

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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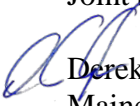
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TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Joint Standing Committee on Veteran and Legal Affairs

FROM:  Derek P. Langhauser, President
Maine Community College System

RE: Student Veterans (PL 2015, Chapter 465)

DATE: January 17, 2017

The Maine Community College System (MCCS) is providing this report in accordance with Public Law 2015, Chapter 465, enacted during the 127th Legislature. The legislation required the University of Maine System and MCCS to:

1. Identify the needs of student-veterans and potential student-veterans attempting to achieve a postsecondary education to degree completion, including but not limited to their ability to gain admission to the University of Maine System or the Maine Community College System, successfully meet the requirements of a course of study, successfully transition to civilian life in a supportive educational environment, obtain available federal veterans' benefits and successfully meet personal and financial obligations;
2. Identify existing services specifically for student-veterans and other services available to student-veterans on each campus that meet the needs identified in subsection 1;
3. Assess the effectiveness in meeting the needs identified in subsection 1 of existing services specifically for student-veterans and other services available to student-veterans on each campus;
4. Determine what services are not currently being offered that, if offered, would meet the needs identified in subsection 1; and
5. Propose services and solutions that fulfill the needs identified in subsection 1 on each campus or across campuses that are based upon best practices in postsecondary educational institutions within the State and nationwide.

1. Identify the needs of student-veterans and potential student-veterans attempting to achieve a postsecondary education.

Of certificate- and degree-seeking students enrolled in Maine’s community colleges in fall 2016, we have identified 552 who receive veteran benefits. We believe that this number undercounts the veteran population at our colleges (as explained elsewhere in this report), but, at just over 4% of our certificate- and degree-seeking students, it is consistent with the percent of veteran undergraduates nationwide.¹

Because Maine’s community colleges are designed to provide low-cost, local access to higher education, they serve a disproportionate number of non-traditional students. The average age of our students is 26. Sixty-one percent attend part-time. More than half report working more than 20 hours a week, and 69% are enrolled in career and occupational programs of study. For these and other reasons, veterans who attend our colleges and who often juggle family and work commitments and bring with them diverse life experiences, find our campuses and the students with whom they study to be welcoming and familiar.

That said, student veterans and those veterans seeking to enroll in college do have specific needs. A 2014 report from the National Conference of State Legislatures sums up many of the common challenges faced by veterans seeking to further their education. As the report notes, the challenges can range “from a lack of camaraderie and understanding among other students and faculty, difficulty obtaining credit for military training and experiences, concerns about targeted recruiting by for-profit institutions, or state residency requirements.”²

Because we know that not all of these challenges are of major concern to veterans enrolled in Maine’s community colleges (for instance, all honorably discharged veterans, regardless of state residency, are eligible for in-state tuition per Maine state law), the M CCS has worked to identify the specific needs of its student veterans.

During the fall semester of 2016, the M CCS conducted a survey of those students identified as receiving veteran benefits at the seven colleges. The survey was sent to over 500 students and, as explained in the sections below, has provided helpful insight into veterans’ experiences within the Maine Community College System. In addition, the M CCS has led ongoing discussions with staff at all of the colleges on the challenges veterans face and how best to respond to them.

As detailed below, each of our colleges is working to develop and strengthen targeted responses that meet the specific needs of its particular student veterans.

¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, *State and Community Roles in Supporting College Completion for Veterans*, May 30, 2014: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/veterans-and-college.aspx>

² Ibid.

2. Identify existing services specifically for student-veterans and other services available to student-veterans on each campus.

In accordance with U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs regulations, each of Maine's community colleges has designated a certifying official to sign off on eligibility standards for students receiving veteran's benefits. These staff often serve as an important first-point of contact for veteran's both during the admissions process and when they first arrive on campus. In addition, each college has created a page on its website that focuses on the programs, services, and resources available to veterans and provides contact information for staff and offices that work directly with veterans on campus.

Those colleges with larger populations of veterans have established Veterans Clubs to provide support and a forum for those interested in veteran's issues. Club events typically include film discussions, guest speakers, community service, field trips, social events, and more.

At Central Maine Community College, the Veterans Club is an active group of veterans for students on campus and online that includes members from all branches of service. The club coordinates activities on campus and remains in touch with the local Veterans Administration (VA) in Augusta to help keep all veterans on campus aware of and current on developments related to their VA benefits. In addition, the club has a Mobile Veteran Center on campus that has open hours two to three times every week for drop in tutoring, support and planning for on-campus activities.

The most significant activity underway across the MCCS in support of student veterans is the strengthening of the colleges' ability to award academic credit for knowledge gained in the military.

Known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), this process enables the colleges to evaluate a veteran's knowledge and skills and award college credit for that learning, saving the individual both time and money in his or her pursuit of a college degree.

Many adult students, but particularly veterans, can demonstrate college-level knowledge and competencies. Such learning, gained from experiences outside postsecondary education, often merits academic credit. PLA provides a range of options from recognition of military and workforce training to national examinations and portfolio development.

One Vet's Experience with PLA

After serving 20 years in the U.S. Navy as a biomedical equipment technician, Ken Gray decided it was time to earn a college degree. Based on the knowledge he gained in the military, York County Community College awarded him 15 prior learning credits toward his degree in information technology (IT). This meant he was able to earn his associate degree in just 18 months and is planning to transfer to the University of Southern Maine for a bachelor's degree in IT.

Over the past several years, the M CCS has implemented a comprehensive PLA process that includes a broad range of tools for assessing prior learning, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DSST (credit-by-examination tests originated by USDOD), AP, IB-Higher Level, credential review, and challenge exams. This broad range of assessment tools provides adult students with multiple and diverse ways in which to demonstrate college-level knowledge and skills and optimizes the awarding of credits.

Military Review is a prior learning assessment specifically aligned to the experience of veterans. Veterans can also receive credit for learning demonstrated by formal service school training, such as Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), Navy Enlisted Classification (NEC), Marine Corps Enlisted Rating (MCE), and Coast Guard Rating (CGR), as well as off-duty educational activities, including basic training and military service school recommendations by the American Council on Education and U.S. Armed Forces Institute correspondence courses.

Veterans can also work with the PLA coordinators at the colleges to develop a portfolio that demonstrates learning that is reflective of their unique military experience. The M CCS is developing curriculum crosswalks between associate and certificate programs and common service training, and is also exploring program options that accelerate completion of high demand credentials, such as Nursing, for veterans with complementary service training.

3. Assess the effectiveness of existing services in meeting the needs of student-veterans.

As noted earlier, the M CCS conducted a survey of over 500 M CCS students identified as receiving veterans educational benefits. The questions were drafted in consultation with Chaplin (Colonel) Andrew Gibson and Sergeant First Class Bradley Merrill of the Maine Army National Guard. To date, nearly 100 students have responded to the survey.

Over 88% of those respondents indicated that they feel welcome on their college campus by faculty and staff, and over 85% feel welcomed by other students. Eighty-eight percent of respondents said that they were very (60%) or somewhat (28%) satisfied with the administrative support they receive. Administrative support includes supports provided by the college's certifying official, admissions, financial aid, advising, disability services, health services, counseling and career services, as well as transfer services.

Although the survey results indicated that most student veterans are pleased with the campus environment and services available to them, they were helpful in identifying areas for future focus and attention. For instance, 65% of survey respondents indicated that they knew their certifying official, and 63% indicated that they are aware of on-campus services and programs available to student veterans. We believe that we can improve these numbers through the activities detailed in sections 4 and 5 below.

4. Determine what services are not currently being offered that, if offered, would meet the student veterans needs.

During the fall of 2016, while the student veteran survey was underway, MCCS staff met with the Deans of Students and the Academic Deans at all seven colleges to review existing practices and brainstorm ideas that were targeted to ensuring the academic success of our student veterans.

As a result of these sessions and the student veteran survey, the MCCS—in collaboration with the Maine Army National Guard—has developed a new professional development opportunity for college faculty and staff. Known as Military 101, the program offers a broad overview of the structure and culture of the American military. Based on his more than 29 years of experience in the Maine Army National Guard, including two long-term deployments overseas, Chaplin (Colonel) Gibson leads a lecture-based discussion on the branches of the military, the essential values that form their culture, core beliefs, and the advantages and challenges of the return to civilian life for military members. The first of the trainings are being offered this semester and are scheduled to be delivered at all of the colleges in 2017. MCCS will record one of these training events for future use for new or part-time employees who are not able to attend.

5. Propose services and solutions that fulfill the needs on each campus or across campuses that are based upon best practices.

Through past experience, ongoing discussions with college staff, survey results, and consultation with the Maine Army National Guard, the MCCS has identified the following best practices for possible expansion or implementation. Each of the colleges has been asked to review these suggestions and report back on 1) how they would implement them if they not already in place and 2) how they might compliment services already offered. Not every initiative is practical or necessary at every college; for example, a designated student veteran lounge at Washington County Community College in Calais would not be prudent as there are currently few students receiving veteran's benefits at WCCC.

1. *Continued training and education* - Provide on-going training using the Military 101 training video to all full/part-time faculty and staff.
2. *Early class registration* – Consider the development of early class registration that could be accessed by student veterans.
3. *Student veteran lounges and clubs* – Provide as possible space for student veterans on campus and support the establishment of veteran clubs.
4. *Student veteran navigators* – Ensure each campus has access to student navigators specifically trained to provide services to the veteran population.
5. *Veterans' check list* – MCCS will develop a compressive check list that student veterans can use as they navigate the enrollment, financial and registration process at each

campus. Each college will modify this template for their individual campus use.

6. *Veteran focused orientation* – Develop a veteran focused component to student orientation programs. As part of the orientation process, each college should work with student veterans to develop a long-range academic success plan.
7. *Veteran focused web link* – Each college will add content to its web pages geared towards veterans’ needs and interests.
8. *Promotional material* – MCCS will create and generate promotional materials for each college to use that can be distributed throughout the campus identifying each campus’ certifying official, location of veteran lounge where applicable, veteran-centered events, etc.
9. *Identification of veterans* – After consultation with the Maine Army National Guard, MCCS is encouraging all seven colleges to provide an opportunity on each college’s application for students to voluntarily identify themselves as a veteran. Over 12% of Maine’s population has served in the military. Having an accurate count of how many veterans we are educating would help us to better meet their needs and ensure student success.