



Assessing Veteran Services and Success in Higher Education: Cal Poly Pomona's Veterans Resource Center Case Study

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study tests if the services of the Veterans Resource Center meet the needs of veterans and if these services contribute to veteran success. Using a survey of 130+ student veterans, the study determined that services are accessed and utilized. However, while services contribute to immediate needs, few are related to long-term success. Services that do contribute to long-term success were the Veterans Resource Center, VA benefits certification, library, career, and counseling. Higher success scores are associated with the use and efficiency of these services as assessed by veterans. Equally important is what is missing. There is no statistical relationship between demographic factors (e.g., gender, race) and success. In addition, the unwillingness of veterans to conceal their veteran status from faculty and staff is also absent.

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Governor Gavin Newsom, in mid-March of 2020, signed an executive order to curb the spread of COVID-19. The California State University system transitioned to remote learning and support services for students, faculty, and staff. Cal Poly Pomona's (CPP) Veterans Resource Center (VRC), which was established in 2012, also transitioned to online services.

In a matter of 1 day, CPP's VRC went virtual. The VRC is a department within the Division of Student Affairs that is comprised of three professional staff members and 10 military-affiliated student employees. They implemented weekly virtual drop-in hours, movie nights, outreach events, and cooking workshops. They partnered with Congressman Gil Cisneros and Congresswoman Norma Torres, to congratulate the graduating class of 2020 with a video reminding them of the importance of giving back to their fellow veterans and remaining connected to CPP.

In the summer of 2020, VRC, in collaboration with orientation services, hosted remote-orientation sessions to provide incoming military-affiliated students with the necessary information they need to use their VA educational benefits and to showcase CPP's veteran services. During the fall semester, the VRC hosted a series of virtual career-readiness workshops, such as its annual "Future Forward," which provided information on entrepreneurship, employment, education, and veteran resources (Katayama & Azpeitia, 2020). It also celebrated Veterans Day and the US Marine Corps Birthday. Most notably, it showcased the CPP veteran and dependent story with a performance reading of its very own original play, *Here & There*, written by Paula Weston Solano and Bernardo Solano.

CPP's VRC demonstrated capacity, resilience, and commitment to serve military-affiliated students with the support needed to successfully complete an undergraduate or graduate degree.

In 2020, CPP's VRC appeared to be what every administrator strives for: an effective, efficient, and flexible operation to serve an intended target population, by creating innovative means to keep services available and viable despite obstacles.

This was far from where the university's administrators were in 2009. At that time, the university had a Veteran Services Initiative comprised of top administrators including the vice president for student affairs, the provost and vice president of academic affairs, and college deans, among others. Veteran services were defined as providing in-person and online information to veterans that was sufficient to promote application and admission to CPP's academic programs. In 2009, a Master of Public Administration student elected to evaluate CPP's veteran services from the student veteran perspective.

The 2010–2011 study indicated that most student veteran participants were not aware of CPP's veteran services and that these services were generally not used. The services that were used were not particularly helpful to veterans. Veterans faced numerous difficulties. These included transitioning to life at CPP; getting academic credit for military courses and service; having a supportive campus climate; getting a fair assessment of military training/experience; getting consistent and accurate information about requirements, policies, and opportunities; and receiving the support services needed for unique challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many student veterans felt alienated from the campus and from fellow students. Specifically, they did not want faculty or staff to know of their veteran status. They relied on fellow veterans and a few faculty members for key information about navigating the complex environment of curriculum, financial aid, university policies, and external resources. Student veterans attended CPP, but they were not connected and engaged on campus (Azpeitia, 2011).

In 2011, the university received the Kellogg Legacy Project Endowment. Some of these funds were invested in academic and student support services to strengthen student success. An application for a veteran support program was submitted and rejected. At the time, there was no institutional mechanism for implementing the proposed center and there was no long-term funding source. However, the weakness of the university's approach was difficult to ignore. The CPP's ombudsman was requested to revisit the university's approach to veteran services. In 2012, enrollment management and services initiated a part-time position to provide support for veteran services. In addition, a small office was designated outside of the registrar's office to serve as the veterans resource center (VRC), where student veterans could connect with peers and CPP staff about any issue of concern. Based on student veteran input, the VRC integrated new programs, policies, and resources into its strategy and practices.

In 2016, after 3 years of operation, a new evaluation survey was initiated and provided to CPP's administrators on the state of veteran services (Tablante, 2016). The new survey suggested veterans were aware of services, which they used and generally found helpful. Veterans found support among staff and faculty members, but they were not integrated into the programs and policies of the CPP campus.

In 2019, the university built a new state-of-the-art student services center that included financial aid, advising, admission services, the president's and provost's offices, student affairs, and an enlarged VRC. The visibility and scope of the VRC was given a permanent and

acknowledged presence on the CPP campus. Another 3 years had elapsed since the VRC's last evaluation, and it was again time to evaluate what progress, if any, the VRC had made in meeting the needs and demands of veterans on campus.

The VRC study was completed by spring of 2019 and was presented to the university's president and administrative staff in June 2019. Our decision to take the data and explore how services might contribute to the long-term success of veterans arose out of the novel challenges and demands brought on by the COVID pandemic. This study had two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The university's VRC has met the needs of its student veterans.

Hypothesis 2: CPP's services has promoted the successful completion of graduate and undergraduate studies.

These hypotheses represent the administrator's dual agenda. The first agenda is to understand, design, and employ resources and promote activities that the client wants. If the administrator provides these services, then logically, it follows that the target population will recognize, use, and benefit from the services, at least from the perspective of the client. The second hypothesis is institutional. The services provided enable the institution to realize its objective of enabling student veterans to complete their degrees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a wealth of research on veterans in higher education. For this study, there were three themes of interest. The first was the diversity among veterans in terms of their identity and circumstances. This diversity gave rise to the second theme, which covers the diversity of needs institutions were asked to address in providing veteran services. The final theme was the degree to which campuses were "veteran friendly" and were seen by student veterans as flexible and accepting of veterans' concerns.

The stakes have been high for both the student veteran and the institution. Veterans have sought a degree as a steppingstone to access the jobs and opportunities not otherwise available to them. Higher education provided veterans with a resiliency and a capacity to manage their careers in turbulent labor markets. Universities looked to expanding enrollments of students to be able to bear the burden of tuition, fees, and living expenses. The inability to make progress toward the degree has meant the veteran lost out on job opportunities. Furthermore, the failure

of institutions to promote progress of veterans toward graduation meant the loss of federal and state funds (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Fouad & Ghosh, 2018; Geiger, 2015; Vick & Fontanella, 2017).

TODAY'S VETERAN

Dillard and Yu (2016) and Hammond (2017) reported that veterans using the GI Bill were U.S. citizens, males, and full-time students. Today's veterans are more diverse. According to Molina and Morse (2017), about one third of National Guard members and reservists were undergraduate females. In addition, they found that about 48% of active-duty service members and 47% of reservists were ethnic minorities.

Hammond (2017) identified that an increased number of service members survived their war injuries and returned home. Such injuries caused significant trauma to their bodies and/or to their mental health. A study conducted by Graf et al. (2015) found that about two thirds of student veterans reported having physical and emotional difficulties in the classroom.

As for citizenship status, López et al. (2016) recognized that one of every 20 recruits were noncitizens. They also stated that 3,400,000 students enrolled in higher education were not naturalized citizens. They found that students with such mixed identities may experience cultural and political isolation.

With regards to employment, Molina and Morse (2017) stated that about 42% of veterans were employed full-time after leaving the service. It was also reported that veterans that were not employed made higher education their full-time job.

Research into veteran services reflected the challenge of the dissimilarity among veterans. To study a homogenous group, López et al. (2016) suggested that researchers focus on veteran subgroups such as men, women, minorities, those with PTSD, etc.

TODAY'S VETERANS' NEEDS

Osborne (2014) found that military service and educational benefits offered higher education opportunities for many who would not otherwise have access to college or university resources. Many who volunteered for military service did so for the benefits that enabled them to attend college (Kraus and Rattray 2018, Mendoza 2016). Wang et al. (2012) found that educational benefits did *level the playing field* by providing financial resources for veterans, but it did not alter the inequality and disparity in education found in wealthier and whiter communities versus communities that were poor, minority, and immigrant. Consequently, while some veteran subgroups required few support services, others needed extensive support.

Adjusting to the college environment may be difficult for student veterans. Researchers De La Garza et al. (2016) encouraged college administrators to recognize that some student veterans may have spent years away from the classroom environment. This time away made them feel ill-prepared for their post-secondary studies. For instance, Oberweis and Bradford (2017) reported that student veterans in their study expressed a strong need for academic counseling. Killam and Degges-White (2018) noted that the academic challenges that student veterans experienced may be related to the differences between the academic and military environments. They stated that learning and teaching in higher education is less regimented and constrained than in the military.

Kraus and Rattray (2013) identified a complex relationship between disability and veteran status. They reported that out of 2,000,000 student veterans enrolled in higher education, a quarter have some type of disability (i.e., physical, mental, or both) and that they were twice as likely as civilian students to have at least one disability. For Hammond (2017), mental health was a potential obstacle for student veteran success on college campuses; whereas Graf et al. (2015) were able to observe the dilemma that student veterans experienced when contemplating disclosure of a physical or mental disability due to the associated stigma and potential for discrimination.

Navigating campus processes, understanding university requirements, and accessing support services were other higher education concerns that Oberweis and Bradford (2017) and Dillard and Yu (2016) reported that student veterans struggled with. Higher education institutions needed to invest in the development of support services that meet the academic needs of this student population.

Although adjusting to academia's culture, processes, and requirements were issues that also impact civilian students (e.g., first-generation); student veterans, as noted by Killam and Degges-White (2018), were more likely to be reluctant to seek assistance or ask for help from faculty, staff, or fellow students. They also found that student veterans typically enrolled in colleges near their military discharge location, rather than in their hometowns, where they may have had connections with persons and programs that assist youth in applying for and adapting to college.

In order to best serve student veterans in higher education, Wilson et al. (2016) and Kraus and Rattray (2013) recommended a flexible and holistic approach, particularly towards supporting student veterans' unique needs of: transferring credits, getting VA assistance, maintaining well-being, reaching employers, gaining confidence and readiness for college courses, and getting assistance for family members/dependents when needed.

VETERAN FRIENDLY CAMPUS

A college that understood and worked with veterans on addressing their needs has been defined as "veteran friendly." Dillard and Yu (2016) noted that some of the elements of "veteran friendly" campus include a designated space for veterans. In a study conducted by Oberweis and Bradford (2017), they found that veterans sought opportunities to help fellow veterans and had a desire to access specialized support (e.g., medical and mental health services). Osborne's (2014) study of the gap between the military and civilian cultures on campus indicated that veterans were most concerned that their status as "veteran" was understood as ill-prepared for college and dangerous, rather than as someone disciplined, resilient, and mature. "Veteran-friendly" campuses, Osborne (2014) suggested, needed to hold recognition ceremonies to acknowledge the veteran's service to the larger community.

As for enrollment, Hitt et al. (2015) identified that awarding academic credit for military training and the ability to waive reapplication requirements following a deployment were best practices that assisted student veterans. In addition, De La Garza et al. (2016) reported that veterans were interested in improving their readiness for college coursework. Furthermore, Wilson et al. (2016) identified the value of supporting student veterans in adapting to the college-community's culture and in securing services for family members and dependents when needed.

According to Killam and Degges-White (2018), veterans wanted a source that offers correct and complete information on concerns unique to them, but they did not define a "veteran-friendly" campus as one that provided all services and addressed all needs. A "veteran -friendly" campus was not necessarily a campus that accredited all military courses but had a transparent and clear process for getting military service and courses accredited.

LITERATURE SUMMARY

Recent literature on veterans in higher education has suggested there is greater diversity among today's veterans and that consequently, support services have diversified as well. Campuses that have sought to be "veteran friendly" have been those that have acknowledged differences and risen to the challenge to assure equity for all and customized efforts when needed.

METHODOLOGY

The VRC maintained a student database for CPP students that self-identify as veterans and/or military service

members. This database identified the student and their university email address. There were 453 student veterans that were enrolled in 2018–2019; all were invited to participate in the VRC survey. The VRC maintained a log of students accessing the center in-person, by phone, and by computer. In 2018–2019, the Center served 66.7% of all veterans on campus. There were also veteran dependents on campus of which 38% received services (in 2018–2019). Dependents were more like the traditional, civilian college student.

Outreach to veterans to participate in the survey was made primarily via email and in-person requests to veterans visiting the VRC. While appeals to participate were made by the VRC, the survey itself was completed by the participant using an online university survey system separate from the VRC or university administration. There was neither a mechanism to track which respondents answered a given question, nor a means for knowing which of the 453 persons actually elected to complete the survey. In all, 126 persons participated. Each participants' identity and confidentiality was maintained.

The survey had several distinct sections.

1. Success indicators included questions regarding the respondent's GPA, anticipated date of graduation, and assessment of preparedness for a career as well as the transition to home and family life as a civilian.
2. Respondents were asked to assess the usage and effectiveness of university programs such as orientation, financial aid, student services, and mentoring.
3. Respondents evaluated their experiences with academic credit for military training and service, VA certification, and VRC support.
4. Awareness and usage of related university services such as library, career center, learning resource center, counseling, student health services, disability resource center, and the children's center was also assessed.

The online survey was sent and collected in spring semester (January–March) 2019.

The strength of this approach was that it was easy and convenient for participants. Participants simply used a link provided in the email from the VRC to access the online survey. Participants were able to complete the survey within 15–20 minutes. If needed, they were able to complete part of the survey and come back to the link and complete the remaining questions, as time permitted. Participation in the study was anonymous and confidential. The VRC received an Excel spreadsheet of the data, but none of the data identified the respondent. The survey questions were drawn from prior veteran studies at CPP and from the

works of scholars in the field. There were opportunities in the survey instrument for respondents to provide any input they deemed relevant in open-ended questions. The cost of this research was minimal to the VRC.

The weakness of this approach was two-fold. The survey instrument was inflexible, and the researchers were not able to probe answers for greater understanding of the respondent's perspective. While open-ended responses were available, participants used this option infrequently and wrote cryptic replies. The focus of the survey instrument was to assess the VRC, its services, and ancillary university services. Use of other methods or additional survey questions concerning veteran health, family needs, and career were not included in our research due to the reliance on the assessment data collected in 2019.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

The typical respondent was a 26–36-year-old (62%), male (80%), and Hispanic (40%). Other ethnic groups included Asian (25%) and White (20%) ethnicities. The respondent was typically single (53%) and a full-time student (92%) with no children (67%). The data suggested the respondent served in the Army (33%). Other branches represented in the survey included the Marine Corps (30%) and the Navy (25%). Service in the military had been for less than 5 years (49%) or up to 10 years (39%). Half of the respondents (50%) had a disability and 48% of these disabilities were combat related. Most respondents (73%) had been active duty, and some were still active duty/reservist. Only 11% reported being solely a reservist.

Respondents generally were admitted as transfers (87%) and either did not work at all (45%) or worked part-time (37%). Respondents were primarily enrolled in the College of Engineering (29%) followed by the College of Business Administration (26%) and the College of Letters Arts and Social Sciences (23%). The respondent had a 2.6–3.0 GPA (39%), a 3.1–3.5 (29%), or higher (21%), and anticipated completing college in less than 4 years (51.5%).

SUCCESS

Surveys are a longstanding approach for assessing the correlation between academic services and veteran issues such as alienation (Killiam & Degges-White, 2018; Oberweis & Bradford, 2017), mental and physical health (De La Garza et al., 2016; López et al., 2016), and adaptation to classroom activities (Mendoza, 2016), to name a few. The focus has been on how well services fit the institution's agenda. In part, we kept this approach. However, we expanded results to include veterans' confidence beyond the university experience. For example, how well did the veteran's services and experiences translate into faith in pursuing a chosen career, shaping one's role as a civilian,

and having a happy home and family life? Beyond classes, advising, lectures, exams, and papers, were veterans ready for the range of challenges they would face after college?

To answer these questions, we asked three Likert-scaled questions: did respondents agree or not that they were well prepared for their chosen career, to participate fully in civilian life, and to have a happy home and family life? Each question had a high score of strongly agreed (5) and were added together along with categorical scores for GPA and years to completing degree (with a high score of 4). The top score for this definition of success was 24. Survey data was used to test two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: The university's VRC has met the needs of its student veterans.

Hypothesis 2: CPP's services have promoted the successful completion of graduate and undergraduate studies.

SERVICES USED AND ASSESSMENT

Data suggested that respondents were aware of services and resources at CPP and held these services in high regard. A summary of these findings is found below in **Table 1**.

Respondents were asked to assess related services, such as the library and career center, on a scale of 0–5, with zero meaning that they disagreed that services were beneficial and a score of five meaning that they strongly agreed that services were beneficial. **Table 2** summarizes veterans' views.

COMPUTING SUCCESS FOR THE VETERAN AND INSTITUTION

The responses to the questions on career readiness, civilian life, home and family life, GPA, and years to degree

completion were summed up to compute a new variable, *success*, which is defined above. The range for the 126 respondents was from 11 to the maximum of 24. The distribution is below in **Figure 1**.

The norm for CPP veterans in 2019 was success of 20 (median) and was skewed. Two thirds of responding veterans scored from 16.11–22. The data was then used to

SERVICE CATEGORY	ACCESSED	ASSESSMENT
Orientation	Yes	Easy, informative, and useful (79.1 %)
Financial aid	Yes	Useful, but 19% of respondents had financial aid issues (M = 4, satisfied)
Student services	Yes	Most important to veterans was VA certification and VRC staff (M = 2, rarely had issues)
Related university	Yes	See Table 2 below

Table 1 Use and Assessment of Services by Veterans.

RESOURCE	MEAN (N)	MEDIAN
Library	4.42 (130)	5 (strongly agree)
Career center	3.95 (110)	4 (agree)
Learning resource center	3.94 (109)	4 (agree)
Counseling	3.92 (114)	4 (agree)
Student health	3.86 (109)	4 (agree)
Disability resource center	3.68 (78)	4 (agree)
Children's center	3.00 (50)	3 (undecided)

Table 2 Veteran's Views of Auxiliary CPP Services.

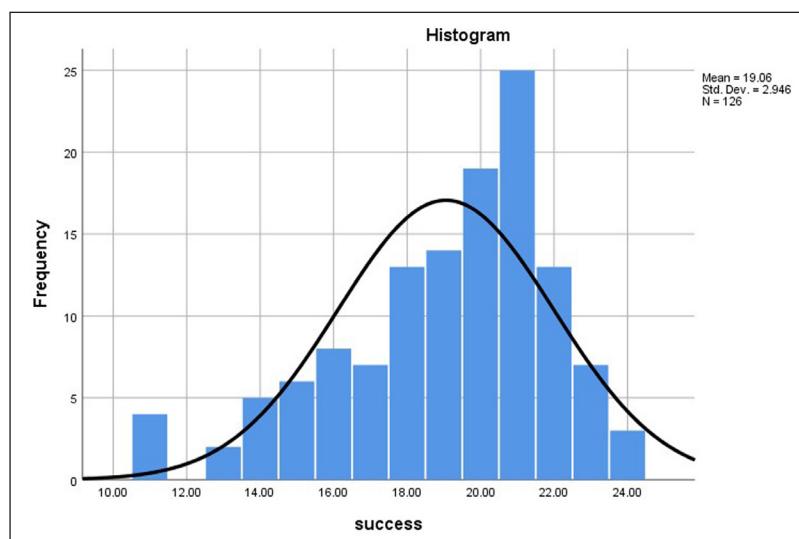


Figure 1 Distribution of Success: Sum of GPA.; Time; and Preparedness for Career, Civilian, and Home Life.

test the hypothesis that success is related to gender, race, age, college, etc., using t tests and ANOVAs. Demographic factors were not statistically significantly related to success.

CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS

What factors contributed to *success*? This study examined four factors: orientation, financial aid, student services, and mentoring. Each is described in **Figure 2** below and each then correlated to veteran *success*.

ORIENTATION

Prior to the VRC, there was a campus visit/orientation session. Veterans reported the session had little utility and therefore, that veterans wanted an “adult” orientation.

Today, veterans may choose (a) to come to an orientation session on campus, (b) to use an online orientation, or (c) to use both. The data indicates that 47.45% use both.

Veterans (75%) found the admissions process easy and highly informative, (79%). Many also indicated it enabled them to be well prepared for their first term at CPP (61.6%). The mode of orientation was unrelated to whether veterans found admissions easy or informative. However, it was a significant fact (Chi, $p = 0.037$) with regard to how well-prepared veterans were for their first quarter/semester at CPP. The on-campus orientation and the online orientation were equally valuable in preparing veterans for their first term at CPP. However, utilization of both modes (43.52%) made a significant difference to veterans (See **Figure 3** below).

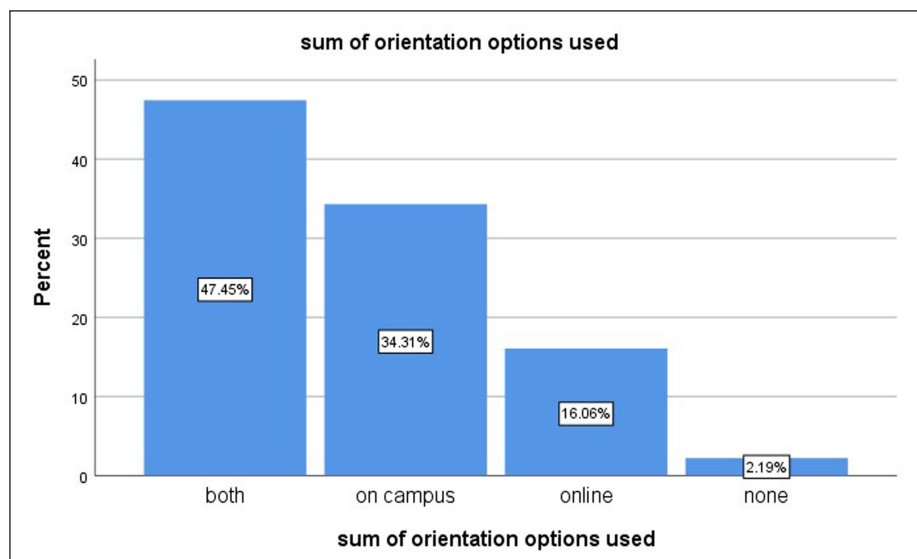


Figure 2 Orientation.

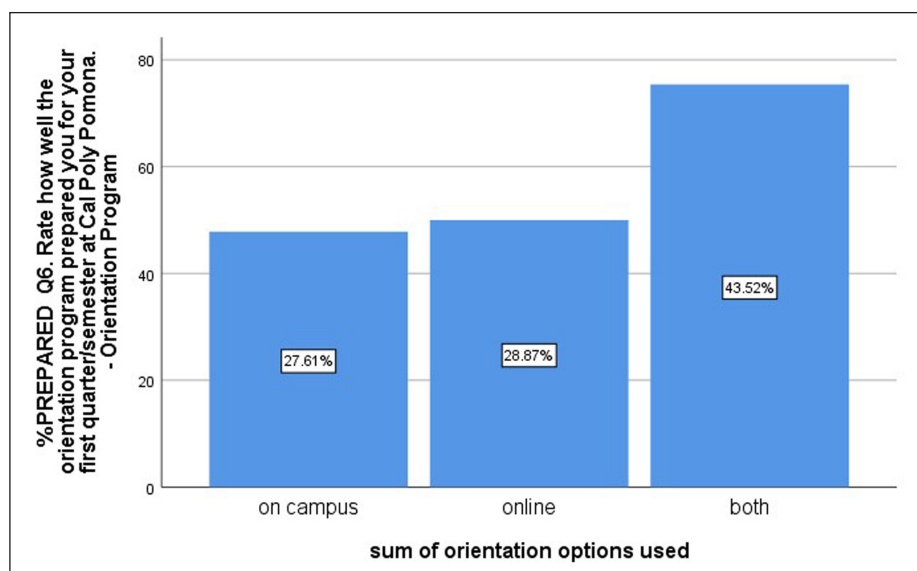


Figure 3 Orientation Options and Being Prepared for First Term.

Orientation, per se, was unrelated to long-term veteran success. Orientation's greatest influence is its immediate value to support veteran adjustment in the first term.

FINANCIAL AID

Prior to the VRC, financial aid and securing the funds earned from military service was a major challenge for CPP veterans. Today, according to our survey findings, veterans (65.7%) typically have financial aid during the academic year and 80% apply for Federal Student Aid. Only 19.4% reported issues getting their VA educational benefits and most (67.6%) found getting the aid is easy at CPP. Financial aid was not a factor in veteran success. It fills an immediate need.

STUDENT SERVICES

There were a wide range of services available to veterans including: (a) getting academic credit for military training and service, (b) transferring college course work earned elsewhere, (c) getting VA certification, (d) utilizing programs provided by the VRC, and (e) utilizing the disability resource center, children's center, learning resources, student health, career center, and the CPP library.

Getting Academic Credit. Student veterans (93.3%) were aware that they are eligible for academic credit for their military service and 57% received academic credit at CPP. The majority (69%) found getting credit was easy, 21.7% were undecided, and 9.4% found the process difficult.

Transferring College Coursework Earned Elsewhere. Nearly 86% of veterans transferred academic credit earned elsewhere to their programs at CPP. Most (67.8%) found

transferring credit was easy. Getting academic credit for work completed elsewhere had been the major obstacle for veterans prior to the VRC. However, today most get credit and find the process easy.

Using VA Educational Benefits. Among CPP veterans, 84% are using VA educational benefits. The US Department of Veterans Affairs Chapter 33 (53.5%) and Chapter 31 (34.2%) are the most prevalent programs at CPP. Overwhelmingly, veterans (92.0%) are satisfied with the process and the timeliness of the processing of VA benefits certification.

Certification of VA benefits have an impact on veteran success. Veterans with the lowest success scores (at 12.5) are those dissatisfied with the processing of VA Benefits. As satisfaction rises the success median scores rise too (See **Figure 4** below). The relationship between satisfaction with VRC services, especially the certification of VA benefits, and a participant's success score was significant (ANOVA, $p = 0.003$). Using Tukey's post hoc test, success significance was strongest between those who were satisfied with VRC/VA certification services and had high success scores, and those who were dissatisfied and had low success score.

Further analysis of VA benefits was not feasible since the number of persons in some categories is insufficient to compute an ANOVA.

Today the VRC has a dedicated staff person to assist veterans in getting the VA support earned through military service. This has been a major contributor to veteran success.

VRC. Question 40 asked, "Is there any resource/tool at CPP that has helped you the most as a student?" Out of 152 respondents, 67 did not provide a comment, but 85

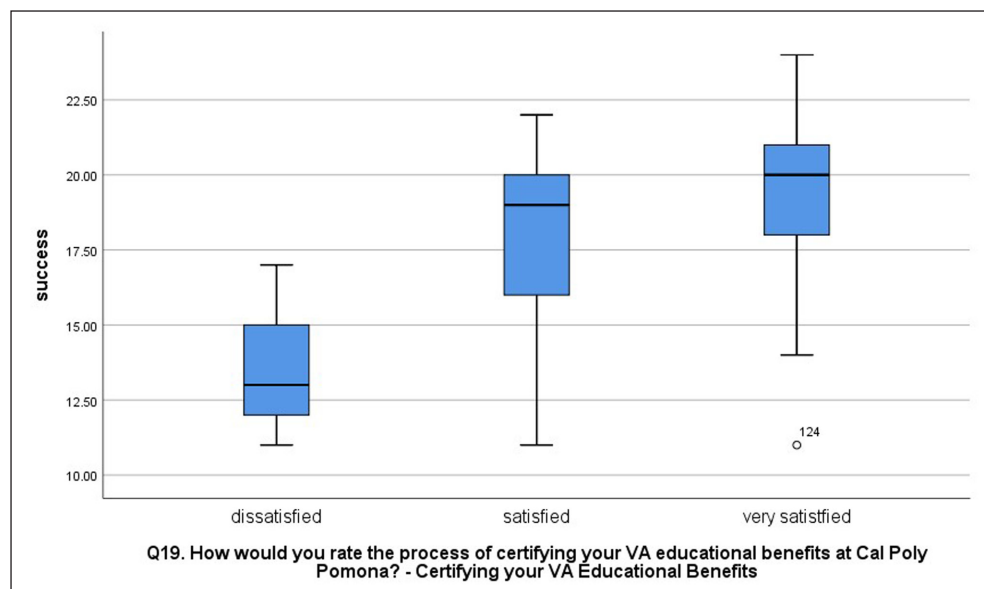


Figure 4 Relationship Between VA Certification of Benefits and Success.

participants did. The most frequent and most extensive comments were about the VRC: the staff (i.e., Elke and Kim) and the tools and programs (i.e., computers, printers, workshops, events). Veterans most valued the knowledge staff had about the campus, its programs, and the VA. More than half the comments were about the importance and relevance the VRC had for CPP veterans. Examples of comments regarding the VRC included the following:

Elke and the staff at VRC have been very helpful since day one.

I have talked to fellow veterans at other schools and have heard they sometimes do not receive benefits or sometimes they are late. I think that the certification process at Cal Poly is top notch. I feel well informed throughout the process and whenever I had a question it was answered the same day. The VRC staff is a cut above the rest in my opinion.

The resource I use the most is the VRC. It has provided me with different workshops and assistance in getting books and other materials I need for my classes.

In addition to the staff and physical space, the VRC maintained a website (infrequently used by respondents), an online benefits certification resource (used often), and a newsletter (used infrequently). Except for the online benefit certification resource, the auxiliary resources were less important to respondents than the VRC itself.

Respondents indicated that they were aware (78%) of the Veteran Club on campus. A majority of veterans (57%) attended special events on campus (Veterans Day celebration and intramural sports) and rated these events highly (63% of respondents).

Other CPP Resources. First among the auxiliary services veterans relied on was the CPP Library. Housed inside the CPP library was the learning resource center. This core resource for veterans was often seen as a library service rather than as a stand-alone resource. However, along with the library it was highly valued. The test of significance between library satisfaction and *success* was (ANOVA $df = 4$, $p = -0.026$).

The other major services for veterans were the career center and the workshops offered on resume writing, job searches, and interviewing techniques. Auxiliary services provided immediate support term by term. However, they also contributed to the student's overall *success*. Among these core services were the career center, library, and counseling services. Graphed below (see [Figure 5](#)) is the relationship between students' views of the Career Center and their self-reported *success* indicators (ANOVA $df = 4$, $p = 0.000$). Students who strongly agreed that the career center provided services they need also reported the highest norm (21) for *success*, while those who disagreed had a *success* score of about 16 (See [Figure 5](#) below).

There is a statistically significant relationship between *success* and support provided by the library and by counseling services, too. However, the sample size for some categories is insufficient to enable a clear graphic representation of the relationship.

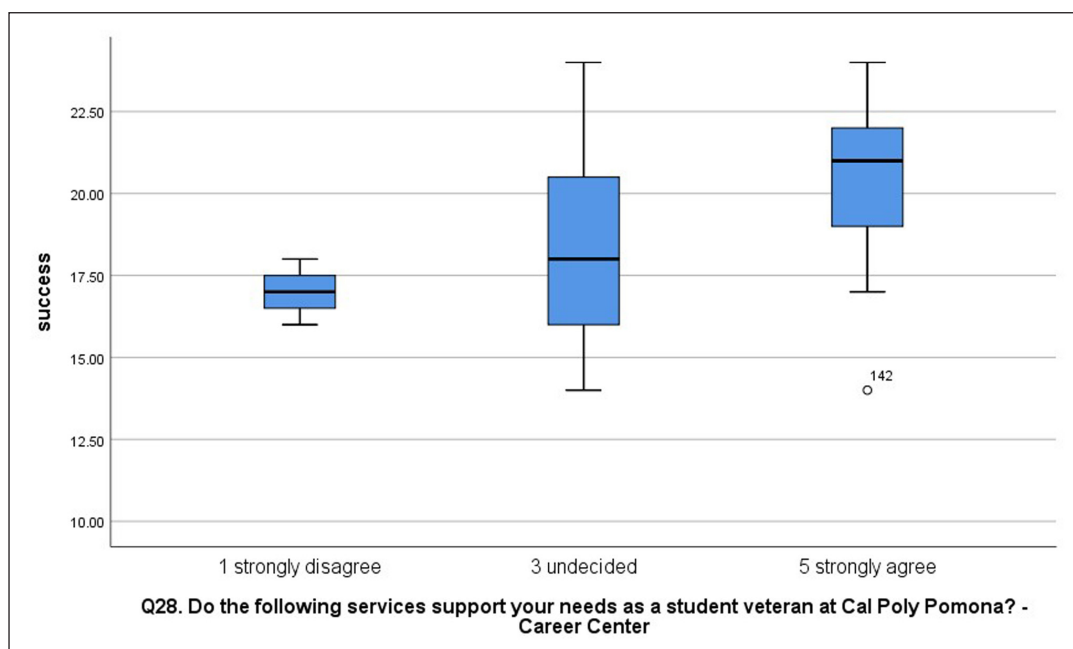


Figure 5 Services at CPP and Relative Effect on Veteran Success.

FACULTY AND STAFF

Researchers Geiger (2015), Graf, Ysasi & Marini (2015), Killam and Degges-White (2018), Mendoza (2015), and Molina and Morse (2017) found that student veterans were a significantly different group than the traditional undergraduate population. How important were relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow undergraduates were to student veterans? The survey indicated that these relationships were important to student veterans at CPP. They highly valued friendships with both faculty and staff. These friendships were nearly on a par with how they value friendship with fellow veterans. Veterans valued friendships with non-veteran undergraduates slightly less. At CPP, veterans (89%) were comfortable with faculty and staff knowing their veteran status. This has been a major shift in veteran responses since 2011. In the past, veterans were reluctant to have faculty and staff know they had veteran status (Azpeitia, 2011). Today, these relationships seem to be part of the college experience and, per se, were not a factor in veteran success.

PROVIDED AND NEEDED

As discussed above, the core resource identified by veterans as the tool/resource that has helped most has been the VRC. Also mentioned were the CPP library and services (e.g., learning resource center).

Gaps in services fell into two general categories: academic and service. Among the services veterans want/need was less-costly parking, low-cost housing, legal services, as well as longer hours, more computers, more job events at the VRC, and “in-house tutoring” rather than using the CPP learning resource center.

The second major category of comments concerned academics. Needs in this area included: an academic area mentor, education counselor/assistance with developing an academic plan, and tutoring (especially in STEM courses). The most frequently mentioned factor among the open-ended responses was a need for tutors.

Veterans were asked if they would be interested in being a mentor or in being mentored by a fellow veteran. In both cases less than half of respondents were interested. Veterans with disabilities were significantly uninterested in being mentored by fellow veterans. The need among veterans was for tutoring or academic area support. For this support, veterans needed faculty, department tutors, and/or discipline-specific advisors.

CONCLUSIONS

The study defines *success* as a combination of the veteran’s GPA and timely graduation as well as readiness for a

profession, civilian life, and for home and family. *Success* scores at CPP are skewed; the norm is 20 out of a range from 11–24. This score suggests that respondents are strong academically and confident about their abilities to have productive and rewarding lives. Among the primary findings of this study is that the respondent’s *success* is not related to the respondent’s gender, race, college, age, or disability.

Much of this *success* is associated with the strong relationship veterans have with the Veteran Resource Center (VRC). Veterans’ complaints about the VRC are that they want more: staff, programs, computers, and hours. Among the most significant benefits of the VRC is support in securing VA benefits certification. The VRC is critical to respondents but is not the only resource that veterans use or need. Veterans rely on the CPP library, career center, and counseling services. This study suggests that the intervention efforts of VRC, VA certification, and these specified services are significant in contributing to the veterans’ *success* at CPP.

There are service gaps. The gaps, however, are not unique to the veteran population. The major need is for academic support, especially as it concerns tutoring in discipline specific areas (e.g., STEM) and in using computers. Consequently, veterans appear less interested in mentoring and more interested in tutoring.

The VRC was nearly 7-years old in 2019. The latest data from the survey of CPP veterans strongly suggests that the VRC meets the core needs of its population. More and more, CPP veterans’ needs, complaints, and concerns mirror those of the non-veteran population. Consequently, VRC efforts to address concerns about tutoring in STEM fields, and/or meeting demands for less-expensive parking or more affordable housing, will serve the veteran community and civilian student population as well. If *success* for the VRC is leveling the playing field for veterans so they have the same challenges as the civilian population, then the VRC continues to meet the challenge of providing equity for CPP veterans.

It should be noted that factors that arose in earlier assessments of veteran services are missing in the 2019 survey. Among these missing factors is the unwillingness of veterans to share their veteran status with faculty and staff. Also missing is a desire by veterans to be mentored by other veterans. In past surveys, CPP veterans were steadfast and exclusive in their attachment to their fellow veterans; veterans were in one group and everyone else in another. In this latest assessment, the division of veteran versus non-veteran has faded from view. The shift in the culture is not statistically significant with access or use of the VRC or any service at CPP, but it is a characteristic that has evolved since initially detected in 2009.

The case study approach is limited to a specific study site that is not generalizable. Veteran services vary from campus to campus. Services often vary at the same campus from year to year (Hitt et al., 2015; Killam & Degges-White, 2018; Oberweis & Bradford, 2017). The case study approach is useful when the research objectives are to view issues from the client's perspective and identify practical measures for improvement as was the case for the administrators at CPP in 2019.

The veteran-centered perspective has been the focus of CPP's VRC operations for 7 years, and the CPP program is the product of on-going assessments and improvements. In this regard, this study is of a mature, high-functioning program. It reveals both persistent challenges and emerging norms. Among its persistent challenges are gaps in academic readiness of veterans for college-level work and the need by veterans to access advisors outside of normal business hours. However, absent from this assessment is the isolation and alienation found in other studies (Oberweis & Bradford, 2017).

For administrators of veteran services, prospects are mixed. Some veterans' needs may be met by stand-alone programs, but others (e.g., academic preparedness and advising) will require collaboration with the larger university community.

Finally, a future research agenda for the VRC is assessing the transition from the university to full-time careers and civilian life. While contributing to veteran success when at the university is critical, translating success into being responsible and productive members of the community is a core outcome of the academy and the VRC. To date, this area of assessment (post-graduation) is unexplored and remains a potential wellspring for insights about the services, resources, and tools undergraduates gain or continue to need after their time in the academy.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

A formal IRB application was not required for the study because it was a part of the university's overall assessment of student services. The authors used secondary data that was collected by the university for the purpose of improving student services. However, when the university conducts assessments requiring student participation, it complies with all IRB guidelines including informed consent, assuring data is secure on password protected computers, and enabling participants to skip any question or section of the survey if they choose. For more information visit: <https://www.cpp.edu/research/research-compliance/irb/policies.shtml>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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