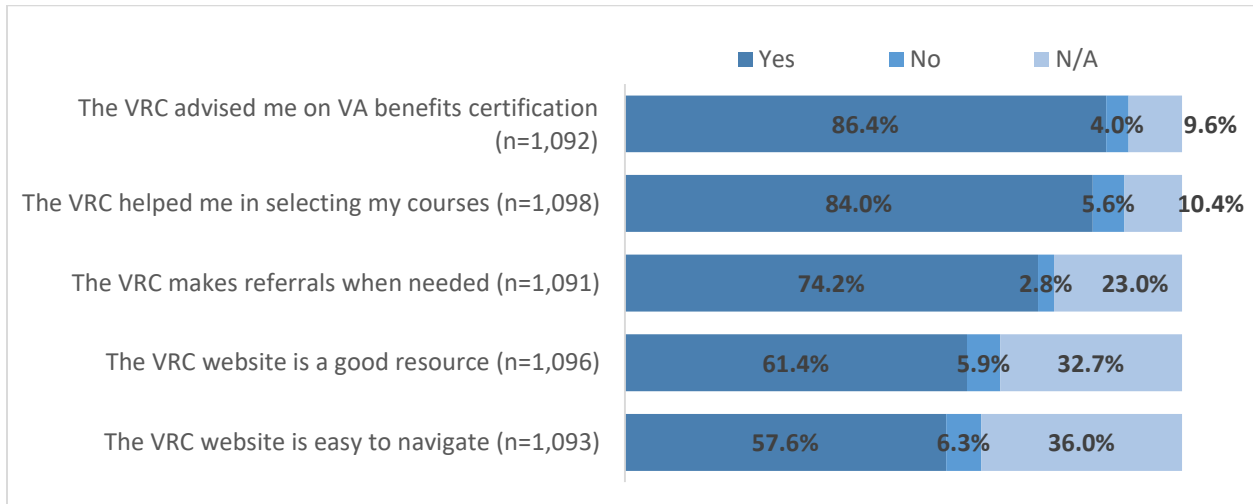
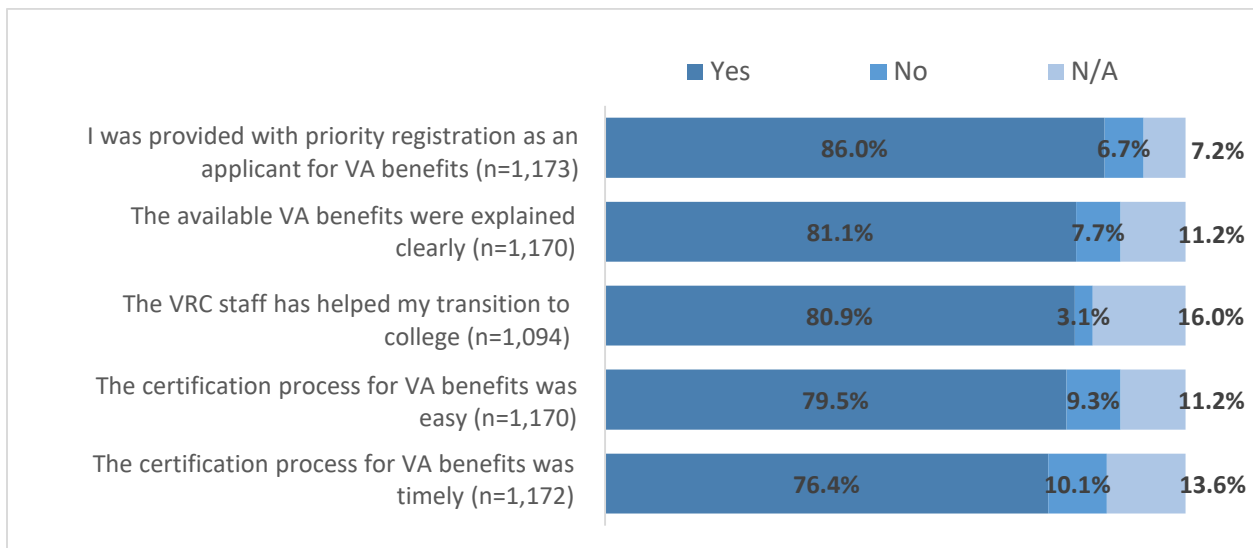


Figure 18 below shows that the majority of survey respondents felt that VRC staff helped them with their transition to college (81%), and that the certification process was easy (81%) and timely (76%).

Figure 18. Experience with Transition Supports



MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

As mentioned in the preceding section, there is limited availability of mental health services offered through the VRCs and the colleges in general, and more often than not, mental health services are provided through community partners. Two students illustrated why it would be helpful to have on-site mental health services at the VRC:

I think we need a psychologist here on campus for us veterans because you never know what's going to hit the fan. There's a lot of challenges. I see a lot of these

guys get real angry. To have somebody here would be extremely beneficial especially with that transition out of the military. For some people, it hits them a little bit harder.

I feel like we should have an on-hand psychological counselor at all times. We had a student recently that needed to speak to someone, and it was like pulling teeth trying to get somebody that could talk to him. He came in, he recognized that he needed to talk to someone; we weren't going to let him leave the office, but we didn't have anyone on hand that day.

EVENING HOURS NEEDED

Across the focus groups and in open-ended survey responses students noted that more often than not, VRCs are not open in the evening and therefore, do not serve veterans who work full-time or take evening courses. A couple of students shared:

The center should be open later than 5:30 pm for those who have to take night classes in order to attend. They seem to have good resources, but only for those who do not have to attend at night. At least stay open until 7 pm, after the night classes have started for those who could use a place to come before their classes start.

Increase the hours of operation. I work full-time [Monday through Friday] and I get to campus at 5/6pm.

SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Information gleaned from focus groups and survey responses showed that in addition to benefit assistance activities and support, VRCs also offer a variety of additional services and resources (see side bar for examples). However, it is important to note the uneven ability of VRCs across the state to provide resources and services. Two students described:

[The VRC] has math, Spanish, [and] English tutoring, but it's kind of small in there. You can't have too many tutors in at the same time. [Tutoring] helps people that don't understand and need help with homework, math, especially.

Everywhere that I know on campus where you can print, you have to pay to print. In the VRC, you have free printing, to a limit, but still nonetheless, it's free printing. And pretty much any time of the day, you can get a computer to work on, and that's a huge thing.

Additional Services and Resources Offered by VRCs

- Printing
- Computers
- Coffee and snacks
- Lounge/hangout space
- Emergency funding
- Scholarships
- Tutoring
- Textbook lending
- Laptop lending
- Food pantry
- Referrals to community partners
- Extracurricular activities

PHYSICAL SPACE

As mentioned in *The State of VRCs* section above, VRCs across the community college system vary in size and spatial configurations. Some are single rooms, while others are larger and have private offices for counseling. While students and staff are thankful for the space they already have, on some college campuses, students and staff feel existing VRCs are not big enough to meet the variety of needs such a private office for counseling and quiet study areas. Four students shared:

In the mornings, it's just packed. I think it's difficult for some people because yes, this is a study room, but I think it gets a little too chaotic for some veterans.

The VRC could improve with offering veterans tutoring in few course subjects, however this would require the VRC office space to expand. Currently, it's not large enough.

Counselors need their own space and vets in VRC should feel that this is their space, not the counselors' space that they are allowed to use. VRC feels like a counselors' waiting room.

We just have two tables and the couches, and even with people scattered about, [the VRC] still looks packed, and that is intimidating for a lot of new veterans coming out and transitioning.

Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

For Veteran students, reintegration into civilian life entails more than just providing veterans with education benefits; it requires psychological, physiological, and social assistance. Colleges must prepare faculty and staff to meet the complex needs of a diverse Veteran population by partnering with outside entities that are trained in veterans' physical and mental health issues, and willing to embark on a journey that includes building a life for a military Veteran outside of the military world.

Higher education is one area where veterans can find meaning in their "after" or post-military life. Veterans can access GI Bill benefits to make a better life after leaving the military, yet some college campuses are unprepared to provide these students with the necessary support they need in order to acclimate and succeed in their education. College campuses often lack the funding and capacity to provide personnel, resources, and referrals to assist this vulnerable population, and yet Veteran students are asked not to become frustrated when interacting with our often fragmented, often confusing educational system.

This section highlights six key findings from the study, accompanied by recommendations to inform IVC's efforts to advocate for and develop a best-practices toolkit and resources tailored to enhancing, developing, implementing, and maintaining a comprehensive Veteran student-centered program.

Key Finding #1: Unmet mental health needs

Based on staff interviews and experiences shared by students, it appears that most mental health services accessed by veterans are provided through community partners and many VRCs throughout the state do not have any dedicated mental health services on campus. Only half of VRCs have a mental health counselor on staff, but most of these counselors work 15 hours or less per week. Seventy percent of surveyed Veteran students reported sustaining illness or injury during their military service. In addition, close to 40% of surveyed students reported that they frequently experienced difficulty falling asleep, 27% noted feeling distant, and 26% mentioned they have difficulty concentrating. Anxiety, depression, PTSD, and financial stress are prevalent concerns experience by Veteran students. Meeting the mental health needs of Veteran students, and college students in general, will be an ongoing issue for colleges throughout the state.

Recommendation 1.1

Identify ways for colleges to provide more on-site mental health services. Possible options include community partnerships where the mental health specialist comes to the college, partnering with psychology programs at four-year universities that could place interns at the college with supervision, or support groups in the form of group counseling with a trained professional.

Recommendation 1.2

Study VRCs that have effectively implemented mental health services and disseminate these findings as effective practices to help inform VRCs throughout the state.

Key Finding #2: Lack of understanding of Veteran students' unique challenges among non-VRC staff and faculty

Focus group participants shared having mixed experiences with faculty, staff, and students, specifically citing a lack of sensitivity to the disabilities of and classroom triggers Veteran students may experience, and a **lack of flexibility and willingness to work with Veteran students' schedules**. Continued advocacy by VRC staff could help improve sensitivity to and understanding of Veteran student issues, while offering practical and effective strategies for maintaining supportive environments for Veteran students.

Recommendation 2.1

Identify college-wide professional development/training opportunities to increase the numbers of administrators, faculty, staff, and students who understand the unique culture of Veteran students and develop the skills responsive to the specific needs of Veteran students to successfully achieve their educational goals.

Recommendation 2.2

Provide resources and information to faculty that can be embedded in their course syllabi as a way to raise awareness both among faculty and students about the needs of the Veteran students as well as with Veteran students about the resources/supports available to them.

Key Finding #3: Need for student-friendly business hours and spaces

Veteran students noted that more often than not, VRCs are not open in the evening, and therefore, are not adequately serving Veteran students who work full-time and/or attend in the evening. As noted in the site visit observations, most VRCs are open during normal business hours and days, with only a few VRCs offering extended evening hours to accommodate working and evening students. In addition, VRCs staff and students both noted that some of the VRC spaces are not large enough to provide very many services for students.

Recommendation 3.1

Provide VRCs with resources and information for how to analyze Veteran student enrollment trends and schedules in order to identify the most optimal business hours that best align with their students' schedules that include extending hours into the evening or even weekends.

Recommendation 3.2

Study VRCs that have maximized the use of their spaces and disseminate findings and effective practices to help inform VRCs throughout the state.

Key Finding #4: Need for increased capacity to support Veteran students' education planning and benefits

A significant challenge cited by students was the lack of available counseling appointments when they need to complete their education plans along with counselors who could effectively help them navigate the VA benefits system. The need to meet with counselors during busy periods of the academic year are not unique to Veteran students. However, the need for current and verified education plans to apply for VA education benefits is unique to Veteran students. Across the state, hiring and/or assigning more counselors to serve Veteran students may not be feasible nor scalable at some colleges. Moreover, as this study finds, Veteran students may be reluctant to visit general counseling services on campus for concerns their education plan may not be completed correctly. In lieu of being able to hire additional Veterans counselors, Veteran students should feel confident that general counselors can modify or verify their education plan accurately.

Recommendation 4.1

Identify professional development / training opportunities for college staff and counselors to understand the necessity of 100% accuracy between students' education plan on file at the college and VA certification submission.

Recommendation 4.2

Develop a checklist protocol that lists common VA education plan certification errors (see Appendix A: Best Practices and Important Considerations) that counselors and Veteran students can go through together during their appointment to ensure that the VA education plan submission is as accurate and complete as possible.

Recommendation 4.3

Examine how technology can improve and streamline Veteran students' education planning needs.

Key Finding #5: Need for stronger partnerships between the VA and VRCs to support Veteran students' transition

There appears to be **missed opportunities to strengthen partnerships between Veterans Affairs and VRCs to support a smoother transition from military to education.** As noted, VRCs play an important role in helping veterans learn how to navigate the policies and procedures of

community colleges and the additional requirements placed on students that access VA benefits.

Recommendation 5.1

Advocate for stronger partnerships between the VRCs and VA offices across the state in to coordinate and co-identify practices and processes to streamline the onboarding process for prospective and current Veteran students to ensure successful transition from the military to the educational setting.

Key Finding #6: Lack of consistent and reliable data about Veteran students

The lack of consistent and reliable data on Veteran students is a nationwide issue. Having an accurate count of veterans, active duty military personnel, and military beneficiaries on a college campus is fundamental to providing support for these students. More consistent and reliable methods to identify these students will enable colleges know more about their Veteran students in order to provide the best supports. A common concern among CCC Veteran services staff statewide is that the numbers of veterans attending each community college in California are greatly underestimated in the California Community College Management Information System (COMIS). During site visits, VRC staff were asked how many veterans receive and do not receive VA education benefits at the college. On average, VRCs estimated that only half of their Veteran student population receive VA education benefits and therefore, the college cannot largely account for half of its Veteran student population. Accurate and complete identification and tracking of Veteran students in the CCC system will help VRCs better target and provide services to support Veteran students' transition into the college.

Recommendation 6.1

Advocate for data-sharing agreements between California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the Departments of Veterans Affairs and/or Defense to have Veteran students identified more systematically, rather than relying on students self-reporting or using proxies such as whether a Veteran student utilizes VA education benefits.

Concluding Remarks

For many veterans, it is not easy to transition back to civilian life and/or into higher education after their service in the military. Survey data revealed nearly 50% of Veteran students indicated having had difficulties maintaining a balance between schoolwork and personal demands, while a slightly lower portion of students (46%) reported that they have difficulty dealing with stress due to class demands. Veteran students' physical and mental health concerns can impede their success in college—particularly when these problems intensify challenges also faced by non-Veteran students: financial barriers, housing, transportation, family responsibilities, work, time management, study skills, learning to navigate college policies and procedures, and connecting with college culture. However, more often than not,

community college administrators, staff, faculty, and non-Veteran students may not be aware of the impact that military service can have on the ability of Veteran students to cope with and overcome many of these challenges. In spite of these challenges, only a third of the Veteran students who responded to the survey had thought about dropping out of college. Despite this resiliency, VRCs and colleges can do more to support to Veteran students with their transition from the military to an academic life.

The focus groups and survey that produced the findings represent a first step of eliciting the views of Veteran students across California community colleges. This level of student engagement signifies an opportunity that could be leveraged to develop a systematic process for regularly engaging Veteran students in the planning, design, assessment, and refinement of college practices.

As the entire CCC system explores using the Guided Pathways framework to redesign the comprehensive student experience, this very framework may serve as a useful model for transitioning Veteran students to and from college successfully. A focus on a redesigned student intake and onboarding process, along with continuous assessment of personal, educational, and career needs, could help Veteran students during their transition to college life, connect them with other support services on campus, and ultimately lead to the successful achievement of their goals.

Appendix A: Best Practices and Important Considerations

Listed below are (1) activities that the IVC ORP2VRC has implemented to apply a holistic student support approach and (2) tips to keep in mind to ensure Veteran students are served well in their educational journeys:

1. Develop an intake form when working with Veteran students that helps to determine appropriate services. The intake form can include questions that reveal:
 - VA service-connected disability
 - Need for assistance with filing for VA disability claim
 - Food insecurities
 - Housing insecurities or homelessness
 - Need for mental health counseling
 - Eligibility and enrollment assistance for Extended Opportunities Program and Services (EOPS)
 - Eligibility and enrollment assistance for Disabled Students Program and Services (DSPS)
 - Health care needs

2. When scheduling/reviewing student class schedules, keep in mind:
 - Many new Veterans have difficulty with time management
 - Military Reserve and National Guard members usually get their duty calendar for the year (i.e., can inform class schedule and possible conflicts)
 - Veterans that have VA medical appointments may not be able to reschedule, review class dates in order to accommodate for medical appointment
 - Inform Veteran students to let their instructors know at the beginning of classes if there are any conflicts (e.g., check medical appointments/duty calendar)
 - Veterans should always be referred to the VRC for additional information about services and benefits

3. When creating a VA education plan, if certain information is not included, payment to the Veteran student will be DELAYED. Please include the following in the education plan:
 - Student's name
 - Student's major
 - The education plan and the VA application must match. Ex: Business-CSULA or AS-Registered Nursing
 - If the major does not display completely on application, print the education plan and write in the major
 - An articulation agreement is required for a specific major at a private school. For example, some colleges do not have an articulation

agreement with Stanford and thus, Electrical Engineering-Stanford would not meet VA requirements.

4. All courses should be listed on the education plan, however only **required courses are payable by the VA**. Please specify if the course is for personal interest. (If there are several personal interest courses, you might put an asterisk (*) next to them and a message at the bottom.)
5. The VA will only **pay for one program at a time**. For example, a student cannot major in Chemistry and Accounting. If the student has chosen to put Chemistry as his/her major on the application, any Accounting classes the student wishes to take must be indicated as **personal interest (*) on the education plan and will not be payable by the VA**.
6. The VA **requires that all prior coursework be given credit**. If the student has completed a requirement at a previous school, he/she cannot be given credit for the same requirement again, even if it is met with a different class.
7. Veteran students can take physical education (PE) classes, but if they are using VA benefits, the VA **will neither pay for those PE classes nor count the units towards full-time status** unless it is **REQUIRED BY THEIR MAJOR**. Generally, most colleges grant credit for lifelong learning. The VA counts all previous prior coursework/credits **whether or not the coursework has been evaluated and posted on the transcript**. **Since 2.0 units will be credited for Basic Training**, the maximum number of PE units the Veteran can take at a college and be paid for is 2.0. Veterans must petition when they graduate for these units to be included.

Appendix B: List of Colleges from 2018 Site Visits

American River College	Foothill College	Mt. San Jacinto College
Bakersfield College	Fresno City College	Napa Valley College
Barstow Community College	Fullerton College	Norco College
Berkeley City College	Gavilan College	Orange Coast College
Butte College	Glendale College	Palomar College
Cabrillo College	Golden West College	Pasadena City College
Canada College	Grossmont College	Porterville College
Cerritos College	Hartnell College	Reedley College
Chabot College	Irvine Valley College	Rio Hondo College
Chaffey College	Lake Tahoe Community College	Riverside City College
Citrus College	Laney College	Sacramento City College
City of San Francisco College	Las Positas College	Saddleback College
Coastline College	Lassen College	San Bernardino Valley College
College of Alameda	Long Beach City College	San Diego City College
College of San Mateo	Los Angeles Mission College	San Diego Mesa College
College of the Canyons	Los Angeles City College	San Jose City College
College of the Desert	Los Angeles Harbor College	Santa Ana College
College of the Redwoods	Los Angeles Pierce College	Santa Barbara City College
College of the Siskiyous	Los Angeles Southwest College	Santa Monica College
Compton College	Los Angeles Trade Tech	Santa Rosa Junior College
Contra Costa College	Los Medanos College	Santiago Canyon College
Cooper Mountain	Mendocino College	Shasta College
Cosumnes River College	Merced College	Sierra College
Crafton Hills College	Merritt College	Skyline College
Cuyamaca College	Mira Costa College	Solano College
Cypress College	Miramar College	Southwestern College
De Anza College	Mission College	Valley College
Delta College	Modesto Junior College	Victor Valley College
Diablo Valley College	Monterey Peninsula College	West Hills College Lemoore
East Los Angeles College	Moorpark College	West Los Angeles College
El Camino College	Moreno Valley College	Woodland Community College
Evergreen College	Mt. San Antonio College	Yuba College

Appendix C: Colleges from Student Veteran Surveys

College Name	Number of Participants in Survey	Percent of Overall Participants in Survey
Allan Hancock College	1	0.1%
American River College	34	2.5%
Antelope Valley College	1	0.1%
Bakersfield College	19	1.4%
Berkeley City College	4	0.3%
Butte College	34	2.5%
Canada College	1	0.1%
Cabrillo College	1	0.1%
Cerritos College	41	3.0%
Cerro Coso Community College	1	0.1%
Chabot College	1	0.1%
Chaffey College	26	1.9%
Citrus College	20	1.5%
City College of San Francisco	1	0.1%
Clovis Community College	10	0.7%
Coastline Community College	7	0.5%
College of Alameda	5	0.4%
College of the Canyons	16	1.2%
College of the Desert	45	3.3%
College of the Redwoods	24	1.8%
College of the Sequoias	36	2.6%
Copper Mountain College	15	1.1%
Cosumnes River College	1	0.1%
Crafton Hills College	6	0.4%
Diablo Valley College	1	0.1%
East Los Angeles College	29	2.1%
Evergreen Valley College	17	1.2%
Folsom Lake College	23	1.7%
Foothill College	12	0.9%
Fresno City College	17	1.2%
Fullerton College	9	0.7%
Gavilan College	9	0.7%
Glendale College	21	1.5%
Hartnell College	14	1.0%
Irvine Valley College	66	4.8%
Las Positas College	17	1.2%
Long Beach City College	4	0.3%
Los Angeles City College	41	3.0%
Los Angeles Harbor College	8	0.6%

College Name	Number of Participants in Survey	Percent of Overall Participants in Survey
Los Angeles Pierce College	38	2.8%
Los Angeles Southwest College	13	1.0%
Los Angeles Trade-Tech College	42	3.1%
Los Angeles Valley College	24	1.8%
Los Medanos College	17	1.2%
Mendocino College	5	0.4%
Merced College	39	2.9%
Merritt College	8	0.6%
Mira Costa College	70	5.1%
Modesto Junior College	25	1.8%
Monterey Peninsula College	31	2.3%
Moorpark College	26	1.9%
Mt. San Jacinto College	42	3.1%
Napa Valley College	1	0.1%
Ohlone College	22	1.6%
Oxnard College	17	1.2%
Palomar College	5	0.4%
Pasadena City College	30	2.2%
Reedley College	16	1.2%
Rio Hondo College	27	2.0%
Sacramento City College	9	0.7%
Saddleback College	1	0.1%
San Bernardino Valley College	5	0.4%
San Joaquin Delta College	31	2.3%
San Jose City College	5	0.4%
Santa Ana College	22	1.6%
Santa Monica City College	12	0.9%
Santiago Canyon College	7	0.5%
Shasta College	7	0.5%
Sierra College	34	2.5%
Solano Community College	1	0.1%
Southwestern College	28	2.1%
Ventura College	4	0.3%
Victor Valley College	25	1.8%
West Los Angeles College	12	0.9%
West Valley College	13	1.0%
Yuba College	13	1.0%
TOTAL	1,365	100.0%

Appendix D: Position Descriptions

Veterans Affairs Certifying Official

JOB SUMMARY

The Veterans Affairs Certifying Official serves as the liaison between the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Defense (DoD) and the college, and ensures all college processes align with VA requirements. The Veterans Affairs Certifying Official is also responsible for carrying out a variety of technical duties to ensure eligible students receive available Veteran benefits and educational services; serves as a technical resource concerning Veteran programs and services; and reviews, verifies, and processes related forms and applications.

ESSENTIAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Basic responsibilities of the Veterans Affairs Certifying Official include:

- Communicating with federal, state, and local agencies that provide benefits to Veteran students.
- Advising students on financial aid applications, planning, resources, money management, and available sources of other aid and the application processes.
- Responding to inquiries concerning VA eligibility and ensuring students understand all policies and procedures related to their aid records.
- Certifying the education plans of students accurately to ensure receipt of benefits for applicable course work.
- Processing certification for VA benefits according to federal guidelines and regulations, and providing required information (e.g., enrollment and tuition information) to determine that eligibility requirements satisfy all federal, state, and institutional laws
- Coordinating with college staff to address inquiries regarding the use of Veteran benefits.
- Ensuring supporting documentation required by the VA is communicated and collected.
- Monitoring and following up on student progress and enrollment to ensure VA procedures and requisites are met; processing changes in enrollment status for adds, drops, swaps, and schedule changes; submit related reports to Veterans Affairs.
- Preparing and maintaining records and files for reporting purposes.
- Compiling and maintaining survey data and other data.
- Preparing special or recurring reports for supervisor or other departments as requested including federal audits.
- Keeping up to date on current VA rules and benefits and maintaining current knowledge through regular professional development activities.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

Specific knowledge, skills, and/or abilities of the Veterans Affairs Certifying Official include:

- Completion of the online VA Training and Performance Support System (TPSS) School Certifying Official (SCO) course.

- Knowledge of Veterans Affairs regarding types of education benefits, guidelines, and qualifications necessary for eligibility.
- Familiarity with VA-ONCE web system to submit certifying information.
- Familiarity with appropriate forms and applications needed for applying for various types of benefits.
- Knowledge of the mission, vision, and values of the VA.

Veterans Counselor

JOB SUMMARY

The Veterans Counselor performs a variety of duties related to individual and group counseling for student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents, and often serves as the focal point for the military population at the college.

ESSENTIAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Basic responsibilities of the Veterans Counselor include:

- Preparing and determining disability verification for student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents through observation and/or analysis of medical and psychological documentation.
- Assisting student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents in determining appropriate academic adjustments and accommodations.
- Making appropriate referrals to on- and off-campus agencies.
- Completing an intake form when working with student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents to assist in determining the appropriate services needed.
- Creating Veterans Affairs (VA) Education Plan for each student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

Specific knowledge, skills, and/or abilities of the Veterans Counselor include:

- Experience in counseling on crisis intervention, stress management, anger management, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Familiarity with Government Issues (GI) guidelines for education benefits for student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents.
- Experience with evaluation of credit earned from military training experience, knowledge of state-mandated matriculation policies, procedures, and regulations, articulation agreements, and development of individual education plans.

VA Vocational Rehabilitation (Vet Success on Campus [VSOC]) Counselors

JOB SUMMARY

The Vet Success on Campus (VSOC) Counselor is the on-campus face of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and represents the VA on all matters under the VA's jurisdiction. The VSOC Counselor acts as an advocate for the VA by promoting VA programs and providing access to VA benefits and services.

ESSENTIAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Basic responsibilities of the VSOC Counselor include:

- Outreach to student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents to inform them of the wide range of potential services available to them and how to access these services. The VSOC Counselor also engages in follow-up activities to evaluate the effectiveness of provided services and to determine the need for further assistance.
- Assisting student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents in applying for VA benefits and resolving any individual issues with VA benefits.
- Assessing and addressing the needs of student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents either through direct service delivery and/or referral for services to help prevent problems from interfering with the completion of an education program.
- Providing educational and career counseling services directly to student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents when requested.
- Collaborating with other programs and services administered by VA, college, and the local community to ensure that student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents are receiving all needed services and support to successfully transition to the college environment and complete their educational goals.
- Referring qualified student Service members and Veterans (SM/V) for VA Work Study student and Work Study mentor positions on campus.
- Managing VA Work Study student worker(s).
- Managing a reasonable Chapter 31 caseload as necessary (no more than 50 recommended)
- Informing student service-members, veterans, and qualified dependents of the services available to them in securing employment. Special attention should be focused on student SM/Vs with disabilities in regards to the availability of employment assistance.
- Marketing student SM/Vs to employers attending or participating in job fairs or other on-campus activities. In addition, the VSOC Counselor should assist student SM/Vs with job-seeking skills and job placement services as needed throughout their educational pursuits.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

Specific knowledge, skills, and/or abilities of the VSOC Counselor include:

- Knowledge of Veterans Affairs regarding types of education benefits, guidelines, and qualifications necessary for eligibility.
- Familiarity with appropriate forms and applications needed for applying for various types of benefits.
- Knowledge of the mission, vision, and values of the VA.



theRPgroup

Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Project Team

Tim Nguyen
Ileri Valenzuela
Andrew Kretz
Alyssa Nguyen

Editor(s)

Darla Cooper
Priyadarshini Chaplot

www.rpgroup.org