RESOLUTION TO THE FACULTY SENATE REGARDING IMPROVING UCA’S VETERAN SERVICES THROUGH THE HIRING OF A MILITARY OMBUDSMAN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SELF-STUSTAINING VETERANS’ CENTER.

Whereas UCA strives to be Veteran-friendly, it has obligated itself to perform as a **Service-Members’ Opportunity College** under the Department of Defense’s Voluntary Education Partnership (https://www.dodmou.com/). UCA must provide a host of veteran-friendly policies in order to maintain this status, partially including:

1. Veteran-specific academic advising
2. exhaustive efforts to convert military service credentials and training to college credit (where appropriate)
3. connection to disability counseling and other health services
4. Veteran-specific support programs and personnel to aid student-veteran course completion (tutors, study areas, organized peer support)
5. Veteran-specific programs aimed at job-hunting and acquisition post-graduation.
6. A dedicated individual as a point of contact

Current Problem:

These services are currently scattered throughout several offices at UCA, difficult to coordinate, painful for students to negotiate, and only sporadically effective. Moreover, our Veteran Services Coordinator, Mr. David Williams, is also the certifying official who monitors the schedules and degree-completion progress of all 600+ student-veterans at UCA. He is responsible for maintaining each student’s compliance with government guidelines to continue their funding—and to ensure UCA remains in good standing with VA regulators. This is an overwhelming task that leaves inadequate time to perform or promote the other services listed above. In most other institutions, the Certifying Official is a separate post. UCA is striving in good faith to implement the Veteran Administration’s “8 Keys to Veteran Success on Campus,” but there are inadequate resources dedicated to the task and a lack in centralized personnel and administrative authority.

While our administration always faces the tough challenge of allocating sparse resources, we have strong reasons to make improving our veteran services a fiscal priority. Student-veterans provide UCA with roughly six million dollars of revenue each semester, monies that could virtually disappear if federal auditors determine that we are not in compliance with the agreement above. Furthermore, both Camp Robinson and Jacksonville AFB discharge a large number of veterans every year, many of which will seek to attend college with their education-benefits. UCA is struggling to attract these students with guaranteed funding due to falling behind AR Tech, AR State, and UALR in veterans' services. Aside from our obligation to provide necessary services to those who have served our country, these students could potentially supply a substantial financial boost for the university at a time when guaranteed funds are in short supply. Finally, there are many grants available to help improve veterans’ services on our campus. These grants demand a small investment from UCA, but potentially this investment could be far outweighed by incoming grant and tuition dollars.

Solution and Rationale:

A key component in improving the experience of student veterans is the creation of a dedicated Veterans’ Center, which gathers services into a single spot while providing a safe-place where student veterans can support each other by their common interests, challenges, and experiences. A Vet-Center requires at least one or two full-time dedicated staff working to facilitate the different services and act as a visible, approachable contact for veterans either involved with UCA as students or interested in UCA within the wider community.

The premier advocate group for student veteran success, the Student Veterans’ Alliance, has formed a check-sheet of best practices for making universities veteran-friendly, including practical steps toward establishing a Vet-Center.

1. Establish a Veterans’ Task Force
   1. UCA has an unofficial committee dedicated to this role. It includes members from the Registrar, Veteran Services, Minton Commuter College, Health Center, Counseling Center, faculty, administration, and students. **This should become an official group.**
2. Support a Student Veteran Organization
   1. UCA has a Student Veterans of America chapter currently as an RSO
3. Create a Veterans’ Office
   1. Have a Veteran’s Liason/Omsbudsman
      1. **UCA lacks this post, and it is the primary deficiency in our approach to serving veterans.**
   2. Have a Certifying Official
      1. David Williams serves in this role. **The VA is requiring increasing levels of data-collection (including retention) and reporting in order to maintain compliance with Veterans’ programs. The work-load is steadily increasing and becoming more important in regards to UCA’s compliance with VA programs.**
   3. Have VA Work-Study positions (funded by the US Government)
      1. David Williams has 2-3 in his McCastlain Office doing clerical labor
      2. Chris Craun supervises 2-3 in Student Veterans Resource Center (SVRC) within the Minton Commuter College (MCC) who are tasked with providing a satellite office where veterans can seek information, contact service providers, or gain access to academic help.
4. Set up Space
   1. As stated above, there are two contact offices (both inadequate to stand alone) for student-veterans, but the services they actually need to use are spread out across campus. Oft-times student-veterans will avoid seeking these services alongside the general population, and struggle to fully utilize services alone without other vets.
      1. **UCA needs a Vet-Center. AR Tech and ASU already have nationally-recognized centers. UALR is building theirs now.**
      2. **These centers are largely grant-funded, or at least grant-established, BUT—the grants require that UCA have dedicated staff (i.e.—Veterans’ Liaison and Certifying Official) in order to qualify for the applicable grants.**
5. Develop On-line and Print Resources:
   1. SVRC works to gather and maintain an on-line database of veterans’ resources. They also develop some specific fliers and print for UCA.
   2. Our UCA FUTURE STUDENTS tab contains a good link for Veterans and Veterans’ Services. This could be improved over time—perhaps by creating a positive-looking on-line portal for in-coming or interested student-vets where we could streamline the application process, promote our Vet-Center, and plug our UCA on-line programs. Another idea is create a database of military course-transfers (much like the AR Dept. of Higher Ed has started for regular college courses from other AR universities) and make this available on-line to prospective student-veterans.
6. Establish Community Partnerships
   1. SRVC and the MCC are working on this by hosting benefits’ fairs with the VA for the community at large, helping sponsor Veterans’ Day celebrations, and working with the Non-trad Student Organization to link veteran-graduates with internships and/or jobs.
   2. Much more work is needed, and there are lots of possibilities to attract involvement if we have services/programs to promote.
7. Educate Administration, Faculty and Staff
   1. Charlotte Strickland in the Office of Diversity has included military service on her Wheel of Diversity Topics, which means that every so many years our mandatory diversity seminars will cover this topic.
   2. Word of mouth counts for a lot amongst student-veterans, so it is pretty apparent which faculty members (in particular) are military-friendly—but I am convinced most of our faculty ARE military-friendly; they just don’t know how to make that friendliness palpable within a classroom setting. Plans are being discussed regarding a “Military-Friendly Lapel Pin” program where faculty/staff/administration could attend a seminar and then decide if they wanted to implement some of the suggested practices. Those that choose to do so would be awarded a lapel pin which would visibly mark them for students to recognize across campus.
8. Converge All Resources in One Place
   1. After Vet-Center space is established, UCA would need to gradually allocate specific service staff (counselors for instance) to the site—gathering services in one specific space.
9. Implement regular evaluation procedures to measure the success of our veteran’s programs, including Student-Veteran retention and graduation rates, as well as utilization of services. **Again—there is a strong push from the VA (and Congress) for more data and accountability.**

UCA is putting a lot of effort into completing most of these steps, but not in an organized manner or process dedicated to a clear goal. My proposal is based on best practices and seeks to put a person and ultimately a process in place to direct these efforts towards profitable and manageable outcomes.

**PROPOSAL:**

1. **The Faculty urge UCA to recruit a Veterans’ Liaison position by Fall of 2016—preferably sooner—who will work alongside David Williams to bring a targeted, comprehensive approach to serving student-veterans at UCA. Specifically, this post will coordinate veterans’ services and work with the administration to design, build, and fund a Vet-Center capable of attracting students. This person will also be charged with increasing student-veteran recruitment.**
2. **UCA will fund a Graduate Research Assistant or Post-Graduate Internship (generally around $8,000 over two semesters) during the Spring and Summer of 2016 to:**
3. **Establish the necessary criteria for a future Vet-Center at UCA, i.e.—what services need to eventually be located there, what is the necessary size, number of rooms, and possible locations.**
4. **Help in the grant-writing procedure with a goal of submitting a proposal to fund a Vet-Center sometime in the Fall of 2016—pending approval of the proposed plan by the Administration. Most of these grants are 3-4 year start-up grants for operating expenses, so the application process includes a rough yearly budget for staff and programs as well as strategic steps to become self-sufficient at the end of the grant-period.**

**This Graduate Assistant could work under the authority/guidance of the Veterans’ Task Force (or David Williams, Chris Craun, or Jennifer Deering) until the Veterans’ Liaison was hired---at that time he/she would work directly under the Veterans’ Liaison.**