Portland Community College - Program Review Response
Veterans Services Program Review

Overview of presentation

The Veterans Services team is to be applauded for their efforts in their first program review. It was good for those at the review to meet the staff and to gain a better understanding of the responsibilities of the Veterans Services office at PCC. It is a small team experiencing an expanding workload with both a growing number of students (my notes said a 23% increase from Fall 08 to Fall 09, with even more expected) and increasing complexity to comply with state and federal rules and regulations.

The review provided us with a brief overview of student veteran demographics and an explanation of the services PCC currently provides. The three components of the review -- external assessment, benchmarking and internal assessment -- were also explained. Time was spent outlining efforts at the Rock Creek Campus as an example of activities for student veterans and efforts at Clackamas Community College were shared in the report. Accomplishments and improvements at PCC were highlighted and the presentation ended with recommendations.

The program review presentation was supplemented with the written report. In it, overview information was provided about external reviews done by the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and the Oregon State Veterans Affairs Approving Agency. One of the appendices in the report also outlined suggested structures for veterans support programs on university campuses.

Areas of exemplary contribution to the mission of PCC

Veterans Service is a valuable college resource and provides a much-needed service to student veterans. PCC is obligated to help student veterans access available financial and educational resources. Furthermore, the college values "the realization of each individual and their potential" so it is our responsibility to help ease our new student veteran's transition to college and to support lifelong learning for all veterans. Dignity and worth of each individual and preparing students for success are values shared by Veterans Services and the college as identified in the PCC mission and values statements.

The report makes it clear that one of the area's greatest strengths is the experience and expertise of staff. We at PCC are fortunate to have such knowledgeable and caring staff serving our student veterans.

Evidence that program outcomes are being met

Currently over 1,200 student veterans are being served by the PCC Veterans Services office. It is clear from the review that despite the efforts of the hardworking staff, meeting reporting deadlines and serving a growing veteran population has become challenging with such a small team. At the time of the review a third Veterans Affairs Specialist had been recently added to the staff, providing encouragement that renewed attention will be given to this area.

Other positive changes in the works at the time of the of the review and report include a new Veteran Services website and office process automations for improved efficiencies.

Veterans Services is also beginning to enlist the help of campus instructional and student service areas to provide additional supports and services to student veterans. A pilot project at RC provided examples of what can be done on other campuses and throughout the district to support veterans and their families.

Concerns and areas for improvement expressed during the presentation and in the report

In the review process reviewers greatly appreciated that the team began with outcomes and values and generated questions from that process. The six questions found on page 4 of the review are good ones and answers to those questions could provide valuable data and insights for further efforts. Those questions should have been the focus of the review and each question should have been the subject heading for a chapter of the report.

Unfortunately, the way the report was written it was difficult (almost impossible) to pull out/find the answers to those six important questions. Readers were forced hunt through other sections and brief consultant summaries, making responses to the questions difficult to ascertain. For future reports it would be helpful and more informative for the readers if the report were organized so that each question were a heading. Under the heading an explanation could be provided including: what assessment tools were used to answer the question, findings and resulting recommendations.

A second major concern with the report was the limited information in the presentation and written report about the AACRAO consultants' feedback. It was suggested that their report was the major source of information for the review. The report teases us by describing a "50 page power point presentation" given to program staff. However, AACRAO results were limited to no more than three pages in the report itself with some of their recommendations "interpreted" and offered in another 3 pages in Appendix A. More information from their report would have been welcomed and could have easily replaced or been offered in addition to the 17 page Appendix D about university veterans support programs (which was never clearly explained or tied into the report).

At the very least, information should have been given about AACRAO consultants' actual research methodology. If their charge was to interview staff, students, advisors, faculty counselors and administrators, it would have been useful to let reviewers know who or how many of each group they interviewed. In addition, were respondents interviewed individually or in groups? Also, were the same questions asked of all interviewees and what were those questions?

Those in the review audience questioned why more program strengths (other than expertise and experience) were not listed in the report. Many in the audience have worked with the Veterans Services staff and were surprised not to find, "friendly, helpful, caring staff – responsive to student needs" included on the list of strengths. In fact there was no mention in the report anywhere about customer service, student satisfaction, effective referrals or student advocacy.

A third concern was the emphasis on activities for veterans at Rock Creek that were not the actual work of the Veterans Services Office. It was unclear to the review audience if Veterans Services was taking credit for the work done at RC or using it as an example of what can be done in cooperation with campus instruction and student services. One reviewer commented,

> "Almost all of their program achievements were related to the work that Rock Creek has done out of the instructional/student service areas. While this is obviously important work and should be cited and commended in the review, I don't think it should have taken center stage for the VA Services program review. I would have liked to see more emphasis on their program's achievements, such as the new hire. How many more students are they able to serve, what strengths does she bring to the program?"

It was also suggested that efforts at the other campuses or at the district level should have also been included. Examples include: a session for working with student veterans and their families for deans, department chairs and student service leaders sponsored by the Sylvania campus president; Deans of Students from Cascade, ELC and Sylvania (together with the specialists) attending regional veterans services training, or district counselor training to better work with students with PTSD.

A recommendation given in the review presentation and report that was embraced by the reviewers was the need for better internal communications. As the Veterans Services team indicated, much of the problem of being out of compliance in the 65 degree programs listed in the catalog was a communications issues. From the report we learn that the "auditor recommended the college put into place a checks and balance system for new degrees and certificates and for program modifications so that these additions and changes are communicated to the approving agency." Later in the report it suggests that "plans for a system of checks and balances for compliance areas have been developed for both curriculum and student monitoring", but no specifics were given. It leaves the reviewers to wonder what "checks and balances" actually means in this circumstance and if specific actions have been taken?

Another area for improved communications is information sharing with advising and counseling. An example was given at the review that emphasized the unique consequences of program decisions for this student population. Veterans Services expertise in working with student veterans is acknowledged and their guidance and willingness to share their knowledge with advisors, counselors and all those working with veterans and their families is critical.

Although there is no heading in the body of the report titled Recommendations, (interpreted consultant recommendations are given in Appendix A) it appears the six bullets listed under the heading of Future Enhancements on page 10 and the five bulleted items listed under the Conclusion heading on page 11 of the report are the recommendations. I am unclear why almost identical ideas were repeated on adjacent pages. I do believe, however, it is safe to say that the majority of the reviewers agree with these recommendations including: creating a veterans support programs on each campus; hiring a Veterans Services Coordinator; expanding and broadening support for student veterans to include instructional and

student services staff; decentralizing some of the basic services; continuing to streamline processes and procedures (and exploring technology solutions – reviewer's words); and continuing the assessment process with surveys to students and the college community.

Several reviewers commented that they wish the report had made an even stronger argument for the need for a program coordinator. They thought that the recommendation could have been better supported with information about current student caseload compared with recommended caseload from Veterans Services professional associations or publications. Outlining the services a Coordinator would be able to provide would also strengthen the request.

Looking toward the future

As projected throughout the review and in this response, we expect the number of student veterans _and_ the complexity of their needs to grow rapidly in the next few years. With this program review, attention has been drawn to the fine work that has already been done and the additional plans in place to improve services and focus on the needs of student veterans.

A place on the PCC admissions application for student veterans to self identify seems a simple move, however, it is an important step forward and will make a world of difference in our ability to collect data as well as find and offer services to students. We will be able to send tailored communications to student veterans, share special program offerings, or query about their interests and needs. Surveys of the veterans themselves may help us figure out why they drop out or what existing services have helped them stay. In addition, with the ability to identify veterans in Banner, we will be able to determine their retention and completion rates and compare them with the general student population.

Professional development will be another key for the future. If the Veterans Services Office is to move forward with automated processes, electronic forms and communications, and technology solutions -- updates and training will be required. In addition, if instruction and student services are going to partner with Veterans Service to better serve our students, guidance, information, and training must be provided to faculty and staff so they can better understand veterans and their needs.

We have numerous models to guide our future success. Many of the great ideas suggested by the Rock Creek taskforce can be used on other campuses. Perhaps the taskforce can be expanded to a district effort. We can also look to Clackamas and other community colleges for model programs and learn from university research and reports to meet the needs of our students.

This timely program review has given Veterans Services some much-deserved consideration. Hopefully, the effort given by staff and administration to evaluate and plan will result in workable solutions to keep up with demand and possibly even improve services. All of the administrators who read the report and attended the review would like to thank Veterans Services administration and staff for their hard work and congratulate them on their initial program review.

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