

Creating a Home for Student Veterans



Members of the Clark College Veterans Club and Associated Students were on hand to welcome student veterans to the new Veterans Resource Center. Also pictured are Vet Corps Navigators (and VCAS advisors) Tim McPharlin, *far left*, and Josh Vance, *far right*.

Less than four months after the college announced a major grant to help create a Veterans Resource Center, that center held its first public event to welcome student veterans and other members of the college community.

"This is a major milestone for the campus community as we pull together all the resources we have for veterans for their personal, financial, and educational success," said Dean of Student Success & Retention Matthew Rygg as he greeted guests

to the center's open house, held March 11.



Clark College Bob Knight called the opening of the Veterans Resource Center “a proud day for Clark College.”

“As a vet myself, it is a proud day for Clark College to be opening a resource center for our student veterans,” said Clark College President Bob Knight, who served more than two decades in the U.S. Army. “To have a space where they can sit and meet with each other and get help and counseling is just a little of what we can do and should do for our veterans.”

Vice President of Student Affairs Bill Belden spoke in gratitude of the donors who had made the center possible. These include Jane Hagelstein, a longtime supporter of Clark's student veteran community who donated \$48,000 to help construct and furnish the center; the Community Foundation for Southwest Washington, which donated \$30,000 in November to help hire and train staff at the center; and other individual donors who wish to remain anonymous. Belden also thanked Clark College Foundation for its support in making the center a reality.

Tucked into a quiet corner of Gaiser Hall's second floor, the center is not yet complete—there is more furniture and decor in the works, and the college is still in the process of

hiring a staff person to run it. But already it offers student veterans a host of amenities. A comfortable couch sits near a bank of computers available for research and paper-writing; private offices allow student veterans to discuss their educational and personal needs in confidentiality. An American flag stands by the doorway.



Clark College Veterans Club and Associated Students president Megan O'Malley thanks Jane Hagelstein, whose donation helped make the Veterans Resource Center possible.

"For me personally, a lot of it is just having that quiet space that [veterans] can come to where they don't have to fight for a computer and where they can feel comfortable," said Megan O'Malley, who is currently serving in the Army National Guard and is president of the Clark College Veterans Club and Associated Students.

About 700 veterans enroll at Clark College every quarter, about 500 of whom use GI Bill benefits to help pay for tuition, fees, housing, books and supplies. They often face unique challenges when they enter college—everything from managing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to navigating the sometimes complex paperwork involved in accessing military benefits. And then there are the not-so-unique challenges,

like time management and financial instability. The Veterans Resource Center provides veterans with guidance and help for all of those things in one welcoming, centralized location.

“It’s our way of extending a helping hand to our vets and showing that the community they experienced while in the military is still available to them now that they’re out,” said Clark student Josh Vance. Vance, who served 10 years in the Air Force, now works as one of two Vet Corps Navigators in the center, helping veterans connect with services both inside and outside the college. Additionally, the center houses two full-time staff members who previously worked in the Office of Financial Aid; they are charged with helping veterans (as well as their qualifying dependents) access, understand, and comply with their GI Bill benefits. Six work-study employees also work in the center, supporting the staff and helping student veterans with questions. All the center’s work-study students and most of its staff are veterans or active service members themselves, helping to create a comfortable and supportive environment for student veterans.



Student veteran Killian Hough and her service dog, Chekov, visit with Veterans Affairs Program Manager Michael Gibson at the Veterans Resource Center open house.

Killian Hough, a quiet woman whose service dog bears a sergeant's stripes, came to check out the center after reading about it in her student email. She said she would return, and thought the center was a good step toward serving veterans at the college. "It shows that they're considering veterans, having a place where we can have our thoughts, separate from all the kids," said Hough, who served in the Air Force during Operation Desert Storm and currently serves in the Army National Guard. "A lot of us, both young and old, we've been through a lot, and sometimes we kind of think differently."

The Veterans Resource Center is located in Gaiser Hall room 216. Its current hours during the regular academic year are 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 10 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. on Friday. Hours are reduced during breaks in the academic year. Certifying officials are available 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday. The center's main phone line is 360-992-2073.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley. For more photos from this event, visit our Flickr set.