

University of Louisville
Veteran Services Task Force
Report to Dr. Dale Billingsley and Dr. Tom Jackson
November 21, 2008

Introduction

Benefits of a concerted effort to provide services to veteran students

The university currently has no programs designed specifically to assist Veterans. Student services are offered to all students and therefore designed with the “typical” UofL student in mind. A Veteran student can be very different from “typical” and programs should be built, or modified, to deal with those differences. It is in the university’s interest to attract and retain Veterans. Veterans have sacrificed much in the service of their country and we at UofL owe a debt to Veterans that can be repaid by increasing our services aimed specifically at this group of students.

The “21st Century GI Bill” was signed into law June 30, 2008 opening the door to higher education for thousands of Veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces when it goes into effect next year. Institutions of higher education are preparing for an influx of Veteran students. Universities around the country are responding to this influx of students in a variety of ways and have a variety of interests in Veteran students. Many institutions will expand or create services and programs designed specifically for Veterans. This task force seeks to develop and encourage services for Veterans at UofL that facilitate education and the completion of degree programs.

A Veteran is typically defined as a person who served on full-time active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable. But this strict definition omits National Guardsmen and Reservists that have never been mobilized to active duty, and even omits current, active-duty service members. The task force tried to think as inclusively as possible and bring forth ideas that will benefit all of these populations. From the twenty-three year old who enlisted out of high school expressly to get out four years later and attend college, the forty-two year old recent retiree, a National Guardsman or Reservist just back from mobilization in Iraq, active duty men and women stationed at Fort Knox, and the hundreds of other ‘typical’ military personnel (and spouses and dependents as well); the University of Louisville should work to support them all.

Students with a background of military service have a different perspective than students that come to the university directly from high school. They are older. They may have families to support. But more importantly, military service and training is unlike any other experience. The task force recognizes individual backgrounds and interests will vary widely amongst the student populations identified: Veterans, active-duty service members, Reservists, etc. However, the common thread of military service gives this group more similarities than differences. Initial efforts may focus expressly on ‘Veterans’ but it is neither necessary nor desirable to be exclusive in that focus.

Formation of the task force, task force charge and chronological summary of work

The Veteran Service Task Force first convened on October 8, 2008 at the charge of Dr. Tom Jackson and Dr. Dale Billingsley¹. At that first meeting, Dr. Jackson and Dr. Billingsley introduced the task force to its work. LTC Jamie Gough, UofL Army ROTC commandant, and Joe Dablow, Associate Director in Undergraduate Affairs were introduced as co-chairs of the task force. The full task force divided into subcommittees for initial information gathering². One subcommittee concentrated on the perspective of current Veterans – the Veteran student needs subcommittee³. The other subcommittee focused on national trends regarding higher education services to Veterans relative to current services available at UofL⁴. Each subcommittee met and brought findings back to the full committee. The entire task force met October 27 and heard a special presentation from John Schupp, founder of Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran (S.E.R.V.), a Veteran initiative at Cleveland State University⁵. Another meeting November 3rd allowed the task force to hear subcommittee reports and discuss the issues presented by Mr. Schupp⁶. A webinar presentation from the University of Minnesota was available to the task force on November 5th⁷. The committee met again November 10th and 17th for further discussion⁸, to organize findings and produce this report.

Summary

This final report of the Veteran Service Task Force has the following organization: an inventory of current UofL services and three stated goals with description. The first goal focuses on recruitment and admissions, the second on specific services for enrolled Veterans and military personnel, and the third on the institutional resources needed to create a military and Veteran friendly campus.

What does UofL currently do?

While UofL currently offers many services to ALL students, that would include Veterans, few offices on campus have any initiatives expressly designed for Veterans or military personnel. For example, the Counseling Center sees many students and dependents of students that are self-identified Veterans but does not have the ability to seek them out. Veterans are not actively recruited; orientation programs are targeted toward either first-time freshmen or adult and transfer students. Student records systems are not utilized to identify Veterans in the UofL campus community. Veteran-specific advising is not currently offered, and course offerings do not present options tailored for Veterans. Again, while Veterans are generally respected on campus, Veterans are not identified for

¹ Task Force Charge enclosed as Tab 1

² Meeting Notes of October 8, 2008 enclosed as Tab 2

³ Subcommittee findings enclosed as Tab 3

⁴ Subcommittee findings enclosed as Tab 4

⁵ Meeting Notes of October 27, 2008 and Handouts of Presentation enclosed as Tab 5

⁶ Meeting Notes of November 3, 2008 enclosed as Tab 6

⁷ Handouts of 'Improving Veteran Services' webinar enclosed as Tab 7

⁸ Meeting Notes of November 10, 2008 enclosed as Tab 8

most university offices, limiting the ability of these offices to provide specific initiatives for Veterans.

An exception where a UofL staff member works expressly for Veteran students is Ann Kirwan. Ms. Kirwan certifies Veteran enrollment to the VA for the purpose of VA-paid education benefits. But she does much more. She works with the Veteran student organization on campus and provides guidance to new Veteran students at the university. In the course of researching veteran services at other institutions, it was discovered that universities with similar numbers of enrolled Veterans have two to three employees to certify enrollment. The Bursar and Financial Aid Offices also have established procedures to ensure students that are eligible to receive funds based on their Veteran status or relation to a Veteran have the capacity to do so.

Goal #1: Actively recruit Veteran students, better facilitate the admissions process, and establish mechanisms to track and assess Veteran students.

Implement new recruitment strategies.

Evidence from American Veterans (AMVETS), suggests there are thousands of Veterans in the Louisville region currently eligible for VA education benefits but not utilizing these benefits. With guidance from John Schupp of Cleveland State University, UofL can immediately begin identifying these local Veterans, contacting them and intentionally recruiting them. A Veteran recruitment strategy should include campus tours with enrolled Veterans or with staff who have an understanding of the Veteran perspective.

UofL can promote education opportunities to military members currently deployed through contact with their family members in the area. Again, with guidance from John Schupp, UofL can implement strategies that help family members make videos to send to deployed service-members. Cameras can be made available for families to tape holiday functions, greetings, or popular local events. The university can then assist in transforming that footage into a DVD and include a brief introduction to UofL programs on the disc. Other opportunities exist by simply making education opportunities known to family members of those deployed in the hope that upon return, the family will encourage these Veterans to contact the university.

Provide a Veteran-specific orientation in conjunction with new student or transfer student orientation.

UofL orientation programs are designed to address either students directly out of high school or adult/transfer students. This structure neglects some of the needs unique to Veterans of the military. New (or at least enhanced) orientation programs should be created and made available to Veterans and their families.

Upon admission to the university, Veteran students should be sent a “Welcome to UofL, Veteran” letter to introduce all of the services and support available.

Identify Veterans applying to and/or currently attending UofL.

Currently, we have the ability to identify Veterans on campus who receive VA education benefits or who have completed a FAFSA and indicated military service on that form. Many Veterans are not eligible for VA benefits or have used those benefits to exhaustion and a FAFSA form is not required for all students. Therefore, we don't have a mechanism to identify all Veteran students on campus. The admission application should include a question that allows applicants to self-identify as Veterans in an attempt to better identify all Veterans. It may not be possible to immediately identify every Veteran on campus but over time, each student will have had an opportunity to self-identify. This information will be stored in Oracle, a PeopleSoft delivered functionality to track Veterans, active duty military, National Guard or Reservists and be used to contact students and for assessment purposes.

It may be beneficial to maintain an inventory of faculty and staff Veterans. Human Resources already has some data on Veteran/military status for faculty and staff. This data can be checked for accuracy and utilized as needed.

In order to further encourage Veterans to apply to UofL, the Office of Admissions should waive the admission application fee for Veterans (if it is not possible to waive this fee, the university should attempt to reimburse it or pay the fee on the applicants behalf), especially those that have been actively recruited to be a part of Veteran programs or learning communities (see below).

Provide flexibility and guidance for Veterans acclimating to UofL.

VA education benefits often take more than three months to process before a Veteran student receives his or her first payment. In order to allow for this processing time, UofL and the University Bursar should not require Veterans eligible for VA education benefits to pay for tuition and fees until those funds are released.

Health services have become crucial to many Veterans who have returned from overseas deployment. Because of the importance of health services, including counseling and the expertise of the VA staff, UofL should work cooperatively with the Veterans Administration to make VA counselors available on campus. Benefit coordinators and other service representatives can also be available on campus to assist Veteran students in what is often a difficult process. Again, much of this service can simply be coordinated, leaving the direct counseling, treatments, or advocating to VA representatives. However, campus health services should also be involved to give Veterans another resource to seek help and to work cooperatively with the VA.

Goal #2: Provide effective academic support, effective support related to student life and opportunities for Veterans and military personnel.

Assist in the transfer process and transfer credit evaluations. Conduct a thorough review of what transfer credits and proficiency exams are accepted for credit.

Possibly the biggest frustration to student Veterans is denial of academic credit for military training or courses from other universities or colleges. Military service often involves frequent moves and it is not uncommon to see a Veteran arrive at UofL with six to eight transcripts that must be evaluated. Further, many credits from a Veteran's AARTS Transcript, SMART Transcript, or DD Form 295 either are not accepted by UofL or are posted to a transcript but are not accepted toward a degree.⁹ The task force is under the impression that academic units are not properly trained to evaluate these transcripts for equivalencies. The university should train academic units on military transcripts in order to establish appropriate equivalencies and then train admission counselors, processors, and academic advisors regarding application of military experience and credits.

UofL currently accepts a relatively modest number of courses in which students can earn credit via proficiency examination. Two programs, CLEP and DSST, are designed for that purpose and both offer exams which the American Council on Education (ACE) recommend, for certain test scores, college credit be awarded. UofL currently recognizes a limited number of CLEP exams and no DSST exams. Many students, Veterans included, stand to benefit from a thorough review of the acceptance of proficiency exams for credit and the marketing of how these exams can best be utilized.

Utilize already established university services for academic support with slight adjustments if necessary.

Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH), the University Writing Center, and other tutoring and mentoring programs are already available to all UofL students. There is no need to create new departments, offices or programs to perform these functions. Veterans should be informed about these resources during orientation and encouraged to use these resources during their college careers.

Conversely, these existing resources should be aware of and become well trained on Veteran-specific programming and be able to identify signs that Veteran-specific programming is necessary. For example, REACH tutors do not need to be formally trained on counseling techniques for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but should be able to identify warning signs in students and know where to go with those warning signs.

Establish and utilize 'learning communities'.

Learning communities may be an effective means of orienting students to campus and allowing them to slowly integrate into the campus community, retaining new students beyond the first and second semester of college. We recommend that UofL establish Veteran-specific learning communities as an option for course delivery for Veterans.

⁹ **AARTS - ARMY/ACE REGISTRY TRANSCRIPT SYSTEM**
SMART - SAILOR/MARINE/ACE REGISTRY TRANSCRIPT
DD Form 295 – Application for the Evaluation of Learning Experiences during Military Service

This would include common course scheduling amongst the participants as well as distinctive support initiatives. The students identified to participate in the learning community would register and attend some or all of their classes with other Veterans. As importantly, a specific section of 'GEN101', the Arts and Sciences, new student, required orientation course could be tailored to Veterans.

Faculty should be recruited from general education courses that apply to a broad range of majors. Learning communities provide a unique opportunity for Veterans to acclimate to civilian life at a reasonable pace and in a comfortable learning environment. And while this approach will not be necessary or desirable for all incoming Veterans, this model has proven successful at Cleveland State University.

Explore housing opportunities specific to Veterans.

As an extension to learning communities, we recommend a common block of student housing for student Veterans. Many student Veterans are married, some with children. We recommend designated Veteran family housing with a rental rate set to correspond to the allowable housing allowance granted by the 21st Century GI Bill.

Advocate on behalf of Veterans regarding policies impacting Veterans.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky may have an interest in revisiting the regulation that governs how public institutions classify students for resident vs. non-resident tuition. They may want to state that all Veterans of the U.S. military, active duty service-members, National Guardsmen and Reservists are eligible for in-state tuition. UofL should lobby the Kentucky General Assembly for such a change.

Provide guidance and liaison services to offices and departments across the University community – specific initiatives may be appropriate with the Disabilities Resource Center (DRC), Career Development Center and others.

The Delphi Center can be utilized to conduct faculty training for faculty participating in learning communities and for the faculty on the whole. Other programs can be developed so that UofL staff can gain a better understanding of the unique problems Veterans face.

Expand opportunities available at Fort Knox.

Fort Knox is scheduled to significantly grow in the number of soldiers and employees assigned within the next few years as a result of the Department of Defense Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program. The number of active-duty service members there will necessarily increase and the number of Veterans in the area will increase as well. The Fort Knox Education Center is an already established learning facility. We highlight the College of Education's (CEHD) Workforce Leadership Degree program for its proactive approach to utilizing facilities at Fort Knox. The CEHD operates at Fort Knox in a building adjacent to the Fort Knox Education Center for teaching classes and has an effective recruiting effort within the Fort Knox population. We recommend other

Academic Departments observe the Workforce Leadership program and develop their own strategies to enhance of the course opportunities for students at Fort Knox. The University currently lacks a concerted outreach for the potential student population of Veterans and soldiers at Fort Knox.

Other institutions that offer learning opportunities at Fort Knox cap the tuition charge to \$250 / credit hour, the maximum rate military tuition assistance will pay. UofL should do the same in order to be competitive. It is conspicuous to those stationed at Fort Knox that every public institution in the state recognizes military tuition assistance as a cap except for UofL and therefore all service members eligible for tuition assistance should be eligible for courses at a rate of \$250 / credit hour; at Fort Knox, on Louisville's main campus, or even online.

To further show support of Fort Knox and the service members stationed there, UofL staff permanently assigned there should hold membership (subsidized by the university) in local economic development councils in order to be engaged in the community.

Enhance information available via the web and create a "one-stop" Veterans services website.

Other universities that are successful at attracting and retaining Veterans start with a Veteran/Soldier specific webpage populated with information specific to Veterans and links to other important information relevant to their needs. The most effective of these, have a prominently visible link to this webpage from the root website (in our case <http://louisville.edu>). We recommend that UofL develop such a webpage. The task force can provide examples used at other universities.

Goal #3: Provide a single contact at UofL, an "Office of Military and Veteran Services", and staff it appropriately.

As charged to do, the task force has proposed new or expanded services, programs, and initiatives to address military and Veteran needs. In sum, UofL should work to

- actively recruit potential military and Veteran students.
- orient military and Veteran students effectively.
- track and inventory military and Veteran students and staff (for assessment purposes and to ensure students are aware of services).
- advocate on behalf of military and Veteran students with regard to transfer credits, university or state policies, housing opportunities, etc.
- establish Veteran 'learning communities'.
- utilize already established university academic support services.
- enhance information available on the UofL website.
- expand the presence of UofL at Fort Knox.

The most efficient mechanism to meet this set of needs is a designated office, established to provide all military personnel and Veterans a CENTRAL place to go and have their issues addressed. This office may not be in a position to resolve student problems but

can provide much needed guidance. This office and the personnel assigned should be responsible for coordinating and liaising with many University Offices; Admissions, Financial Aid, Bursar, Advising, Housing, and all the Academic units.

At a minimum, a director is needed to provide leadership to the office and coordinate with other offices on campus. Administrative support will be necessary. This office should work out of the Office of the Provost and be housed in the Houchens Building (if not in the Houchens Building, as close as possible).

Staff to serve as advisors and coordinate VA education benefits will be required as well. (It is not clear how VA education benefits will be processed or how UofL organization structure should be developed to support this processing. Currently, Ms. Kirwan works out of the Registrar's Office and there is no reason to disrupt that because it works very well.) This staff will coordinate with the Transfer Credit Office, educate the Academic units on how military experience should translate to academically related credit, coordinate with Admissions, Financial Aid, and Bursar related issues, and possibly assist with VA education benefits. All office personnel will be familiar with and be professionally trained regarding Campus Health Services and VA Health Assets and will be informed of academic support services such as REACH. Staff will serve to refer Veterans who may need such health assistance.

Student Veterans should be employed where possible to do miscellaneous tasks around the office and serve as student mentors. VA work-study opportunities should be secured.

It is in the university's best interest to act and act quickly. Many universities across the nation are working to position themselves as military and Veteran friendly for tuition revenue, grant money, institutional relationships and other benefits. But beyond that, as stated in the opening, Veterans have sacrificed much in the service of their country and we at UofL owe a debt to them that can be repaid by appropriate services aimed at ensuring academic success for this group of students.