

# Veteran Support Teams Guide

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*Best Practices Committee*  
A Subcommittee of the California  
Veterans Education Opportunities Partnership  
Troops to Colleges

## Acknowledgements

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

California is home to the largest and most robust system of higher education in the nation. Recently Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger created the *Troops to College* initiative, which has challenged our colleges and universities to develop a comprehensive program of services to assist Veterans who are preparing for a rigorous and fulfilling postsecondary education. As part of this initiative, campuses are encouraged to develop a Veterans Support Team (VST) to remove unnecessary roadblocks and aid Veterans in their transition from “soldier to student.”

Veterans have access to financial assistance from the Montgomery GI Bill for educational purposes, and many have additional government-provided educational funds garnered during their service. Historically, however, only a small percentage of this unique population has taken advantage of the educational benefits they are entitled to receive. There are several compelling reasons why this may be the case. In some instances, Veterans who have served in the military have a hard time transitioning from the “iron-clad” military lifestyle to that of a higher education academic culture, which may be one reason why some Veterans are not taking full advantage of the Montgomery GI Bill.

Another roadblock is the age/experience disparity between Veterans and students coming to college right out of high school. Veterans who enter the university setting tend to be older and have a life experience that is much different than their non-military counterparts. The Veteran also has many external demands that must be met, e.g. a spouse, children, a job. Veterans often do not fit the typical profile of first-time students just out of high school. Our institutions need to be less rigid when dealing with our Veterans. We must learn to be more flexible and innovative in accommodating the Veteran who may have external demands. Without flexibility and innovation to meet their unique needs, Veterans will be less likely to enroll, and they will have a lower probability of reaching their educational goals because of unique obstacles. These men and women have paid the price of military service to obtain their Montgomery GI Bill so that they can go to school. We need to help make their educational goals a reality.

The purpose of the VST is to identify a group of dedicated professionals who can address the unique needs of our Veteran student population. The support team provides the tools that each individual Veteran needs in order to meet his/her educational goals. An energetic and knowledgeable VST will ensure that *No Veteran is Left Behind.*

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## WHO MAKES UP THE VETERANS SUPPORT TEAM

The key element to a successful Veterans Support Team is the strategic link between a wide variety of on-campus personnel and support groups and outside organizations and institutions. Each campus needs to tailor the composition of their VST to conform to the needs of their individual Veteran population. Some ideas include:

**VETERAN CERTIFYING OFFICIAL (VCO):** The VCO has the expertise to give advice to students on what benefits they are entitled to. The VCO is often the person who makes first contact with potential Veterans and is in the best position to provide information to the Veteran population.

**DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS:** The director of admissions is another key member of the support team. The director of admissions has a broader perspective on the admissions piece of this initiative and can be an immense help in getting Veterans formally accepted. For instance, the director can help with special admissions such as handling petitions from Veterans who missed application deadlines because of military service, etc.

**DIRECTOR OF OUTREACH:** The director of outreach is also a crucial part of the support team. He/she is the key to drawing potential Veterans onto our campuses. Establishing relationships with local military installations and colleges is a key to this initiative, and the director of outreach is the central figure in making this happen.

**FINANCIAL AID:** The vast majority of Veterans who use benefits also apply for financial aid. A big source of confusion for Veterans is how the financial aid process works. Having personnel from financial aid serve on the support team will allow the gap to be closed and provide Veterans with clearer policies.

**EVALUATIONS:** In order for Veterans' certifications to be processed quickly and accurately, the coursework must be verified. Fostering a relationship with evaluations will be a key to providing top-notch service to Veterans.

**SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (SSWD) OR DISABLED STUDENTS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES (DSPS):** The people at SSWD or DSPS can help foster a working relationship with our campuses' disabled Veterans. An open line of communication between the certifying official and SSWD or DSPS is crucial to a timely identification and proper handling of disabled Veteran entitlements.

**COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES:** Providing counseling services for Veterans would also include help with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). This campus counseling service is critical for returning combat Vets to help facilitate their successful transition from combat to college.

**CAMPUS STUDENT VETERAN ORGANIZATION:** Having a representative from the campus student Veteran organization will help to bridge the gap between the campus Veterans and the university or college, and will help to provide a good line of communication between both. The campus student Veteran organization will give the “student Veteran perspective” to the VST.

**COMMUNICATION OFFICE:** Working with the campus communication office will help ensure that appropriate and timely information about Veteran issues/events will be disseminated to the campus community. Also, updates to the campus Veteran website and media attention might be handled through this office.

**EXTENDED STUDIES OFFICE:** Including the campus extended studies office in the VST will help strengthen the effort to offer classes to active duty military.

**DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY SCIENCE:** Representatives from these campus departments will strengthen the VST.

**LOCAL BASE EDUCATION SERVICE OFFICERS:** A working partnership with local military base educational service officers will serve to bridge the information gap between active duty military personnel and the university or college.

**LOCAL VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS:** Partnerships with various local Veteran organizations will vary depending on location. Some ideas include the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), American Legion, military hospitals, and Veteran Centers.

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## HOW THE VST WORKS

The support team should meet on a regular basis in order to allow each member to update one another on activities in their areas of expertise. Meetings should focus on both current activities and on ways to improve the efforts to better serve Veterans. Organizing times when all participants can gather together to meet can be very challenging. It would best serve the VST to have a named chair of the group who can facilitate organizing meetings and provide outlets for information dissemination.

The ultimate goal of the support team is to develop a web of communication that allows Veterans to receive help and increase the likelihood of reaching their educational goals. The VST chairperson will need to maximize the use of email to maximize the flow of information to all the members.

Again, each campus will need to take a look at what process works best for them. The key is to develop a support team that meets YOUR campus' needs.

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## WHAT SERVICES SHOULD BE PROVIDED

The Veteran Support Team should provide quality service to the Veterans from their time of admission to the university or college until the time they graduate. The Veteran population is a diverse group—which typically bring some college units, greater maturity, global perspective, and in some cases, due to combat service, physical and/or emotional injuries. The goal is to “advantage the Veteran” in any way possible. This will be constantly evolving as each campus has specific needs. The services that are offered will be a product of what each campus support team feels they need. Some ideas of services include:

<b>Service</b>	<b>Result</b>
Help with the application process	Takes the ambiguity out of the application process and alleviates the common fears in the college application process.
Veteran Specific Orientation	Gives Veteran students a chance to come together and meet like-minded students and staff that share similar experiences
Provide Veterans with access to Services to Students with Disabilities (SSWD) or (DSPS) and Psychological counseling	Provides information and assistance to Veterans concerning issues associated with their military service.
Academic counseling	Setting up roadmap and academic plan with each Veteran will help foster success.
Periodic follow-up	The first couple of semesters are critical as this is the time that Veterans will still be unsure about their place at the university, and strong encouragement can keep them on track.

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## Outreach

A big focus of the Veteran's Initiative is to reach out to those Veterans that may either be unsure about attending college or may have never considered attending. The VST is in a great position to reach out and get those Veterans to our campuses. This is another area where individual support teams will need to design outreach models for their specific campuses. Typical ideas include:

**REGULAR BASE VISITS:** Visits to military installations are important not only to foster a relationship with ESO's but also to get the word out about our campuses.

**COORDINATION BETWEEN FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES:** Typically, a large number of our Veterans begin their postsecondary education at community colleges. We want to make sure we get those students who want to transfer prepared to transfer.

**PARTICIPATION IN ORIENTATIONS:** Orientation is a chance to see a large number of Veterans. This is a golden opportunity to get to know the Veterans and ease their transition into the university/college.

**VISITING OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS:** Becoming familiar with programs such as federal work-study (off-campus), Troops to Teachers, education fairs, Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, Veteran Centers, etc. is essential to successful outreach.