Veterans go from Boots to Books to Business at Sierra College

The Veterans Success Center and Business Entrepreneurship Program Team up to Help Vets and Military Spouses Realize their Dreams

ROCKLIN, Calif. (PRWEB) May 29, 2018 -- At the beginning of their college experience, a typical student faces a number of steps that can seem quite challenging. They need to choose a career path, select their major, secure financial aid and register on time. Then they can get on with their college career.

To military veterans the experience is often far more daunting. After an extended absence from home and life in the strict discipline and rigid structure of the military, they confront what they call ‘a whole other world’ on the college campus.

"Some vets need help navigating life issues unique to them," said Jay Blake, who runs the front desk of Sierra's Veterans Success Center (VSC). "For some, especially among those who saw combat, their problems sometimes seem insurmountable."

Blake spent 12 years in the Marines with two tours of duty in the second Iraq war. He sometimes tells troubled vets to imagine themselves in the surf next to a pier during a storm. "Just grab onto the pier," he will say. "The waves will crash into you, but keep hanging on, the storm will pass."

The Veterans Success Center (VSC) at Sierra is like that metaphorical pier. It is for the exclusive use of over 650 veterans and their spouses and dependents who may also be eligible to receive benefits for attending college. A large space with workstations, offices for meetings, and comfortable chairs; the Center design encourages interaction among vets. It is a place to hang out, discover how to best navigate their education, develop friendships, and where they can talk through their troubles with peers or get help from the center's dedicated crisis counselor.

The VSC has become a model for veterans programs statewide. Its team of dedicated employees and student employees are highly trained in veterans’ issues and are committed to serving the individual needs of each veteran.

In addition to one-on-one academic counseling, the Center's counselors are versed in the complicated rules to follow and forms to complete for services provided by the Veterans Administration, local or state governments, and non-profits. “It can be confusing and overwhelming,” said Blake Rood, the lead veterans’ counselor. "But when the veteran understands ‘what to do when’ it opens up a world of opportunities and support."

Most vets have been out of school for at least four years and are unfamiliar with academic terms, conditions, and practices. With this in mind, the Center provides an in-depth orientation and a for-credit course that provides a full semester of guidance and access to assistance called Boots to Books. These address topics such as; choosing a major, course requirements for degrees and certificates, contents of the college catalog, and how to succeed as a student.

Rood cites one example of crucial choices in academics that the Center helps its students make. The GI Bill provides 36 months of education benefits, he explained. "If students take courses that don't count toward their major or certificate, benefits and time in class are wasted."
“The Center provides help to vets from the moment they apply to Sierra College through the day they graduate,” said Rood. "Then we'll help them transfer to further their education or help prepare them to enter the workforce."

A Natural Partnership
One of the most popular majors for veterans and military spouses is Business. Nationwide, veterans comprise 6% of the population but represent 13% of small business owners. In addition, 48% of military spouses own a small business. For this reason, veterans groups, government agencies, and educators have mobilized across the country and in California to help veterans start a business of their own.

"Veterans and their spouses have a measure of maturity and discipline not often seen in traditional students," said Sierra College professor Denise Bushnell. "They seem well-suited to running a small business."

Bushnell coordinates the college Entrepreneurship Program, which is unique in a number of significant ways. Entirely based on applied learning, students study business practices along with work at the Hacker Lab, a makerspace where they learn how to pitch their ideas to investors or actually make product prototypes. Then, once they complete their certificate, they have a dedicated support system of business/entrepreneur mentors that they remain in contact with to keep them on track for success.

“Vets can take their interests and turn them into a business,” said Bushnell. "They can earn an entrepreneur certificate in 18 months and can take all of the required courses online," she added. "That's attractive to vets who are juggling work, college, and family."

In May 2017, Bushnell, along with counselor Blake Rood and business instructor Natasha Palumbo, met at the Hacker Lab with Maurice Wilson, Executive Director of the non-profit National Veterans Transition Services, based in San Diego and widely known as Project REBOOT. It assists veterans in adjusting to civilian life and securing meaningful employment.

Wilson knew of the unique initiative and the synergy created when Sierra integrated the Veterans Center with business courses, entrepreneurship, and the Hacker Lab; he wanted to collaborate with the college. When he left the meeting that day, Sierra and REBOOT had partnered to bring to the Rocklin Campus on June 30: the 2018 Veteran & Military Spouse Entrepreneurship Freedom Summit.

The Right Idea at the Right Time
“Wherever veterans and military spouses are in the process of starting or growing their business,” said Rood “they will leave this event empowered.”

The keynote speaker is Stephanie Brown, CEO of the Rosie Network, which provides no-cost training, resources, and mentorship for military family enterprises.

Among the summit's guests and presenters are military veterans Jim Wong, Chairman of REBOOT; Joe Molina, President of the National Veterans Chamber of Commerce; and Mike McGrane, lending director for Veteran Launch, non-profit helping veterans secure funding for their small business.

The summit will provide networking opportunities, exhibits, and these interactive workshops: starting a business using the Adobe Kickbox method and Hacker Lab; the gig economy and 21st-century skills; franchising; and funding for veterans business. Topics for "meet the experts" sessions include; teamwork and taxes, marketing and social media, legal aspects
of the small business, entrepreneur internships and the business coach program, accounting, and intellectual property.

The all-day program will culminate in a competition for the best pitch of a business proposal among four finalists chosen by judges, and the top prize of $10,000, with $2,000 awarded to each of the other finalists.

For those interested in submitting a video for the pitch competition, the deadline is June 15. For the event, it is June 22 - that is limited to 500 veterans and spouses. To sign up or learn more, go to; http://www.vetucation.org.
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