

REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL SPACE FOR THE VETERANS OFFICE I PROPOSE WE CREATE A COMPREHENSIVE VETERANS' RESOURCE CENTER

VA Office Current Situation:

Currently at SLCC we have one room, 178 sq ft, with a small space outside of our office for our Veterans Express with two workstations which is completely in an open space. In the office we house all our records for three years (three large file cabinets), three work stations, one shared phone line, two printers; one dedicated and one network printer. The way the room is set up, our backs are to the students as they come in. Often we do not know they are there until they cough or say something. Our computer monitors screens are in full view of anyone that walks into our office or even by the office. We can only have one or two students in the office at a time to assist them and even that gets confusing as we give them our orientation and instructions for the steps they need to complete to get their benefits started.

There is no room or table for them to fill out documents they are turning in with their application. If we need to find their file, we need to have them step out of the way for us to open the file cabinet and then in plain view are the names and social security number of at least 150-200 other students per drawer. If their file isn't in that file cabinet, we must then ask them to move to the other side of the room so we can open the other file. If we talk to a student at the door during our busy times, the veteran often feels uncomfortable and it also annoys the students at the student computers in the open lab (I have had complaints from some students on the computers). We often must ask personal information which can be heard by others close by.

We have one full-time and one part-time college employee and 4-5 work-study students. We have between 400-500 Veteran students currently attending SLCC any term. We receive and process VA documents, certify enrollment each term for each student, review and audit the files monthly to ensure students are still in the classes approved, process adjustments in enrollment, run final grade rosters and complete needed adjustments for failing grades, contact by email all instructors who do not enter last dates of attendance for students on their final grade report online, answer questions of students regarding benefits, serve as a liaison between the college and the Federal VA Office and send written communication to students as needed.

The area outside of our office, Veterans Express has two work stations. There is no privacy in this space. As we work with our veterans, students walk by and everyone walking by can hear everything that is being discussed. Anyone walking by can see the students file, and students sitting on the chairs by the Veterans Express can see and hear complete conversations we have with our veterans. We cannot be FERPA compliant in this space.

Two days a week we have a representative from Dept Work Force Services that comes out to SLCC to meet with our VA students to assist them with tuition payment, resume writing, and job placement. They sit at the Veterans Express and discuss the student's financial situation including money they receive, payments they make and all debts they have. They discuss the possibility of the need for food stamps, psychological counseling, how they are doing making the transition to civilian life, family relationships, and other situations that may affect the students schooling, etc.

Two days a week we have a representative from Veterans Upward Bound, TRIO program, who meets with our VA students at the VA Express. They discuss student's goals with

education, test scores and placement in classes and educational progress. They also discuss the student's financial situation including money they receive, payments they make and all debts they have, possible need for psychological counseling, and how they are doing making the transition to civilian life.

In all of our areas where we work with students, process their paperwork and store our records, we cannot be FERPA compliant. We have no way to do our work and have information protected.

We have three tutors that work with the Veterans Upward Bound program: one for English, Math and Computer Science. VUB is a trio program administered by an employee from Weber State University. They assist our students with a tutoring for each of the subjects above in different class rooms. Each term we have to coordinate the use of a room for the tutoring with the college and notify the students of where the room will be the next term for the tutoring and all to ensure the room has the equipment to support the tutors and students. Sometimes the room we have approved and set up for the tutoring is changed in the middle of the term.

We have approximately 350-500 students that do not return to school each year. I don't have solid reasons as to why they don't return (I am planning on beginning to research this). I have had the chance to talk to about this situation with a few students and they shared with me the following reasons as to why they do not return: money, stress with school-family-work, need to work to support their family, discouragement and feeling alone at school, feeling like they have no where to turn.

When our Veterans are in the service, they are in a group and they feel secure and know their buddies will be there for them. It is a feeling of a tight family unit. When they get out they don't feel that in the civilian life and the civilian lifestyle is so radically different from the way they have had to live for their survival while in the service. Often as they make the transition from military life to civilian life, they feel lost and like they don't matter to another soul. One way we can assist in this transition is to have a place where they can come together and support each other. After all – who better knows how the veteran is feeling better than another veteran.

PROPOSAL:

I would like to propose we create a 'Veterans Resource Center' at SLCC dedicated to serve the needs of our Veteran Students to support and encourage their educational success as they make the many transitions from military active duty serving our country to civilian life. To my knowledge there are no colleges or universities in the state of Utah that provide a comprehensive approach to support their Veteran Students as they use their GI bill for education, and for the many whom no longer have GI Bill money and are still attending school but still need the assistance we could provide through this center. From my conversations with other certifying officials across the nation at conferences and by e-mail, there are very few centers at college and university campuses in the US. Through the use of the GI bill our vets creates billions of dollars of revenue while attending college. Also, the Federal Government pays a stipend- reporting fee, to the college for each person using the GI money for education each year at our institution.

I request that this center include at least two offices for the SLCC Veterans office, a reception desk, a room for file storage space, two to four additional offices for outside agencies to work with our students, tutoring rooms including a computer lab area, a lounge area and a meeting room. I also propose to have our SLCC Army-National Guard Recruit employee in this same office space.

Following are the reasons for the request and how we can serve the needs of our Veteran Students at SLCC. Also, I list some of the organizations which have pledged to assist and support this effort and our students.

Space issues/ Space requests

1. We need to have closed office space where we can process certifications with little interruption. With all the rules and regulations required with the VA it is difficult to process all the paperwork quickly and accurately when we have many interruptions and we currently have to move what we are working on so the sensitive data is not viewed by others when they come into the office. If we had separate offices, we can focus on the work and complete our duties quicker and accurately.
2. A reception desk in front would allow us to have an employee to be the first contact for students to greet and welcome the student. They would give new students required paperwork to enroll for their benefits and ensure the documents are completed when submitted to us and that we have all the supporting documentation we need to start their file and process their certification of enrollment for their school pay. We would have a table and computer close to the reception desk for the student to sit at and complete their documentation and submit it. We would be able to assist them if they have questions and they could print documentation they need to turn in and complete their application for benefits on-line if they choose. The person at the reception desk would also complete the orientation which is designed to review our veteran's office policies and procedures for the student to receive their pay.
3. We would have one or two other desks for work-study employees. An employee would answer the phones and handle problems and questions over the phone and assist the person at the reception desk if they needed. Another employee could pull the files and do the basic data entry required.
4. This would allow us space to have the student's files where we would have access to them with ease and secure so that only the office staff can see the information in the files. We could be FERPA compliant. Also, we would be able to retrieve files without having to have someone move in order to access it.
5. Additional offices to share and/or dedicated to provide the following services:
 - Tutoring room for Math tutor- VUB
 - Tutoring room for English tutor including computers and printer -VUB
 - Tutoring room for Computer Science –VUB
 - Office space for Counselors for VUB and DWS to share for enrolling and counseling our students. We would work out the schedule of the room and they could share the space. This would allow them to meet with students in private to ensure sensitive information remains confidential. The students would be more likely to share more of what is sensitive if they had privacy.
 - I have had requests from the VA Rehab counselors to come to our campus to meet with their clients each month or as needed. Currently our students have to go to the state office located across from the University of Utah to meet with their counselors each term. Some students have to meet with them each month and if there are any problems it requires multiple trips there. I have been told by the counselors that this would be good for them and the student. We currently have four rehab counselors working with 75 to 100 of our students. It is estimated the number of cases they will be supporting will be increasing due to the current war and number of students coming home injured.
 - I would like to propose to the state VA Rehab that they hold their Disability Briefing at SLCC. This is the time students decide which school to attend and they make their educational plans with their Rehabilitation counselor.

- We have been offered free the services of a “Transition Assistance Advisor” for our students. This advisor would meet with our VA student’s one on one to ensure they know the benefits available to them because of their service to our country. This service is offered by others; however, the student is often charged \$200 for the information and assistance. This would be free to our students with the advisor.
- We have also been offered FREE services from the VA Salt Lake City Health Care System-Psychology Service and the VA Hospital Services and The Family Support Center. They would need a room that would be dedicated to that use only. We could use one or all of the service providers. They would like to work with our VA students and offer counseling, transition assistance and assistance for post war syndrome (aka: PTSD/TBI). According to an article in Military.com (March 14, 2007) it is estimated that “More than one third of American troops returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with some sort of mental or “psychosocial” disorder, a new report from the Archives of Internal Medicine finds.” Also, approximately 64% of our returning Veterans have some degree of Traumatic Brain Injury”. We are seeing students with that we either know have these issues or are displaying the symptoms of these issues. This problem also affects the spouses and children of the veterans of whom we also have attending SLCC. This would be helpful to have this assistance available here on our campus.
- Members of The American Legion, Vietnam Veterans Association and Veterans of Foreign Wars expressed interest at our Information and Benefits Fair we had on March 31st, in coming in to assist our students in anyway they can and to tell them about their organizations. I am sure we could get other groups to also come in and meet with our students.
- Employees of the US Dept of Labor, Veterans’ Employment and Training Service have expressed interest in working with the SLCC-VA office in offering services to our students.
- The State Department of Veterans Affairs employees would like to be involved with SLCC in working with our students.
- The Director of Utah State Approving Agency for Veterans Education, a member of Utah System of Higher Education, would like to have the opportunity to meet with our VA students. He wants to also be available for students in Apprenticeship programs who must meet with him for their certification for pay. We could set up time for him to meet with our students at our campus.
- The Health Benefits Advisor from the VA Medical Center would like to talk to students regarding their medical benefits. When a veteran is released from active duty, they have two years of medical benefits free. A large majority of our veterans in the state of Utah do not use these benefits. They would like to make sure they all know what benefits they do have and ensure they know about the medical benefits.
- I am in contact with a number of people who present information to the Veterans when they are released from active duty. I am currently working to find out what we at SLCC can do to be part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) process so students might choose to attend our school for the first two years of their schooling. One of the presenters at TAPS has stated he would be in support of our students in whatever capacity he could.
- We have a group of students at SLCC that are in the process of creating a Veterans Club on the campus. They would need a meeting room.
- Because of the sense of community developed by Veterans and often missed with civilian life, I feel it is important to have a place they can come and unwind from classes and just relax and feel connected to those who

understand what they have experienced. This is why I am requesting space for a lounge area.

- A meeting room would be essential for trainings and meetings for the students and the community.
- This would be a perfect place to host trainings for certifying officials from other colleges and universities around Utah. There are many meetings and trainings I feel would be beneficial to us as the certifying officials at our schools working with Veterans which would allow us to in support of each other.
- Having this center, we could employ more VA work-study students thus give more students a little more money for living expenses.
- Congressman Matheson's Veterans Representative would like to have opportunities to meet with the Vets and hear their concerns and experiences to see how they can assist the veterans. They have expressed their concerns when I met with them in Washington, DC and when they attended our Veterans fair at SLCC. I think that given the chance, Senator Hatch's office may be open to the same. I met with the Veterans Rep for Senator Hatch while in DC, and he was interested in what our students were concerned with. I have been also contacted by Senator Bennett's Veterans Rep and she is interested in being a part of our community at SLCC.

These are some of the reasons I am requesting numerous offices and or meeting rooms for our Veterans Center. I think we could handle all of these requests to work with us and our students with maybe four or five additional offices.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES/EQUIPMENT

I would like to provide the following items as resources to support the students in this center:

- At least 6 computers for students to use to complete the VA on-line application for benefits, to access their military account to retrieve documents such as DD-214, etc, to contact Muskogee, to register and print class schedules for certification, to complete their monthly certification on WAVES and to use computers to complete their homework.
- Copier/Fax machine for our use with veterans related assistance.
- In our lounge area, I would like to place a Pepsi machine. We could use the proceeds from the machine to buy some of the supplies for the office or provide refreshments for some of our outreach events. I would also like to have a microwave and a coffee maker for the veterans to use.
- A TV and DVD/VHS player would also be important.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH/SUPPORT

I also see the possibility of opening some of services above to members of our community. If promoted properly, we could serve a big need in our community. According to Governor Huntsman, the State of Utah has an estimated 220,000 veterans not counting those currently serving. Utah Veterans do not use a majority of their benefits. We could provide some of the above services to the community members in combination with our students in a community outreach effort. This could provide community support for our vets and valuable networking possibilities for our students.

When we hosted the Veterans Information and Benefits fair at SLCC, I found that a lot of attendees did not realize they had the many benefits that were available to them. Others did

not know where to go to and what questions to ask to find what might be available for them. Some had a hard time getting up to the state offices and generally felt overwhelmed by the whole process. Many of the attendees expressed gratitude for Salt Lake Community Colleges involvement and for our hosting this event because now they had access to benefits they did not realize was available to them. At the fair we had over 400 in attendance (the highest turnout the State VA office has ever had) and the service providers said the event was successful because they were able to assist those that had not been reached before.

It would be great to begin offering workshops or lectures maybe once a month with some of the service providers above or other community members and invite SLCC students and community members to attend. This way we could promote a larger community of support for our students and community members. We also can assist the general community members to learn more about the benefits they have. This also may allow our students to do some networking with others for employment or mentoring.

As I spoke with some of the members of the organizations listed above about having a Veterans Center at SLCC, they were excited about this possibility and said it was about time one of the schools in Utah did this.

By creating this Veterans Resource Center, we are making a loud and a clear statement to our students and the military community: at SLCC, our veterans matter, we support them, and we are a Veteran Friendly college. Imagine how our service personnel will feel when they return home and hear that SLCC is supportive of them as a veteran and a student, and we have a Center dedicated for their use. The message we send is we care about our veteran's, they matter to us and we are committed to serving and assisting them as they complete their education.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Darlene S. Head
SLCC VA Supervisor/Certifying Official