

Veterans Center of Excellence Celebration



Bill Erickson, General Council Secretary of the Cowlitz Tribe (left) accepted an award recognizing the crucial support of the Cowlitz Foundation. Pictured above (left to right) with Dr. Karin Edwards, Cheree Nygard, and Donna Larson.

Photo: Monica Patton

Generations of veterans connected to Clark College gathered to celebrate how the college and its partners have impacted veteran students over the years. The May 21 event in Gaiser Student Center celebrated 10 years of the Veterans Center of Excellence (VCOE) at Clark College. The college has offered unique resources for veterans for much longer than a decade.

Several speakers shared the history of the Veterans Center of Excellence at Clark and reflected on how the VCOE has changed lives.

Cheree Nygard, chair of Clark College Foundation Board of

Directors, a veteran, and a long-time supporter of the center said, "Reflecting on the inception of the VCOE fills me with pride and nostalgia. A decade ago, we embarked on a journey filled with hope and determination to support our veterans. Over the years, I've witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of the VCOE on veterans' education and their successful integration into civilian life. Together, we've achieved significant milestones and made a tangible difference in the lives of our military-affiliated students."

Nygaard added, "Today, I stand before you as a testament to the resilience and determination of our veteran community. The VCOE has been more than just an educational resource; it has been a lifeline, providing guidance, mentorship, and a sense of belonging to so many of us. As we celebrate our past achievements, let us look towards the future with optimism and determination. Clark College remains steadfast in its commitment to serving and supporting our military-affiliated students, ensuring they have the necessary resources to succeed."

A video highlighted Clark College student veterans sharing their stories and talking about how the support of the VCOE impacted their lives and their ability to succeed in school.

William (Bill) Erickson, General Council Secretary of the Cowlitz Tribe, contributed a land acknowledgment and shared the importance of veterans to his tribe. A high percentage of Cowlitz Tribe members are veterans.

Clark College President Dr. Karin Edwards and Donna Larson presented appreciation certificates to those who have made substantial financial contributions to the VCOE.



Photo: Monica Patton

Jane Hagelstein (pictured above receiving recognition from Dr. Edwards), a founding member of Clark's Veterans Advisory Board, began supporting Clark Student Veterans in 2011 with a scholarship. She continued supporting student veterans by providing funds to build out the Veteran Resource Center for facilities, staffing, and emergency grants. Her overall support of veterans with scholarships and emergency grants, along with facilities and staffing support has totaled \$300,000 from 2011 to 2019. Without her generosity and belief in helping student veterans, there would not be a Veteran Center of Excellence today. She was a founding member of the Veterans Advisory Board.

The Cowlitz Tribal Foundation contributed \$250,000 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing the VCOE to

expand basic needs and to provide needed technology devices student veterans needed to transition to remote learning.



People had opportunities to write thank-you notes to veterans and to meet others who are connected to the VCOE.

Donna Larson, associate director of the VCOE, said, “This event was truly a celebration for student veterans, alumni, staff, and supporters of the VCOE to celebrate this important milestone. The atmosphere felt like a tight-knit family gathering.”

She added, “A short history of the VCOE was shared, along with several inspirational student stories. The highlight of the event was presenting Clark College student coins to Jane Hagelstein and Bill Erickson of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in appreciation for large donations to support the VCOE. After the program, employees, students, partners, and honorees mingled while they enjoyed coffee and festive cupcakes and

cake.”

About Veterans Center of Excellence

The center assists military-affiliated students with their educational journey. Focused on supporting veteran student success, the center provides a single point of contact to coordinate comprehensive, individualized support services that address the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of Clark College’s student veterans. A Clark College veteran is any military-affiliated student at Clark: veterans, active duty, or a military dependent, either spouse or child.

The center’s staff can connect student veterans to agencies, programs, and support. The center also provides tutoring, help with books and calculators; useful workshops; a study area with computers and printers; a lounge and games for relaxation; networking with other veterans, and more.



Monica Patton, Program Coordinator, and Megan Anderson, Veterans Educational Planner. *Photo: Carly Rae Zent.*

Connect with VCOE:

- In-person: Penguin Union Building, PUB 015
- Phone: 360-992-2073 or 360-992-2864
- Web: Veterans Center of Excellence (clark.edu)

Timeline: Veterans Center at Clark College

- November 2013: Clark College President Bob Knight began a new tradition: a college-sponsored celebration honoring veterans held the Thursday before Veterans Day in Gaiser Student Center. At that event, Knight announced the college would one day have a Veterans

Resource Center on campus.

- At that same Nov. 2013 event: Jennifer Rhoads, president of Community Foundation for Southwest Washington, announced in honor of the foundation's 30th anniversary, they would donate six grants of \$30,000 each to help alleviate poverty. The first grant was for Clark College to create its Veteran Resource Center.
- March 2014: First open house at new Veterans Resource Center at Clark College—less than four months after the CFSWW announced the grant, the center held its first public event to welcome student veterans and the college community
- Feb. 2021: The Veterans Resource Center received a \$449,460 federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education to establish a Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success over three years. Clark was one of only two community colleges in the state to receive the grant. Focused on supporting student success, the Center will provide a single point of contact to coordinate comprehensive, individualized support services that address the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of Clark College's student-veterans.

Read previous stories about the VCOE

- Gratitude for Those Who Served
- Creating a Home for Student Veterans
- Veterans Resource Center Receives Grant
- Clark College honors Vietnam War veterans by dedicating Witness Tree | Clark 24/7