



Veteran's Resource Center: Serving Those Who Served

By Tricia Crane, Independent Education Consultant

Less than a month after he was discharged from the Navy and active duty in Afghanistan Stephen Riggs found himself standing in the doorway to the Pasadena Community College Veterans Resource Center. Riggs was overcome with emotion as he scanned the large room, which midway into the week before finals was abuzz with the activity of a dozen students, all former soldiers. Some studied in small groups while others worked alone at computers. After he composed himself, Riggs stepped into the welcoming space and met with a counselor to plan his fall semester. Later in the day, he reflected on his initial nervousness: "As a soldier you become used to support. You are not used to making decisions on your own. Civilians are sharp. They know how to go after it. A military guy is waiting for someone to tell him what to do."

Returning veterans who arrive on college campuses are at risk. Not only do they have to transition to civilian life and learn how to be independent, but they have been away from traditional academics for years. An estimated 40 to 50 percent have learning challenges and are referred to as "non-traditional learners." And then there are those who suffer traumas such as traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, both of which can profoundly affect cognitive skills, including attention, working memory, information processing speed, retention, sequencing and decision making. In some cases individuals enter the military with learning disabilities that are compounded by injuries sustained in duty.

An estimated 16,000 of the 21,000 veterans and their dependents using the GI Bill at California colleges are enrolled at a community college. Helping veterans transition to college life is the focus of the Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) located at 24 campuses throughout California. While there have long been services for veterans on community college campuses, the VRCs have only recently been created as dedicated spaces, offering two distinctive features: vets helping other vets to navigate the college campus and accessibility to assistive technology for all who want it. This combination of personal and technological support is proving to be a powerful attraction to veterans, many of whom had joined the military to avoid school.

Juan Hernandez is one such college student who is experiencing academic success for the first time because of a VRC. Hernandez had enrolled at Pasadena Community College (PCC) after high school, but found it "too much" and quit to enroll in the Navy. "As a boy living in South Central L.A. speaking Spanish at home, I had to translate for my parents with teachers," he says. "In Spanish you use many words to say something you can say in one word with English, but finding the right English word is hard!" Hernandez gave the community college a second try and he now works part-time at the center while attending classes. He credits his success to the Veterans Resource Center where he relies on support from fellow veterans and uses Kurzweil 3000 text-to-speech software to help him with reading and writing. "I learned here that I am a physical and visual graphic learner, which is why the Kurzweil 3000 writing and study tools work for me," Hernandez says. "It helps me arrange my thoughts in a graphic form so I can write in a way that I never have before."



After nine years in the Navy and being deployed twice, Tasha Ford of Long Beach decided to leave military life and go back to school. She enrolled this fall at Santa Monica College because she had heard there was a VRC there and "it made it easy," she says. "Everything is coordinated in the office and they offer counseling right away and that's exactly what I needed."

Patricia D'Orange-Martin, a counselor at PCC, has collected data during the past academic year that show more than 16,000 recorded "contacts" between her office and veterans at her center. "That number of contacts with veterans is staggering when you note that I work in the VRC only 50% of my time," says D'Orange-Martin, whose husband is a faculty member at the college and a Vietnam veteran. The data also show that the single most frequently cited reason given for visits to the center was "computer use." Computers are available elsewhere on the campus, says the counselor, but the computers at the Pasadena VRC have an added attraction: two are equipped with Inspiration and Kurzweil 3000 software.

The popularity of the software offered to vets in the centers does not surprise Myra Lerch, who first encountered Kurzweil 3000 in 2008 at a conference dedicated to the educational re-entry of veterans. Trained as a speech pathologist, Lerch immediately saw the utility of the software for her disabled students at Butte College in Oroville, especially those who were veterans and suffered from traumatic brain injury, a population she says benefits from a tool that allows them to scan text and have it read aloud. Lerch became increasingly concerned about "wounded warriors" and wrote a proposal to create a dedicated veterans center at Butte. She found a supporter for her cause in Gaeir Dietrich, Director of the High Tech Center Training Unit (HTCTU) at De Anza College, a training and support facility for faculty and staff wishing to acquire and improve teaching skills related to assistive computer technology, alternate media creation, and web accessibility. Dietrich shared Lerch's desire to create a network of programs for veterans that combined camaraderie with a focus on academics and wellness.



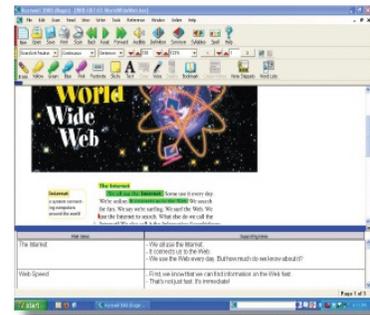
Once the VRC concept was born Dietrich says "People came out of the woodwork to help us get these centers going because they were for the veterans." Fellow vets provided furniture and computers to furnish centers. At the opening celebrations of VRCs, veterans turned out who had served in World War II. The outpouring struck Dietrich. "People who work in disability services are not accustomed to this sort of response," she says. "It was and continues to be remarkable."

While there is no direct cost to a college for opening a VRC, each campus must provide the physical space and there is the expectation that each college provides a space that has its own door. Staffing is also expected to include vets. On average 70% of the employees at centers across the state are veterans on work-study with Veterans Administration funding and 30% are support specialists who are already employed by the colleges. For the program to work, Dietrich says, there must also be a willingness by faculty and staff to coordinate services among different departments on each campus, including Veterans Services, Financial Aid, Disabled Student Programs & Services (DSPS), Counseling and the Health Center. Computers are usually provided by the colleges, but the Kurzweil 3000 software was donated during the launch by Cambium Learning Technologies and since then to each center that has come online in the community college system. Kurzweil 3000 has a special discounted price for college students that student veterans can take advantage of. Instead of paying full price, student veterans pay half price.

To use the technology at the center, student veterans are expected to carry a full load of courses and maintain a 2.0 grade point average. Their ability to perform academically is enhanced by the recent addition of a low tech tool called a Learning Profile questionnaire. Myra Lerch developed the questionnaire, which she distributes to students to help them become aware of what she calls "their strongest input modalities." The brief survey asks students to answer questions that connect to four primary processing modalities: visual graphic, visual text, auditory and kinesthetic. The information the survey generates becomes useful to students because once they identify their two strongest modalities

they can consider new approaches to studying. According to Lerch, research shows that when individuals use more than one modality in the learning process, they are better able to retain information.

“If I read a chapter of a book I will retain a certain amount,” she says. “If, however, I read it and also hear it the way I can using Kurzweil 3000 text-to-speech software, I am using two modalities and my retention of the material will be increased.” The software can also be used by students with organizational difficulties to support their writing with brainstorming concept mapping – a visual graphic. “Kurzweil 3000 provides a back door to the writing process with a graphic format,” Lerch says. In addition, students with Attention Deficit Disorder can benefit when the reading rate is set at more words per minute than their normal reading rates. This pulls them along and they must exert effort to attend. “It helps them focus,” she says.



Berkeley student John Weber is a veteran of the Navy and a VRC success story. When he first enrolled in college Weber says it felt “like being dropped on the moon.” He had been discharged from the Navy years earlier and had spent a couple of years working and was frustrated when he was continually laid off because of the weak economy. While he never considered himself much of a student, he enrolled at Grossmount Community College in El Cajon “rather than take another low-paying job with no future.” At the community college he met fellow vet and faculty member Carl Fielden, the Coordinator of the Assistive Technology Center for students with disabilities. Together they wrote the proposal that persuaded the college to give veterans the space they needed to set up a center, prevailing in a fierce competition for the needed space against other student organizations.



“We built it from the ground up,” Weber says. “We had to fight for it. It didn’t come easy.” Weber became the unofficial ‘tech guy’ at the center, he says, “because it’s key to have a vet do the training because as vets we are taught ‘If it isn’t yours, don’t touch it. And if you haven’t been trained, you won’t know what to do.’ Weber’s approach was to casually show the software to fellow vets in the center. “I would say, ‘Look, you may like this program. You can mess around with it. Check it out!’ Once they saw what Kurzweil 3000 could do for them that sold them immediately.” Weber transferred to UC Berkeley this fall and hopes to go on to study law. He recently participated in a conference held by the Office of Civil Rights for educators in the community college system. As a member of a student panel Weber spoke of his hope to eventually run for political office because he believes his experience as a veteran makes him uniquely qualified to help facilitate change.

Getting accustomed to the independence of civilian life is an enduring challenge for newly returned veterans, says Carl Fielden who says that at the Grossmount vet center he finds himself having to sometimes function like the platoon leader he was while he served in the Army after the Vietnam War. “The idea that the military draws from people who don’t like school has been consistent since my time,” he says. “They come in and expect us to tell them what courses to take. It takes someone with military experience to understand how to help them transition.”

At Santa Monica City College the VRC is up and running, but the space is not yet ideal, says director Linda Sinclair. There is not yet a noticeable veteran presence and at first glance the center seems more suited to a doctor’s office. The waiting area is furnished with two rows of facing wooden chairs and a secretary at a desk stops visitors to ask them if they have an appointment. There is no sign of any place for veterans to gather and meet each other informally, although the secretary will show visitors how to

find their way down the hall to the lounge containing a table and chairs and a refrigerator. Another room contains computers loaded with Kurzweil 3000 software and yet another room has a cot surrounded by filing cabinets. Sinclair says “The ideal model is vets helping other vets because of the trust issue, but sometimes vet- to-vet isn’t the best. Being older, I can say to them ‘I want to talk with you about something that may affect your learning.’” Student vets at SMC may be referred by Sinclair to the campus to the High Tech Training Center for students with disabilities where Tom Peters, himself a vet, trains them to use assistive technology.

Peters works hard to connect with students who are veterans but says many are reluctant to accept help. “A young vet I met today told me he wants to see how he can on his own. Help can be a four letter word.”



Concerned to help vet center staff understand the civil rights of returning “wounded warriors” under the Americans with Disabilities Act, attorney Jenny Moon at the Office of Civil Rights in San Francisco sees a need for more work to be done. Her office organized a recent conference to heighten the awareness of educators in the community colleges and to encourage veteran engagement. “Recently we have begun to look at best practices in education for all veterans,” says Moon. “We are interested in supporting colleges that offer innovative models.”

At the headquarters of the California Community Colleges, Vice Chancellor Linda Michalowski expresses her confidence that despite the economic challenges faced by the system the VRCs will thrive. “Even though available state funds for student services have been decimated,” says Michalowski, “veterans have enrollment priority, so colleges will continue to prioritize our vets.”