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Sac State’s veteran-specific courses pay dividends

While several universities around the country offer veteran-specific classes, none provides Sacramento State’s unique mentoring component.

RPTA 122: Perspectives on Leisure, is part of Sac State’s Veterans Leadership and Mentorship program. The two-semester program consists of three units of credit given during the first semester that can be used to fulfill the upper-division writing-intensive course requirement for all Sac State students. The non-credit second class focuses on leadership, program and event planning, and provides student mentors with a stipend.

Events may include outdoor group activities that prompt students to “appreciate the importance of leisure in one’s life” while enjoying themselves in a recreational setting, such as whitewater rafting, hiking and wall climbing. The outings also promote cohesion and self-reflection, which can hone leadership skills.

Professor Beth Erickson calls the writing-intensive class she conducts solely for military veterans “the most amazing course I’ve taught in 13 years.” Her students, many of whom have signed up for a second semester, readily agree.

Erickson, who comes from the Department of Recreation & Parks and Tourism, (RPTA), crafted the course several years ago in response to a veteran who was taking one of her classes. “I couldn’t understand why this ‘A’ student began to fail,” she says. After speaking with him, she realized that he needed help to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder. With the aid of Jeff Weston, head of Sac State’s Veterans Success Center, she had the student admitted to a VA hospital, where he was able to receive counseling. He since has earned his degree in RPTA.

That experience prompted Erickson, Weston and Ryan Roebuck, a veterans benefit advisor, to create specific courses that would complement the center’s basic mission of helping veterans make the successful transition from active duty to campus life.

In addition to helping veterans get their GI benefits, navigate the admission process and register for courses, the center’s overarching goal is help student veterans access campus resources, get involved in leadership activities and transition into the
civilian world. What better way to achieve this than by creating a specific course that enables veterans to hone their writing skills by sharing their unique experiences?

That sharing is the crux of RPTA 122, which Erickson says provides a forum for students to re-create that buddy-system connection they may have left but never forsaken. The atmosphere that pervades the class is not unlike the platoon structure wherein members look out for one another. Student Sean Johnson agrees: “In the military, the focus is on the mission. In Professor Erickson’s class, we get to examine ourselves.”

“I have learned so much from them,” Erickson marvels. “My objective is to help them translate the training and leadership they learned in the service into measurable civilian skills.”

That translation begins with letting them write about their experiences and then relate their combat experience to their résumés. She coordinates with the campus Career Center to help them bridge the gap with prospective employers.

Weston is no less enthused about what he considers “the most exciting program innovation” during his nine years at Sac State. “Beth is thoroughly committed to these veterans, and the program and student feedback has been uniformly positive,” he says, adding that this unique class epitomizes “the essence of the camaraderie we are striving to build.”

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-2776. – Alan Miller

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