Veterans Success Center delivers for those who served

Sacramento State’s vibrant Veterans Success Center has assisted hundreds of men and women who have served their nation. With Veterans Day around the corner, the spirit of giving back to those who served continues with a special inaugural event just for veterans.

The center will host its first veteran-specific career fair from 1 to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 5, at the Alumni Center (Story: http://bit.ly/1ciFxMv). And on Thursday, Nov. 7, a panel of student-veterans will discuss their concerns with California lawmakers and their staffs during a breakfast meeting.

In addition to helping veterans get their GI benefits, navigate the admission process and register for courses, the center helps student veterans access campus resources, get involved in leadership activities and transition into the civilian world.

Last summer, Sac State’s first orientation for returning veterans was geared to the needs of men and women whose unique experiences warranted special attention. Mateo Avila, Veterans Success Center admissions counselor, is especially adept at answering their questions and concerns. “I am not a veteran,” he says, “but I do have a passion for working with men and women who have served our country.”

Avila has been tracking prospective veteran transfers for several years, and center Director Jeff Weston, who served in Iraq, considers him integral to the operation. Avila does a lot of pre-admission advising, visiting community colleges to speak with vets and their dependents.

Veteran admissions start with pre-admission advising. Avila is contacted by active-duty veterans seeking advice on admissions and general education requirements. “My goal is that they use this tuition assistance to target Sac State (course) requirements, allowing to them to be that much more ahead in their degree,” he says.

Avila’s outreach assignments include the Sacramento City College Vet Center, Solano Community College (Travis AFB) and Yuba Community College (Beale
AFB). “I visit them regularly to advise transfer students, active-duty military and their dependents,” he adds. “I also visit Beale AFB and Travis AFB for yearly college fairs.”

His favorite outreach story is about advising an active-duty submariner in the coastal waters of Japan. “We could only converse via email during certain times,” he says, “depending on the sub’s location.”

Avila’s persistence personifies the connection he makes with new students as he patiently relates to them. Many of these students are coming to a large new school with precious few acquaintances, let alone friends. Avila, who has been at Sac State since 2006, exudes an emphatic understanding that connects. His mission is helping Sac State veterans secure tuition assistance so they can enroll and begin earning their degrees.

Meet some of the student veterans who have been effectively served by Sac State’s Veterans Success Center.

Joe Davis’ success in the classroom and on the school newspaper stems in part from the Veterans Success Center’s support system, which has helped him navigate financial aid requirements. “I was able to complete my certification online for the first time,” he says. That’s no small achievement for the 32-year-old, whose road to Sacramento State had been studded with speed bumps.

Davis, who was born in Oroville, moved around a great deal and quit school when he was 18, just shy of graduation. He scratched out a meager living with dead-end jobs.

“I was going to my … $7-per-hour job on Sept. 11, 2001, when I heard about the attack on the Twin Towers,” Davis recalls. That prompted him to join the Army, and he was sent to Fort Jackson, S.C., for basic training. Enthusiastically responding to the structure and discipline of military life, Davis excelled. His tours of duty included service as an Honor Guard for burials. “That’s a sobering experience I’ll never forget,” he says. Soon thereafter, his rocket-launch unit was deployed to Iraq, where he routinely came under fire.

“I feel so fortunate to have made it back and got my life back on track,” Davis says. After completing his associate degree, he gained admittance to Sac State in fall 2012.

“Receiving that letter of acceptance from Sacramento State was surreal,” he says. “I feel like part of an extended family. The vets center can put you on the right path, but it’s up to you to succeed.”

Davis certainly has made his mark on campus thus far. The committed vet carried 16 units, compiled a 3.0 grade-point average and was such a prolific reporter for the State Hornet that he was promoted to editor. “I look forward to mentoring younger reporters,” he says, “because of the guidance I’ve received thus far.”
Given the rough and winding road Davis has traveled to get to Sac State, his credo is, “Never take anything for granted and be grateful for what you have.” He’s especially grateful to the Veterans Success Center for paving the way for him to be the first in his family to earn a college degree.

**Arianna Raymundo** is hardly your typical Sacramento State civil engineering graduate student.

Once she completes her master’s thesis and receives her degree in 2014, she will have worked more than six years with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE). Factor in a nine-month deployment to forward operating bases (FOBs) in Afghanistan, where she helped oversee several construction projects with Afghan contractors, and Raymundo’s professional résumé is all the more impressive.

She spent six months at Forward Operating Base Fenty in northeastern Afghanistan, then finished her tour at FOB Gamberi, which is near the Pakistani border. At both bases she was under fire and compelled to take cover in a bunker. “You soon learned the difference in sounds between mortar rounds and rockets,” she says. “One day a suicide bomber tried to breach the base’s entry gate.”

Raymundo’s modest recollections of being in a combat zone bespeak someone who was committed to her assignment. In fact, she says, she would return to Afghanistan if not for her current project: She is materials engineer at the Joint Federal Project at Folsom Dam, where the ACE is building a spillway control structure next to the dam. Completion is scheduled for 2017.

Despite a heavy work schedule, she’s determined to complete her thesis in the next several months under the direction of Professor Cyrus Aryani. “He’s my graduate adviser and I had classes with him while earning my B.S. in 2007.”

That same year she so impressed an ACE recruiter during a campus job fair that she earned an interview with the Corps’ geotechnical branch. She began work at the downtown district office two months later and rotated through several sections in the district. She worked eight months on the Folsom Lake Crossing and assisted with levee inspections.

In the fall of 2009 she was assigned to soil design and began her graduate studies at Sac State. The following year she opted for military projects and her responsibilities included design and construction work at the Defense Language
Institute at the Presidio of Monterey, Hill Air Force Base in Utah, Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada and a U.S. Border Patrol headquarters near San Diego. “I worked on these projects from our Sacramento office,” she says.

In 2011 she expressed an interest in deploying to Afghanistan; she was deployed July 29, 2012.

Although Raymundo returned to Sacramento in late April, she misses the work in Afghanistan. Fully prepared for the cultural differences in a country where women are considered subordinate to men, she was required to have a male counterpart whenever she dealt with Afghan contractors. Even so, she enjoyed her experiences overseas, finding them even more exciting than she expected, and welcomes the opportunity to go abroad once the Folsom project is completed.

Sean Johnson was determined to serve his country after the Twin Towers were brought down on Sept. 11, 2001. The 19-year-old joined the U.S. Coast Guard that fateful day, and during his nine years of active duty, he gained valuable experience dealing with all manner of situations.

Johnson’s determination to make the most of his potential prompted him to leave the service and apply to Sacramento State in 2010 under the newly created Veteran Admissions Program. “I put together a package of writing and recommendations and was fortunate enough to land one of the 10 slots,” he says.

It has been full speed ahead for him since, and he’s on track to graduate next spring. “I’m taking 18 units this semester, with a concentration on public relations,” he says. Johnson also is aiming for the honor roll, which will be a challenge since he’s beginning his second year as president of Sac State’s Student Veterans Organization (SVO).

His busy schedule includes organizing a major fundraiser for this spring that will feature an SVO campus-based barbeque. The goal of “Operation: Student Empowerment” is to earn enough money to help defray college costs that are not covered by the G.I. Bill.

“I’ve had some experience as a cook in the Coast Guard, organizing successful events,” he says. Factor in his facility for leadership, and the chances are that he will succeed.

Jeff Weston, director of the Veterans Success Center, is sold on him. “Sean has been an amazing asset to the center,” Weston says. “He has the ability to rally veterans and non-veterans alike around the single purpose of helping veterans.”

Johnson grew up on a ranch in Lake County and recalls being an indifferent student. “My mother graduated from college and began teaching high school English just after I earned my diploma,” he says. It took him several years to get in gear, but he
had an affinity for writing that flows from his mother. “She went over my papers, correcting mistakes, and I learned how to express myself,” he says.

Those skills made him a natural fit for communication studies and a public relations major. “My father is a career Merchant Marine and was hoping that I would follow his lead,” Johnson says. “But he’s proud that I’ve succeeded in college, and my mom is poised to photograph my commencement.”

Sacramento State was Johnson’s first choice of schools, and he’s determined to parlay his degree into a public-relations career that will continue to make the most of his considerable potential.

Sacramento State senior **Wanessa Franklin** is preparing for takeoff.

The 26-year-old is scheduled to graduate this spring with a major in organizational communications. She also will be commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Force, courtesy of Sac State’s AFROTC program.

“I’m interested in intelligence,” Franklin says, but she’s particularly mindful that the needs of the Air Force take precedence in personnel assignments. That’s because she served on active duty at Beale Air Force Base near Marysville before enrolling at Sac State in 2010.

Four years ago, Senior Airman Franklin’s Air Force specialty was communications and information technology. She was selected among many applicants for the prestigious Scholarship for Outstanding Airman, which prompted her release from active duty to earn a degree at Sacramento State.

Franklin is especially grateful for her wing commander’s recommendation, which helped secure the scholarship. She’s no less appreciative of guidance from Weston, the Veterans Success Center director.

“I got off to a rough start because of a scheduling mishap, and that stemmed from my not touching base with the center for advice when I enrolled,” she says. Weston’s guidance helped get her back on track, and she has compiled a 3.5 grade-point average.

Cadet Major Franklin has provided the enlisted person’s perspective to her classmates, which she believes will help them become better officers. “It’s important that they understand the value of enlisted men and women in carrying out the mission,”
she says. "I was a month shy of taking the sergeants’ exam but decided to pursue a college degree and a career as an Air Force officer. I have yet to look back and have any regrets."

"Wanessa is the perfect example of what veterans bring to campus," says Weston. "She is smart, poised and a natural leader. Sac State is very lucky to have her as a student, and she will make a wonderful officer."

Lt. Col. Jennifer Stokes, commander of AFROTC Detachment 088, agrees. "Cadet Franklin displays all the qualities the Air Force is looking for in our future officers. She is a natural leader and sets the example for all other cadets to follow. She seizes every opportunity to lead and mentor the Cadet Wing while excelling in her academics and keeping them a priority. She will make an outstanding Air Force officer, and I look forward to serving with her."

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156. – Alan Miller

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