

## Extra support for military students



A student veteran drops by the veteran service office at Mesa Community College in Arizona. (Photo: MCC)

BY **ELLIE ASHFORD** AUGUST 16, 2020

With many veterans and active-duty military students struggling with the transition to distance learning during the pandemic, a growing number of community colleges are increasing their outreach efforts to help them adjust and succeed.

About 20 percent of the veterans at **Mesa Community College** in Arizona withdrew during the spring semester, says Bill Clites, director of veterans services. Many of them signed up for regular face-to-face classes and weren't prepared when Mesa transitioned to distance learning in the middle of the semester, he says.

“Spring started out normal. Then when they found themselves in the COVID-19 world, they couldn't handle the pressure of online classes,” Clites says.

As with many community colleges across the U.S., Mesa is “a little nervous” about enrollment in the fall, Clites says. Although MCC won’t have those numbers until classes start in late August, Clites expects both veteran and across-the-board enrollment to decline by about 20 percent compared to last fall.

Mesa serves active-duty personnel stationed at the nearby Luke Air Force Base and some from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, which is farther away. The college enrolls about 1,000 students in what Clites calls “our veteran family,” including about 650 students who receive GI benefits.

## Federal help

Legislation passed by Congress ([S. 3503](#)) that authorized the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to treat distance learning courses the same as other courses during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly helped many student veterans this spring. As a result, veterans could retain their level of benefits, Clites says.

Previously under the post-911 GI bill, the VA provided a higher level of educational benefits to veterans who take at least one college course in person. That was a way of proving that the student was actually in that location, Clites says.

In another provision of S. 3503, he says the VA allows veterans to take developmental education courses online between March and December 23. Clites hopes that will be extended.

In addition, “the VA was very lenient and compassionate” in allowing debt forgiveness for veterans who had to withdraw from college as a result of mitigating circumstances due to the pandemic, Clites says.

Mesa provides other supports for veterans and their families, including technology loans and a boot camp to help former soldiers returning from overseas deployment adjust to college. College staff stay in constant contact with new veterans, review their grades and help them access tutoring. If a new veteran is struggling, the college connects him or her with another veteran to serve as a mentor.

## Enrollment dips

At [Tidewater Community College](#) in Virginia, enrollment of students with GI benefits dropped about 40 percent this spring, says Veronica Cianetti, director of military student services. Some students took a semester off because they prefer face-to-face classes. Others were in workforce programs where hands-on classes were canceled, such as trucking, welding and allied health fields.

“For fall, we’re a little more hopeful about enrollment because the VA has done so much,” Cianetti says.



Tidewater Community College in Virginia has a dedicated VA office at each campus that helps veterans apply for benefits. (Photo: Tidewater)

More hands-on classes will be held, and “students will be a little more used to virtual resources,” she says. “We hope some of that will drive their confidence to return.”

About 30 percent of the students at Tidewater are connected to the military as active-duty personnel, members of the reserves, veterans, spouses or dependents. The college certifies about 2,000 students per semester for benefits under the GI bill.

Tidewater has a dedicated VA office at each campus that helps veterans apply for benefits, Cianetti says. Before the pandemic, the college hosted weekly “military Monday” events on campus with information about financial aid, GI bill benefits and state funding to help service members transition to civilian life.

All those services have gone virtual during the pandemic. Academic advisors at nearby military bases also provide online support.

Even though all the support services have moved to a virtual format and students can call a help line, “students still want to talk to someone live,” Cianetti says. “They want to come in and be helped one on one. We’re still finding that a challenge.”

While most classes at Tidewater will be virtual for the foreseeable future, some support services reopened on campus August 10, including military and veteran centers, financial aid and advising.

## Personal contact crucial

Veteran support staff at **Tarrant County College** (TCC) in Texas are working to determine how to provide the same level of services online as they did through in-person connections.

“One-on-one, in-person contact is a big deal with us,” says Valerie Groll, a counselor at the veteran resource center on TCC’s South Campus. “Nonverbal skills are so important. It’s difficult to provide that online, on the phone or through a teleconference.”

TCC serves about 3,500 military-connected students, including active-duty personnel, spouses, dependents, members of the National Guard, military reserve members and veterans. The South Campus is two blocks from the Fort Worth VA Clinic. Other TCC campuses are near the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Fort Worth.

The college’s veterans center serves as a one-stop shop, hosting workshops and helping veterans deal with the day-to-day stresses of college. It provides academic counseling, information on VA benefits, financial planning and referrals to off-campus resources. Staff also determine whether military training and experience can count for college credits.

“There was no break in the kind of services we provide. We made sure we had all tools we need,” Groll said. “We reached out to other people at college who usually don’t provide help to veterans to make sure they know about the benefits.”

Phone call sessions actually take longer, she says. During the pandemic, counselors are also sending emails to veteran students more frequently.

## Looking toward fall

While most military-connected students would prefer to be on campus, they are resilient and made the transition easily, Groll says. There was some confusion in the spring when many service members thought they would lose their housing allowance if all classes were online, but that was soon clarified.

“Summer enrollment was down a little,” Groll says. “A few were hesitant to enroll. They didn’t want to learn how to fix air conditioners on YouTube.”

Some technical courses, such as welding, did offer in-person classes, but at half capacity.

General enrollment is down for the fall, and Groll expects a similar decline among veterans. TCC academic classes will remain online, while technical workforce programs will be in person.

## A presence on the base

Military-connected students stationed at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas have generally kept up with their studies thanks to a branch of **Butler Community College** located on the base.

Most of the students at **Butler's McConnell Campus and Service Center** are active-duty airmen, but the campus also enrolls dependents and civilian contractors, many of whom are veterans, says Director Erika Gestring. Only a few students at that campus dropped out in the spring, and that was mainly because it was hard for them to adapt to online courses.

During the pandemic, Butler staff worked remotely with students on advising and assisted them with tuition assistance and GI Bill and VA benefits. The college was already working to serve students remotely, so when the pandemic hit, “we were already prepared,” Gestring says. “There were no problems transitioning.”

Advisors currently are reaching out to students through Zoom, Microsoft Teams and email. In-person classes at Butler started August 10, with requirements for face masks and social distancing. The college will continue to offer distance learning for students who are quarantined or otherwise can't attend in person.

## Extra support

Serving veterans online “has definitely been challenging,” says RB Green, veterans services coordinator at **Clackamas Community College** (CCC) in Oregon.

While CCC isn't near a military base, it does attract many veterans and National Guard members, Green says. In a typical year, about 800 to 1,000 people connected with the military take at least one class at CCC and about 300 to 400 use GI benefits.

Many of them are in career and technical programs – popular programs include automotive technology, welding and horticulture – which do not lend themselves to distance learning.

In the face of the pandemic, the Veterans' Education and Training Center quickly reoriented its support systems to an online model and made sure every veteran received a Chromebook and wi-fi connection.

During the spring semester, when hands-on classes were canceled, some veterans switched from CTE to something else so they wouldn't lose their GI benefits, Green says.



In a typical year, about 800 to 1,000 people connected with the military take at least one class at Clackamas Community College and about 300 to 400 use GI benefits. (Photo: CCC)

Enrollment at CCC dipped about 20 percent in the spring and summer for both veterans and other students. Enrollment looks good for fall, Green says, especially since “the college is coming up with innovative solutions for CTE.”

For the fall, CCC is looking for workarounds for CTE students, perhaps by having them gain work experience at employer sites, with health protocols in place. Non-workforce courses will mostly stay online.

The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs provided one-time grants of up to \$5,000 to students whose classes were canceled or if they couldn't take classes due to the virus. The [CCC Foundation](#)'s COVID relief fund also provided grants and technology resources to students. The college's veterans center directed students to county resources for emergency housing and rent assistance.

“The VA has been really helpful and supportive,” Green says. “It suspended all debt collections and quickly worked to get Congress to allow veterans to take all their classes online without taking a hit on their housing allowance.”

## Staying connected

Many veterans may have a learning style more conducive to something other than online learning, Green adds.

“Some veterans are struggling with online learning and isolation,” he says.

To counter that, CCC’s veterans center is doing more outreach. Staff is checking in with veterans regularly through email, phone calls and Zoom chats, and making sure they’re aware of the resources and benefits available to them.

“Just being able to speak on the phone helped immensely,” Green says. Even if veterans sit out a semester, “if you can maintain some form of communication with them, you can get them back on track,” he says.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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