

LONG ISLAND / EDUCATION

Colleges work to do more for veterans on campus

Daylong symposium focuses on unique challenges that face veterans in the classroom



Faculty members and administrators from across Long Island came together at Nassau Community College to explore what they can do to better serve veterans. Photo Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

By Martin C. Evans

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Veterans who go to college face a host of challenges, including professors who aren't familiar with military culture and administrators who don't appreciate the difficulties of returning to civilian life, career and education officials said at a symposium Friday.

Dozens of faculty members and administrators from across Long Island came together at Nassau Community College to explore what colleges and universities can do to better serve the veterans in their classrooms.

The training symposium is the latest of several offered statewide by the SUNY New Paltz Office of Veteran & Military Services and Student Veterans of America.

"One thing we have come across in focus groups as we developed this training is the sense that military students don't feel campus services meet their needs," said Rebecca Rodriguez, a program manager for New Paltz and a symposium co-presenter.

Veterans in college typically are older than their fellow students, which can make life on campus tough, said several students who served in the military. Driving a convoy truck through a battle zone or tending a nuclear reactor on a submarine gives a sense of purpose that often isn't as strong in a liberal arts setting, they said.

Of NCCC's roughly 15,000 students, about 300 are registered as veterans. David Deras, 28, was a Marine Corps aviation electrician who worked on Marine One, the presidential helicopter, from 2015 until last year. He has met both President Donald Trump and former President Barack Obama.

"I had the sense that what I was doing was very important," said Deras, of Farmingdale. "Now, I'm just another student."

Veterans also are more likely to be married and have children and other obligations, which can distract them from their studies, said Evangeline Manjares, a dean at NCCC who handles the school's military and Veterans Affairs.

And service-related injuries and emotional problems — post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and blast-related hearing loss are examples — can make it hard for veterans to focus during class or to sleep at night, she said.

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Two key areas that the participants delved into: how differences between the military and academia affect veterans and how the often-cautious attitude that veterans have about seeking help can hamper their ability to thrive in school.

College officials could get a better understanding of veterans by spending more time with them in informal settings of seeking advice from veterans advocates, said Jason Gilliland, who coordinates veteran and military services at New Paltz.

“There are faculty who don’t understand who veterans are,” Manjares said. “Some veterans just try to hide.”

For college officials, addressing the challenges of veterans is crucial to retaining veterans.

“Learning in an academic setting can be quite different from what vets have experienced in the military,” said Connie Egelman, a career development coordinator at NCCC.

“They may not have ever been on an academic track, many of them are married and have families,” she said. “So it can be difficult for us to keep them.”

Capping off the symposium will be a panel of veterans, who will discuss the difficulties they have faced as they negotiate student life.

Participants from Suffolk County Community College, Hofstra, Molloy College, St. Johns and Queensborough Community College attended, Egelman said.

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