The 2021-2022 Academic year has been yet another year of making plans and then changing them; not just in the Veteran Services Office (VSO), but across the Division, University and country. As we began the summer 2020 term, we were making plans on what returning to campus was going to look like and how we would execute our programmatic efforts in an environment of limited crowd sizes as well as social distancing. Things changed and twelve months later we found ourselves in that same place! Thus, we began the 2021 academic year full of hope but also full of trepidation after over a year of massive ups-and-downs, plans and new plans, and old staff departing and new staff coming on-board. All of these changes set-up the 2021-2022 academic year as a year of significant organizational growth and restructuring as we lay the groundwork for what the VSO will be in the coming years.

**Staffing**

The 2021-2022 academic year began with the required “return to work in-person from campus” directive effective in July 2021. This directive, led in part to the resignation of 50% of the VSO staff (in July 2021, we lost our administrative assistant as well as our Lead Certifying Official). The loss of the Lead Certifying Official was especially devastating given the timing (hitting us just as we entered one of the two peak certifications windows of the year). We were able to promote from within to fill our Lead Certifying Official position due to outstanding staff and staff training. The choice was made to leave the Administrative Assistant position vacant while we attempted to upgrade the position to a Program Manager role.

With the promotion of our current Certifying Official into the Lead role, it became time sensitive and mission critical to back-fill the vacant Certifying Official role. After the completion of a successful search, we hired a current UNC Charlotte graduate student (and veteran) into that role. Tyler Thomas was hired, in part, because of the additional experience and skills that he would bring to the team in areas related to peer mentoring (from his time with University Center for Academic Excellence- UCAE). Tyler stepped into his new role and excelled; picking-up the skills necessary to be a great Certifying Official while also enhancing our other offerings with the skills he brought with him.

In the spring of 2022, the VSO was finally able to convert the previous Administrative Assistant role into the newly created Program Manager position. After an external search, Tyler was moved into the role of Program Manager for the VSO where he is tasked with coordinating and overseeing the programmatic efforts of the VSO and linking those efforts to the values, mission and goals of the VSO. Additionally, Tyler serves as the Veterans Services Coordinator (VSC) for UNC Charlotte's PAVE (Peer Advisors for Veteran Education) program.
Currently, the VSO has reopened their search to fill Tyler’s role as a Certifying Official within the VSO. Once that position is filled (hopefully during the summer 2022), the VSO will be fully staffed for the first time in a year. These changes only begin to address meeting the daily needs of the VSO and do not begin to touch (or reflect) the massive population growth the office has seen, nor reflect the needs created by the growth in responsibilities within the areas that the VSO oversees. To meet these needs as well as the goals of the VSO to both reach (programmatically) dependents and to play an active role in not just the retention of veterans, but their recruitment as well, it will be necessary to introduce a number of new positions (three) targeting these areas as well as addressing current staffing shortcomings (specifically the massive gap between the Veterans Administration’s (VA) recommended staffing rates for certifying officials and our current rate: the VA recommends one certifying official per 250 students using benefits; our current rate is nearly 1:600—up from 1:430 just five years ago or up 40%).

Programming

The 2021-2022 academic year saw the gradual re-introduction of in-person programming on campus. The veteran population has seemed to be especially reticent to return to in-person programming or even to return to the Veteran Lounge. Our numbers in the lounge have been down dramatically in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. Additionally, attendance around Veterans Week activities (including the veterans’ breakfast, the veterans roll call, the football game) all saw less students present than their pre-pandemic predecessors.

However, the feather in the VSO’s cap this year has been the introduction of Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) program. PAVE is a peer support program that connects incoming student veterans with student veterans who are trained as Peer Advisors who can help them navigate college life, address challenges they may face, refer them to appropriate resources on and off campus, and provide ongoing support. PAVE provides:

- Added support and engagement on and off campus and provides expertise in campus resources as well as a point of contact for veteran specific resources off campus
- Assistance in setting goals for a veteran’s time at Charlotte and help connecting students with supports to make their goals more achievable
- Communication through emails or meet ups on campus to discuss student needs and provide support.

PAVE is part of M-SPAN (Military Support Programs and Networks), a group of programs at the University of Michigan developed to address the needs and challenges faced by service members, veterans and military families. PAVE is a partnership between the University of Michigan Depression Center and Student Veterans of America.

Funding for Charlotte’s initial year of PAVE was secured using Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II (HEERF II) (authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA))

Wins

While some days, just the continued successful operation of the certification process feels like a win, that is a very low bar and not the type of win the VSO strives for. The largest single win that the VSO achieved this year (and this is a year in which we introduced PAVE), was the adoption of priority registration for all students using VA benefits to pay for their education while here at UNC Charlotte. The VSO was able to make the case that Students using these benefits face a variety of restrictions on and around their benefits that makes their use in a timely and efficient manner critical to their success. The restrictions include:
● Time limits surrounding the use of benefits
  o Chapter 33 benefits consist of only 36 months of benefits (roughly the equivalent of a four-year undergraduate degree)
  o Chapter 35 benefits must be used prior to the dependent turning 26 years old

● Benefit coverage limitations
  o Chapter 30, 31, 33, 35, 1606 and Tuition Assistance (TA) only will pay for courses that are in a student’s degree plan (thus not allowing for “filler courses” to maintain full-time status which is critical to receiving the full value of the benefits).

● Receiving maximum value of benefits
  o Benefits pay-out is dependent on being at least a full-time student (12 hours undergraduate, 9 hours graduate). If a student in not enrolled as a fulltime student, then their benefits will be reduced proportionally (ex. a student only enrolled in 9 credit hours will only receive 75% of their BAH portion of their benefits; the equivalent of a $450/month reduction in payout for someone using chapter 33)

Any obstacle to using these benefits to their maximum value poses the potential risk of having a student “stop-out” for a term. As research shows, students with multiple “stop-outs” graduate at a greatly reduced rate Park (2012).

Thus, by allowing for priority registration, we help to ensure this population is able to register for the classes within their degree plan and at an adequate course load to complete their degree within the allotted time window; avoiding stop-outs for inadequate BAH or other benefits.

Two additional wins include: UNC Charlotte being recognized as a Gold Level Military Friendly School (an improvement over the prior year's Silver designation) as well as Military Friendly Spouse school (our first time receiving this designation); and one (that was frankly outside of our control), was the expansion of the 702 waiver to include dependents and the removal of the time limit associated with this benefit (layman’s definition of the impact of this change at the federal level is that we are now able to offer nearly 100% of our benefit recipients’ tuition and fee level that are on par with the in-state tuition and fees rate).


Challenges

Beyond the previously noted challenges related to staffing, the other significant challenges that were faced by the VSO in the 2021-2022 academic year were almost entirely external challenges. They have been: the disastrous roll-out of Army Ignite and the roll-back of COVID waivers related to virtual learning.

Army Ignited was the Army’s newest version of their portal used to maintain and track students using Tuition Assistance (TA). While this represents a relatively small portion of our population (only about 3%) at UNC Charlotte, it is a key demographic and one that represents a real potential for long-term growth of our militarily affiliated population. As is often the case when working with the VA or other DoD affiliated entities, their technology projects end up being poorly timed, postponed, rushed out, poorly executed and eventually rolled-back. All of the above have been true of Army Ignited this academic
year (and have resulted in a tremendous time and effort suck for our certification team; particularly the Lead).

Finally, while everyone knew that the COVID related waivers surrounding virtual learning would likely be allowed to expire this summer, the manner in which the details surrounding this were conveyed led to great confusion within our office and thus to our student population (as with all things VA related, confusion leads to a greater work burden on the certifying team). Within five business days in late May, we received oral guidance (once) and written guidance (twice); that each both contradicted and superseded the prior guidance.

It is only through this team’s diligent work and efforts that we have been able to convey (and correct) this information with our students and help ensure that each of them is on the correct path to graduation in both a timely and economically sound fashion.

1b. By the numbers: tell your story through quantitative and qualitative data – leverage longitudinal data where possible; 3-5 key data points are sufficient.

Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, the VSO has certified 2,659 students (adjusted to reflect reporting changes in place since last year) representing a 2.7% growth year over year (and 31.6% growth since the arrival of the current director and his team in the fall 2017 term) to our militarily affiliated student population (this is using adjusted 2019 summer numbers to reflect the changes in recording summer numbers from 2019 and 2020).

- 379 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in summer 2021
- 1,183 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in fall 2021
- 1,097 veterans (or dependents using benefits) in spring 2022

Including the nearly flat number for the summer 2021 term (when COVID's impact was continued to reflect the subsequent reduction in student enrollment numbers), we see that the increase in enrollment growth is over 2.7% year over year.

In the spring of 2022 we completed our fifth annual Veteran Student Services Needs Assessment. Key findings within the survey demonstrate that even during these times of reduced programs and COVID related challenges, UNC Charlotte and the VSO are perceived as supportive of our militarily affiliated student population with over 95% agreeing at least somewhat that they fell welcomed by faculty (99% staff and nearly 94% by students) and over 96% stating that they feel UNC Charlotte, “was a good choice” for them. 99% state that the believe that UNC Charlotte is "veteran friendly". With regards to the work of the VSO, nearly 99% of all students that had an interaction with the VSO were satisfied with the service they received with over 95% ranking them helpful and 100% of those that interacted with a staff member were satisfied with that interaction! Finally, with regards to the Veterans Portal, nearly 100% of respondents stated that, “I believe the Veterans Portal has made my Benefits Enrollment process easier and more transparent.”
1c. Student success story:

The Veteran Services Office is proud to count as one of their own, Ms. Hope Williams. Hope is an Accounting major with a 4.0 GPA. She is an Army Reservist who continues to serve her country while working on her Bachelor of Science degree at UNC Charlotte. Hope joined the VSO team in the fall of 2021 as a VA work study student, where she excelled in her role in the office, assisting students and parents alike. When the VSO launched the PAVE program in the spring of 2022, Hope was named as one of the inaugural Peer Advisor for the PAVE team. Her performance was so exemplary that she was recognized in February of 2022 by PAVE national as the “Peer Advisor of the Month” (https://m-span.org/pave/2022/02/28/february-2022-peer-advisor-of-the-month-hope-williams-university-of-north-carolina-at-charlotte/).

Hope states that, “As a Peer Advisor I think it truly benefits the student veterans I work with as a more relaxed resource on campus. Because we act more as a peer and friend versus an actual employee on campus, I think it makes talking and opening up to us a whole lot easier on the student veterans rather than going to an employee on campus who might not understand their situations as well. Also, as Peer Advisors, we act as a direct connection on campus, which helps student veterans feel more connected to the school itself and actually a part of the student body. I love the fact that I am meeting so many new people along the way. Getting to know my fellow student veterans and learning about their experiences and becoming a trusted friend to them is an incredible experience. It’s also a major learning experience for me because as I connect them with resources and help them through situations, I learn more about what I personally can utilize on campus and new resources that I can send to other student veterans that have similar situations.”

In recognition of her outstanding contributions in her role as a Peer Mentor in our PAVE program’s inaugural year, Hope has been named the Team Lead for the 2022-2023 school year.
1d. Departmental photos:

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Section 2: Brag about your team

2a. Notable accomplishments: highlight individual or team accomplishments

- Bill Wilson: Enrollment in Baylor University Ed.D. Program
- Tyler Thomas: Graduated with Masters from UNC Charlotte, December 2021

2b. Notable collaborations: highlight cross-functional team accomplishments within and outside of Student Affairs

- Veterans Week partnership with Athletics, ROTC and Student Involvement
- SOAR with OASES
- Partnership with Human Resources in offering Green Zone training to Charlotte faculty and staff
2c. Publications: include full name and position title for Student Affairs employee, the title of the publication, publication date, and publication location. APA style is appreciated, but not required.

NA

2d. Honors and awards: include full name and position title for Student Affairs employee, the title of the honor or our award, and the granting body.

NA

2e. Significant professional involvement: leadership roles filled by Student Affairs staff.

Bill Wilson:
- Military Affairs Working Group
- SECOME (Southeast Council on Military Education) Board Member

Chris Brasel
- Military Affairs Working Group
  - Army Ignited Working Group

2f. Grants and external funding: include amount and name of the organization providing the funding.

$15,000 in Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II (HEERF II) (authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSAA)) to support the implementation of PAVE.

Section 3: Confronting racial injustice

3a. Individual actions: describe notable individual actions to advance diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

The VSO has incorporated these issues into our staff training and professional development (professional and student staff) as well as within the conversations that take place within our office. Prior to the pandemic, we drafted our own version of the Noble Niner creed, labeled the Noble Niner Veteran which, in part states,

“This is an open environment. Veterans of all backgrounds, creeds and beliefs are welcome...A Niner Veteran will be free from fear of intimidation, physical, and emotional harm.”

This is displayed in the Veterans Lounge. Additionally, we have worked with the Office of Identity, Equity and Engagement (IEE) to facilitate professional development sections for both our professional and student staff on microaggressions.
The VSO has included language related to equity and justice in the staff job descriptions. Finally, the VSO staff has taken part in numerous conversations within our staff meetings related to current issues and their personal impact as well as examining how they may impact our students.

**3b. Collective actions:** highlight actions, beyond participation in divisional activities, your department or groups therein completed to advance diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

NA

**Section 4: Link to the Division**

**4. Advancing the Student Affairs Strategic Plan in Academic Year 2023:** articulate 2-3 actions from the 2022-2027 Student Affairs strategic plan that your department will advance or accomplish.

- Action A.2.1 Increase student competencies through collaboration with the University Career Center Competency Compass
  - The new Program Manager is working in conjunction with the Career Center on numerous programs targeting both our PAVE cohort of students as well as our larger veteran student population.
- Action C.4.1 Increase awareness of financial literacy initiatives and Action C.4.2 Expand access to financial literacy resources
  - The new Program Manager is working in conjunction with the Director of Niner Finances on numerous programs targeting both our PAVE cohort of students as well as our larger veteran student population.
- Action D.1.3 Expand services to support the mental health needs of marginalized student populations
  - The new Program Manager is working with the PAVE mentors to provide both the mentors as well as the VA work study staff in general with frontline mental health training. Additionally, the Director is working as a member of and in partnership with the SAMHSA grant team to identify ways in which both the VSO and the larger campus community can better service our veteran student populations' mental health needs.

**Reminder:** For the 2023 annual report you will be asked to report on achievement level related to the 2022-2027 Student Affairs Strategic Plan and articulate 2-3 actions from the 2022-2027 Student Affairs strategic plan that your department will advance or accomplish.

**Section 5: Assessment Plan Highlights**

**5a. Celebrate your success:** select at least one or more objectives and outcomes from your department’s 2021-2022 Assessment Plan and provide a narrative account as to why this was important to assess this past year. Please include enough background information to help all audiences in the division understand the purpose and context as to why this is important to the success of your department. Highlight any number of the following:

- How did you do it?
Outline your performance target(s) and provide an overview of your assessment methods for this outcome.

Share your results: Did you meet or exceed your performance target(s)?

The backbone of the Veteran Services Office continues to be the outstanding level and pacing of the certification process. The office, even with staffing vacancies and shortfalls, continually exceeds its own lofty goals and performance metrics as they relate to the certification process.

The certification process is not only critical for the campus (it ensures timely and accurate delivery of over $10,000,000/per year to the university directly), but for our student population. The accurate delivery of these funds is just as critical to them as they impact the student's abilities to not only succeed academically, but financially as well (these funds buy books, pay rent, put food on the student’s tables). The fact that this office continues to do this accurately, in a timely fashion and in such a way that consistently delivers approval scores in the upper 90th percentile is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the team members of the VSO. It is validation of their dedication to servicing our students as well as to supporting each other.

This team exceeded their stated goals of:
- The office will accurately and quickly complete the certification process for all military affiliated students.
- Additionally, the office will complete the 30-day adjustments in a timely manner.
- The office (including work-study) will be able to accurately and quickly be able to handle incoming certification inquiries.

This level of performance with the current staffing levels is not sustainable long-term. At some point, attrition, burn-out or the continuously growing burdens put on this process by the VA will cause this team to reach a breaking point where they are no longer able to complete the tasks at the level of excellence that they, our student and our campus has grown to expect from them.

5b. Moving from results to action: how has this informed, improved or changed the work of your department? Did this reveal areas of growth and how will you use this data moving forward? As a result of this assessment, do you plan on implementing/adapting new programs, policies, or processes?

We are actually using the results of the last two years assessment plans to implement internal “throttling” of our efforts around certification. The intent of this is not to slow the process down to, "make a point" of any sort, but to help reduce the work/stress level on the certification team to help ensure they can maintain their level of efficiency for as long as possible.