

Looking Forward

Veterans center offers hope, support



By Mark James Miller, 11-24-17

It's no secret our veterans coming home from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan face a myriad of challenges, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to depression, anxiety and the many difficulties that come with transitioning to civilian life.

At the Allan Hancock College Veteran Success Center they can find hope, support and a path to future success. Dr. Veronica West, a Marine Corps veteran, is director of the Center.

"My goal is to help the veteran student with educational success through the core components of academics, wellness and camaraderie" she said.

That sense of camaraderie is one of the most important of many services the Center offers. Veterans are used to being part of a tightly-knit group that shares in nearly everything they do. Coming home, even if they have a family to support them, can bring on feelings of isolation.

"Here they can recapture that sense of being part of a group," said West. "They study together, go to the gym together, take classes together. It helps them to stay focused on their educations."

During a recent visit to the Center something I heard over and over from the veterans was how important the Center is to them.

"It's an exciting place," said Army veteran Robert, who served in Desert Storm. "I come here every day."

Robert is one of the nearly 400 veterans who attend Hancock College, along with the 122 active-duty personnel who attend.

"The Center provides a safe place for our veterans to study and build relationships with one another," said Yvonne Teniente-Cuello, dean of Student Services. "Having other people and a counselor with similar experiences helps them cope."

The transition from military to civilian life can be daunting, and this is where the

Center's assistance is crucial.

"We help them with financial aid, plan their educational goals, and on Mentor Mondays, we connect them with other veterans who have been successful and have become community leaders," said West. The Center also offers tutorial services, an emergency loan program, counseling and crisis intervention, including a hotline for veterans to call when in distress.

Every veteran I spoke to sang the praises of the Center.

"It's important because here we can unite and bond with each other," said Chris, currently on active duty with the Marine Corps. "Hancock is great for vets. It's so important that we are able to communicate with each other."

Veterans coming home from overseas duty can have numerous physical problems as well as the better-known issues of PTSD and anxiety. They may have lung problems after being exposed to chemicals or musculoskeletal injuries from heavy lifting, resulting in pain to the knees, joints, and shoulders. Most common of all is hearing loss, the result of being too close to gunfire, heavy weapons firing and aircraft engines.

"Combat changes you," said Robert, the Gulf War veteran. "I had nightmares, and thought I was on borrowed time."

Having overcome the difficulties he faced when coming back, he wants to help other veterans to do the same.

"Our veterans have done so much for our country and we are grateful for their service," said Dean Teniente-Cuello. "ARC is dedicated to changing the odds and providing the best learning environment for our veterans."

The Veteran Success Center is in the Student Center, Building A, Room G-101, and is open Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. On Tuesday it is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and on Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. You can reach the Center by calling 805-922-6966, ext. 3925.

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