Bigger, better Veterans Success Center opens Nov. 10

Sacramento State’s expanded, refurbished Veterans Success Center in Lassen Hall is a metaphorical hornets’ nest of activity. The renowned center helps students get their GI benefits, navigate the admission process and register for courses. The center also helps them access campus resources, get involved in leadership activities and transition into the civilian work world.

A Nov. 10 grand opening will give VSC Director Jeff Weston and his staff an opportunity to showcase the center that serves about 1,350 veterans and their dependents. He’s especially grateful for benefits adviser Lindsey Wathan, a Sac State alum who served eight years in the Navy.

Vice President for Student Affairs Lori Varlotta values Sac State’s veterans. “They come to us from the military with leadership skills,” she says, “and we help transfer those skills to college and campus organizations. Then we help them prepare for a civilian career using what they have learned in the classroom and outside the classroom to pursue a satisfying career.”

The spacious new center is twice the size of the former facility. There’s a study room, several desks, chairs and a couple of flat panel televisions. The back room, which doubles as a processing center, contains a sink, cabinets, a microwave, a mini-fridge and a table where students gather for lunch.

“This is our base,” Weston says, “a place where vets can congregate, use desktop computers, kick back and generally enjoy the center’s camaraderie.”
Camaraderie is the operative word. The solid relationship between them flows from the shared experience in defending their country combined with their common objective of getting a college education.

After returning from active duty in Operation Enduring Freedom eight years ago, Weston worked part time as veterans-benefits coordinator while completing his bachelor’s degree. Two years later, the newly minted graduate was running the shop.

“I had a small cubicle inside the admissions department with a work-study assistant,” he recalls. “We barely had time to meet and greet GIs looking to get a college education while processing their paperwork, let alone do the follow-up for their successful transition.

“We hope to generate even more financial support for our program,” Weston says. “That will provide even more benefits.” A case in point is the new Recreation Therapy program for vets. Those with post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems respond to the connection they make through the program.

Janelle Adams is making it. When she first came to Sac State from the Army in 2006 the adjustment was difficult, and she redeployed to Afghanistan. Since returning to campus in 2008, she’s back on track and slated to complete her bachelor’s degree in biology. “Janelle ran last fall’s successful Veterans Diversity Awareness Conference that drew more than 150 attendees,” Weston says.

He’s no less animated about the Students Veterans Organization, which assists “our former brothers and sisters in arms” to make the most of their potential academically, socially and in the workplace. “The group has become better and better each year,” he notes. The leadership role these folks assume helps explain why so many have gone on to succeed in graduate school and get good jobs.

Ryan Roebuck is on his way. The Marine Corps vet came back from a tour in Iraq four years ago, completed his bachelor’s degree and will receive his master’s degree in public policy come spring. Working several years in the Veterans Success Center has whetted his appetite for a career in higher education.
Charles Caraway is another Marine whose Sac State education prompted him to make the most of his potential. A third-year student at McGeorge School of Law, he’s been invited to speak at the grand opening.

Destined for success is Jeff Jordan, who parlayed his superior military service record into a Scholarship for Outstanding Airman to ROTC (SOAR). Jordan was released from active duty as a staff sergeant at Travis Air Force Base in 2007 to get his degree at Sacramento State. The scholarship provides up to $18,000 per year for tuition and fees, an annual $900 textbook allowance and a monthly nontaxable stipend of $250-$500. Enrolled in Sac State’s Air Force ROTC program, Jordan has secured a pilot’s slot and will report for training once he graduates this spring and is commissioned as a second lieutenant.

The multifaceted veterans program has succeeded on several levels, most notably in retaining people. Last fall’s 93 percent retention rate makes Weston happy, but he keeps striving for the next level. “We want to expand our operation and serve even more veterans looking to make the transition from active duty to campus,” he says. “Our vets are the program’s greatest asset -- we rely on their feedback.”

For additional information about the center, contact www.csus.edu/vets. For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156.

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