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For the Record

Veterans Go Online: Minnesota Leads the Charge

As the recipient of the [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's 2006 Institutional Service Award](#), [Minnesota Online](#) has provided a much-needed educational program for the members of Minnesota's National Guard. The program—[Guard Online](#)—was set up in 2003 to provide courses to the state's National Guard Troops sent to Bosnia and is only one of the numerous programs and services that the [Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System \(MnSCU\)](#) offers to military veterans and servicemembers.

MnSCU has a long history of serving veterans and servicemembers. Twenty-nine of the 32 Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are [Service Members Opportunities Colleges \(SOCs\)](#). In addition, the establishment of [SOCGuard](#) provides a link between the higher education community and the Army National Guard to enhance education opportunities for Guard members.

With a new set of challenges emerging, MnSCU is building on its extensive programs for veterans and returning servicemembers. To learn more about how MnSCU is serving this group of adult learners, *CenterPoint* spoke with a cross sector of higher education professionals in the Minnesota System, as well as the executive director of one of the partnering organizations.


Steve Frantz, System Director, [Student Affairs](#), MnSCU
Nancy Jacobsen, Executive Director, [iSeek Solutions](#), an organization composed of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private industry in Minnesota
Linda Lade, Director, [College Transitions](#), Student Affairs, and Program Director, Guard Online Project (2003-05), MnSCU
Gary Langer, Associate Vice Chancellor, [Academic Innovations](#), MnSCU
Shelia McComb, Project Supervisor, [CareerOneStop](#), MnSCU
Deborah Proctor, e-Curriculum Director, [Academic Innovations](#), MnSCU
JoAnn Simser, System Director, [Program Collaboration and Transfer](#), MnSCU

CenterPoint: What are the new challenges for working with military veterans and servicemembers? How are you building on previous experiences?

Steve Frantz: We [State of Minnesota] have about 3000 troops that are in Iraq now, and we are anticipating their coming back in April. Part of our work has been preparing for the largest contingency to return in one group in our history.

Linda Lade: We're working on

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The American Council on Education, the major coordinating body for all the nation's

higher education institutions, seeks to provide leadership and a unifying voice on key higher education issues and to influence public policy through advocacy, research, and program initiatives. For more information, please see [About ACE](#).

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© 2007
American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle NW
Washington DC, 20036
Phone: (202) 939-9300
E-mail: comments@ace.nche.edu

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policy and procedures for credit for higher learning that will get veterans consistent, fair treatment in prior-learning assessment based on military experiences. For one thing, we recently got Governor Tim Pawlenty's [executive order](#) pertaining to veterans and one of the pieces of that was using the [ACE guidelines for evaluating prior-learning assessment](#). This is a System policy that encompasses a number of different types of prior-learning assessment, but we will particularly pay attention to the needs of veterans.

“What was essential to make this work was to get the feedback from veterans, since it's a more high-tech world now, with newer and more sophisticated web users.”

—Sheila McComb, Project Supervisor, [CareerOneStop](#), MnSCU

JoAnn Simser: We've been providing education and information to different people within the Minnesota System for transfers, and this means helping deans, faculty, and others become more aware of this legislation. Implementing better practices and getting information out to some of the newly hired Veterans Affairs liaisons is part of this. We've also worked on creating and expanding web sites, such as www.mntransfer.org. It's important to get the information out to colleges, universities, families, and the veterans using the entire MnSCU System. One of the ways we do this is through our [Online Call Center](#), which includes frequently asked questions and sections for military or transfers.

CP: How are you using technology in programs and services that support servicemembers' and veterans' educational needs?

Deborah Proctor: As a system, we've really been working hard to be as responsive as we can to the needs of the military, and with Minnesota Online in particular. We're hoping that all of these things will support veterans on active-duty and all branches of the military as well. They're really dependent on information systems.

Gary Langer: Through the Online Call Center, we have a specialist on issues for military servicemembers and veterans who cross-trains other staff. It's a good vehicle for online support, and creates a single place to send students. When we helped students in colleges and universities affected by Hurricane Katrina, we couldn't have students calling 32 different places in the system. This is the same kind of response. With one place to call, we can then gently hand each person off to the right campuses.

Sheila McComb: Another unique online element is the [military experience translator](#), which was created to help veterans translate some of their experiences into civilian language concepts, because they're often very hard to describe. What was essential to make this work was to get the feedback from veterans, since it's a more high-tech world now, with newer and more sophisticated web users.

Frantz: I think that in this high-tech world you've got to do both. You have to provide both traditional and electronic support. Recently, we've had vets from Iraq come in to talk with our disability coordinators about their experiences. It's those kinds of stories that give perspective to what we are seeing.

Langer: Yes, this is why people have stepped up to ask, "What can I do to help?" Technology has probably helped with that, but when veterans come through the door, people are just lining up to help.

CP: How is the MnSCU System collaborating with other sectors to provide programs and services?

Frantz: We don't want to be in competition with other county offices, because they're there and they do a good job. We want to blend with them, not duplicate what they're already doing.

The web site put together by [CareerOneStop](#) is one example. They brought in regional and county reps, people from the [Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development](#), so that we're working together and have common resources that we're using wisely.

Nancy Jacobsen: [ISEEK](#) is the Minnesota web site we've created (and CareerOneStop the national) for career, education, and employment information. One way we help the veterans is by providing information that is kind of a seamless linkage—with career planning, institutions that offer a particular kind of training, and information about how that would lead to a job.

McComb: The [Department of Labor](#) wanted to create one presence to serve the returning vets. We worked with Minnesota agencies and other groups to design something that spoke the language of the returning veterans. What's really unique about the CareerOneStop and ISEEK web sites is that they focus on employment and training, providing 40 other groups for spouses, and breaking down both ends of the web user groups, from businesses to families.

“We've learned that with a soldier who's been disabled, there's a person who's been trained to do a job—"I can do it"—and it's hard to seek help. Frequently a spouse will come forward looking for resources. That's why it's really a partnership. The whole family is a part of this.”

—Nancy Jacobsen, Executive Director, [iSeek Solutions](#)

Frantz: Governor Pawlenty ordered a [statewide summit](#) last fall for people from all kinds of areas, all with the common goal of serving veterans. We had families, psychologists, higher education institutions, and various veterans' offices there.

The other thing we're doing is training staff. We've been doing this all over the state, working at individual campuses. We've done training sessions for administrators, counselors, and disability coordinators. Then, on campuses, we worked with student affairs folks and faculty.

CP: What kind of outreach is needed to let veterans know about programs and services?

Frantz: What our campuses have found is that we need to move ahead of the curve by working with families, a critical component of serving veterans. It's being there, listening, and providing information, sometimes in the form of a webcam, to facilitate communication among family members. That's critical because families are the major support mechanism for veterans when they return.

Jacobsen: We've learned that with a soldier who's been disabled, there's a person who's been trained to do a job—"I can do it"—and it's hard to seek help. Frequently a spouse will come forward looking for resources. That's why it's really a partnership. The whole family is a part of this.

McComb: We found out that they don't want handouts; they want partnerships.

Simser: Vietnam veterans and family members came to the Governor's Summit for Veterans. They're talking with relatives about their war experiences in ways that they hadn't before. Part of what has happened is our increased awareness of military experiences, which shows some of the benefits we hadn't planned for.

CP: What feedback are you receiving from the veterans and their families?

Frantz: Over a year ago, we were redoing one of our policies on tuition: when you pay, deadlines, and so forth. The chair of the [Minnesota State University Student Association](#) was a young man who was a graduate

student at [St. Cloud State University](#) and a veteran. He said to us, “Do you know how long it takes to get your benefits if you’re a veteran?”

Well, we didn’t. He said that we needed a policy that allows us to have tuition deferred when there’s a legitimate case of delay by some other agency. The money is there but they can’t get it because of the agency, and the student shouldn’t be punished for that. We said, “You know, you’re right.”

Lo and behold, that was one of the points that the legislature was concerned about for all schools: that tuition deferral was a problem. They passed a law requiring us to do that, but our policy had already been in effect for a full year because we listened to our students’ voices. We were able to be ahead of the curve, find a problem, and implement a solution before the law required us to.

CP: How are you preparing for the trends you’re seeing?

Langer: We’re just starting with folks coming back with disabilities and multiple injuries, such as closed head injuries and memory issues from time to time.

Lade: [Major General Larry W. Shellito](#), the adjutant general of the [Minnesota National Guard](#), has talked about the increase of amputees. We know from experiences with Vietnam vets that there’s a lot of healing to take place.

“The whole experience is pretty jarring, from riding in humvees day to day to hitting the ground with explosions. They lead to closed head injuries and memory issues from time to time. That’s what I think we’re going to see, but it’s just starting.”

—Steve Frantz, System Director, [Student Affairs](#), MnSCU

McComb: Yes, and the staff and faculty on campus need to know the signs—what’s normal combat stress and then when we need to refer veterans for help.

Frantz: We’re seeing a need for reintegration activities, providing support through the different psychological stages. [Major John Morris](#), a state chaplain with the National Guard, is heading this. As he says, it takes a long time for people to go from civilians to soldiers, but a very short time when they come back to go from soldiers to civilians. This often includes some form of higher education.

Simser: And an Iraqi veteran like [Melissa Stockwell](#), whose left leg was shattered by a roadside bomb, is an excellent example of somebody who’s chosen a degree program and career—[orthotics practitioner](#)—based on life experience. They [veterans] contribute in ways that others might not be able to do so.

Frantz: We’re going to be at the forefront of the reintegration effort when people come back with positive and negative experiences, such as injuries, disabilities, or psychological scars. Now with the [Veterans Centers](#) we’re setting up on college campuses—they’re popping up all over the state—our schools are open to veterans’ experiences, and help with the myriad of issues, from benefits to family affairs.

Proctor: [Guard Online](#) is working to develop a new relationship with the [Army National Guard \(ArNG\) Educational Center](#) in Little Rock, Arkansas. One of our goals is to offer 100 percent online courses, especially for folks on active duty or recently coming back. What we bring is that online opportunity for the students.

--Mary Beth Lakin and Ashley Carreon

Please direct questions about this page to:
CenterPointEditor@ace.nche.edu
This page last updated on 1/26/2007

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