

Copy

Client: Career Education Review

Re: Marketing –**ARTICLE** – Military Veterans on Campus

Scope of Work

Career Education Review will run stories on military veterans on college campuses in 2015 issues. Galvin and Associates is under contract to provide two. This is the second of the two articles.

WORD COUNT: **4,202**

KEVIN RANDOLPH

Career Colleges Navigate Challenges, Opportunities with Military Service Vets

US Military Vet students succeed with programs that addresses unique student background, government regulations

Growing college attendance by military veterans

A confluence of circumstances – reductions in active military service numbers, availability of federal government subsidies, a recovering economy, higher market demand for technical services – has led to a spike in the number of U.S. military veterans seeking higher education. Many of these veterans are choosing proprietary colleges.

Kevin Randolph is Corporate Director of Specialty Admissions for Vista College, overseeing programs on eight Vista campuses from headquarters in Killeen, Texas. Currently, military veterans account for between 15 and 20 percent of the total student population at Vista College's eight campuses.

Randolph is himself a veteran, who entered the college admissions world after a 20-year career in U.S. Naval Intelligence. In his 10 years in the proprietary school industry, he has learned a great deal about the programs that successfully support “specialty admissions,” which includes high school and adult students, those needing alcohol and drug counseling (ADC), as well as military veterans.

Randolph is also a graduate of a proprietary college – the University of Phoenix. “As a family man, a father of four, it was extremely tough for me to go to a traditional college with a traditional course schedule,” he said. “The University of Phoenix allowed me to pursue school and still be a father and a provider for my family. The program was not as short as a traditional college, but I was able to acquire my bachelor’s degree.”

Randolph describes the characteristics of the military veteran student and the types of support Vista provides to ensure the student’s success.

The Military Veteran Student

The Vista military student body ranges from lower-level to mid-level enlisted service members who are pursuing career training after exiting the United States military. Randolph described the typical military veteran admission as a man or woman specifically seeking career training rather than the academic rigors of a four-year traditional college.

“They’re looking for something more hands-on, a lot more accelerated, something that’s going to catapult them into a particular career sector that maybe they’ve had some ambitions to pursue in the past,” Randolph said. “You can take a young tank mechanic that maybe wanted to do something with computers. Our school offers that person an opportunity for a condensed and accelerated program, perhaps 10 months to 16 months, in which he or she can acquire the desired skillset so they can go and get some gainful employment and start their career.”

Randolph noted that the military student is a departure from the norm of the college student. “The military student brings a lot to the table,” Randolph said. “They’re very well disciplined. They have perseverance, survival instincts and they’re passionate about the programs that they pursue. They’re also intelligent. The process that we take a military student through to acquire a skill set is strenuous, requiring a great attention to detail, I’s dotted and T’s crossed.”

Military Student Support Systems Start at Admissions

Randolph has instituted support systems for military students that begin with the admission process itself.

“We take our time,” Randolph said. “We don’t rush them through anything. We have the prospective student go through an admissions counseling session with one of our military advisors, most of whom are ex-military so the prospect has someone they connect with who walks them through the process. First and foremost, we make sure that this is a program that’s conducive to their learning and their learning style and that they meet all the requirements of the entrance requirements.”

Government programs can play a part in the admissions process, and Randolph’s advisors are trained in the nuances of the system. “The majority of our guys are educated on the eligibility benefits that a student may potentially qualify for,” he noted. “We can facilitate that process and make it more streamlined. Our goal is a seamless transition for the military member, which is what the military member is looking for, that seamless transition from military to civilian.”

Vista’s cadre of military student advisors play an important role throughout the military student’s time on campus, Randolph asserts. “We have a military student advisor on each campus who can relate and connect with the student veteran and help him or her make that transition from military to civilian,” he said. “We train and periodically update our staff. We follow the sector to spot policy changes and to find pointers and ideas. We take advantage of those to better serve the student veterans.”

Faculty and Advisors Trained to Spot Problems

Once the veteran is admitted and has chosen a field of study, Vista has trained its faculty and advisors to keep on the lookout for problem students.

Randolph has instituted an annual student veteran training seminar for faculty and staff. The seminar profiles the student veteran and reviews potential issues, both positive and negative, that can arise for students with a military background.

“The seminar helps them understand the student veteran and the mind of the student veteran, especially the student veteran who comes from some arduous duty assignments,” Randolph explained. “Not all military come from that type of background, but there are quite a few student veterans that do, so we cater to that student veteran a little bit differently.”

While Vista has a free tutoring program, not all students come forward to take advantage of the program. The Vista faculty is trained to recognize the student that is having issues, which for military students, often is a reluctance to seek help. “Our faculty can spot the signals of the student who doesn’t want to put their hand up and ask for help,” Randolph said. “The faculty member will pull that student aside and have a one-on-one conversation with the student. We put that service out on the table to let that student know that in fact we do offer that service if it’s needed.”

In some cases, the faculty member will refer a student to a student military advisor. “The military advisor may have a better connection with the student veteran and get him or her to come forward and say hey, I’m having difficulty, or a learning disability, or whatever the case may be,” Randolph said. “Our campus military advisors are crucial to our student veteran’s success in school. One thing I can tell you as a veteran is that veterans connect with other veterans. So anytime we can build that trust bond with our student veteran, it is crucial to their success.”

Peer-to-Peer Support

Each of Vista College’s eight campuses has a student veteran organization. These organizations meet regularly to discuss issues relating to their veteran status, air grievances, develop fellowship and plan events that engage the college student body and the surrounding communities. Vista’s student vet events are keyed to military-related holidays, like Memorial Day and Veteran’s Day.

“There’s a lot of peer-to-peer interaction,” Randolph noted. “We’re trying to keep that military student veteran enmeshed in the web of what they are accustomed to in the military, which is a family and team environment. So we develop that stronghold on our campuses as well.”

Government Policies may Alter Distribution of Veteran Benefits

A U.S. Senate report released in July 2014, entitled “Is the New GI Benefit Working?” was critical of the manner in which military benefits are distributed. Sponsored by Iowa

Senator Tom Harkin (D), the report noted that 90 percent of benefit funding went to just 10 percent of the veteran population, and recommended policy changes to reverse that distribution pattern.

Since the majority of military veteran students at Vista and other colleges pay for their tuition with government funds, the impact on colleges, and proprietary colleges in particular, could be dramatic.

Randolph had a sanguine view of a potential change in the 90/10 pattern. “Proprietary schools may have to scale back on student enrollment volume and programs in order to balance everything out across the spectrum,” he said. “However, I think the student veteran will still come to school. The education is still there. This type of education affords these students a golden opportunity to pursue careers that they’ve had ambitions to pursue.”

Randolph said should the policies change, Vista will scale back military student enrollment and operations and put more emphasis on its adult and high school programs, but they will not abandon military student programs.

“Proprietary schools will still be able to sustain and remain in operation because they offer a viable service, not only for military students, and regular adult civilian students, but also for those students who are just not prepared to deal with the rigors of a traditional four-year university,” he said. “One of the common things we hear is ‘I don’t want to deal with a four-year school right now; I just want to get into something, I want to get a career and I want to get out there and start working.’ Proprietary schools like Vista offer that type of catapult, as I call it, a launch into a career.”

Randolph also warned of potential problems for traditional schools. “A change to the GI Benefit will scale back the number of student veterans that proprietary schools can accept, which ultimately is going to impact student veterans who want to come to these types of schools. What’s going to happen is we’re going to see an influx of students jumping into some of the more traditional platforms that they’re just not prepared for and we’re going to end up have more of a drop and failure rate in those types of schools.”

Military Student Benefits Require Extensive Data Collection

As Director of Specialty Admissions, Randolph is the administrator responsible for data collection and reporting. Since military students often have federal and state benefits that underwrite their college costs, he is keenly aware of the extensive reporting required.

“There are measurements and benchmarks that we must meet, not only from a graduation standpoint but from a job placement, or job assistance as we call it, standpoint to make sure our student veterans, as well as all of our students, are getting gainfully employed in the careers that they’ve been educated in,” Randolph said. “[Government regulations] forces our hand to make sure that we’re tracking data, which we do here on the campus level and at the corporate level to make sure that we’re meeting the guidelines.”



In addition to reports to the federal agencies like the Department of Veteran Affairs, Vista reports to state agencies, such as the Texas Workforce Commission.

“I’m pretty sure that schools outside of Texas have governing bodies with some type of measurement regulation that they have to meet. But I can tell you here in the state of Texas we’re regulated pretty heavily to make sure that we meet benchmarks to provide students with a quality education and that we’re graduating them so they can go out there and get gainfully employed.”

Randolph and Vista College sort their reports, with one report for high school and adult students, and a separate report for military students. For military students, he points to an “85/15” benchmark.

“15 percent of your student body can be student veterans,” he said. “That’s one of the trigger benchmarks we monitor. If we see that 15 percent scale up to the 20 or 30 percent, we must scale back. We look at different options, maybe recruiting more adult and high school students.”

Retention rates also figure into the data collection and reporting. The military student retention rate is generally very high. He cited three factors in high retention:

- 1) The Vista College military student program is aligned with what the student wants to do, particularly in offering hands-on learning
- 2) Many of the military students are funding a portion of their college cost from federal benefits, thus requiring a lower out-of-pocket cost
- 3) Military advisors on the Vista staff are charged with fostering a positive experience for military students, and are trained to spot and mitigate student issues

Vista’s military student retention and placement programs are proving to be successful. “Our retention rate benchmark is 70 percent across the student body, and we’re much higher than that; I try to maintain a range above 80 percent,” he said. “Placement is the same; we hold ourselves to a 70 percent placement benchmark. So 7 out of 10 students get gainfully employed in the career that they came to school for.”

Randolph noted that while there is some ‘wiggle room’ in the 85/15 general population / military student population benchmarks, he works assiduously to keep to the guidelines. “There are some exceptions possible to get beyond that 15 percent mark, which is a good thing,” he said. “The military student shows up and it’s hard to turn him or her away when they want to come to school.”

New Federal Guidelines for Colleges with Military Student Populations

Many colleges with significant military student populations have been members of the “SOC [Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges] Consortium,” a voluntary confederation of colleges and universities that agree to abide by principles and criteria developed by the U.S. Department of Defense. The DOD will end the SOC Consortium as of January 2015.

In place of the SOC Consortium contract, the Department of Defense now requires colleges that have students using GI benefits to sign adhere to a set of guidelines called “Principles of Excellence,” and sign a Memorandum of Understanding to that effect.

Randolph said that Vista had been an SOC Consortium member and believed that the transition to the new guidelines would be smooth. “The Principles of Excellence contract has a lot of the same guidelines that we must follow when we are in alignment with SOC,” he noted. “The Principle of Excellence encompasses everybody: active duty, veterans, retired, dependents, spouses. So when I speak of the student veteran, I’m talking about active, veteran, spouses, dependents and everyone that is associated with the military in some shape or form.”

Randolph said the Memorandum of Understanding was more specific to proprietary colleges than the Principles of Excellence. “The DOD MOU is more of an understanding between proprietary schools that work with our active duty service members and active duty Guard members, in reference to issues like how we handle leaves of absence, tuition and tuition assistance, what are our recruitment measures are for the active duty body, and other benchmark issues.”

While the DOD MOU is voluntary, Randolph said that as a practical matter, it is necessary. “When you’re working with the military, they will ask, ‘Do you have a signed DOD MOU?’ So while the MOU may be voluntary, you do need to have it on file in order to have a relationship with military service members.”

Government Guidelines now measure Career Focus

Vista and other proprietary schools must also respond to the Gainful Employment Act, which sets guidelines for schools to graduate students with sufficient career skills that they will be capable of repaying student loans. As with other government regulations, ex-military Randolph was unfazed by the guidelines.

“Our job is to make sure our students are graduating,” he said. “If our students are graduating, we can get our students gainfully employed. The issue I have with it is that the students have to take less funding from the government for school but at the same time acquire the same level of skill sets to go out and get gainful employment.”

Randolph has his own story to tell about students and ‘gainful employment’: “I’m a father of four, with two gone through college, one is in the United States military and one at home. My daughter graduated from a prestigious university and they did not help her get a job. That was mom and dad’s job – to network with neighbors, families and friends to get her at least an interview or help on her resume. With a four-year bachelor’s degree, she’s now working in marketing. I was a little alarmed by how little was offered from a reputable company, General Motors, for a person with a four-year degree. I would almost say that she’s not actually ‘gainfully employed.’ But I’m sure she’ll catch up over time.”

Randolph said the challenge to produce employable graduates is not limited to proprietary schools. “Public and traditional schools are having the same challenges,

because a lot of students coming out of school with four-year degrees are not making what you think that degree should be earning. I realize that it's a process and over time that degree will catch up and the student will be making the money that he or she should be making, but with student debt it can be a real issue."

External Factors can Influence Military Student Success

The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) recently released a report that included a discussion of military and military veteran students and the factors that weigh on their success in college. Randolph provided his view of the military student populations he has seen at Vista and at two colleges where he had served earlier in his career.

"The military veteran student is relatively stable," he said. "That student has more of a solid idea of where they're going to be. They can complete what they start."

The active duty military student has a less stable college experience. "The question is one of whether they're deployed, where a student may start school and have to transfer in the middle of a school term," he said. "There may also be family issues and things such as that. But deployment is the primary external factor that impacts a student's ability to complete schooling."

If an active military student is deployed, Vista provides a "leave of absence" that allows them to complete their military assignment and transition back to the same level upon their return.

"Depending on the length of the deployment, there's an opportunity that the student may be given some work to do 'down range,' Randolph said, referring to coursework done independently. "We have the technology so they can connect with their instructors and classes. We also offer our online school. Depending on the program that the student is doing, we can work a consortium agreement with our online school where the student can transfer to the online school and still maintain the same level of credit that they were already receiving and continue their education in the online school."

Transferring Credits Can be Problematic for Military Students

Military students, particularly active military, may accumulate credits at multiple schools as they are deployed to different military base locations. Randolph said that proprietary schools like Vista have protocols in place to accommodate those situations.

"That's one of the checklist issues when we are first introduced to a potential military student," he said. "At Vista College we use a VA (Veteran Affairs) checklist. We evaluate the potential credits for transfer in accordance with the federal Principles of Excellence, which has a standard for evaluating a military transcript, as well as any prior or post-secondary education that they may bring forward. Our process is overseen by the Vista Directors of Education."

Programs for Spouses and Dependents

Under certain criteria, military veteran family members can use the veteran's government benefits to attend college.

If a spouse or dependent is military benefit eligible, the Vista College Specialty Admissions staff will work with the family to submit for benefits. The process starts with a "VonApp," an online application provided at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website.

For dependent spouses, benefits may be based on the pay grade of their spouse. The amounts can be substantial, released as a grant or scholarship to allow the dependent spouse to attend college.

In other cases, military veterans may be able to transfer benefits they don't want to use themselves. The VA calls this "transferability," and has specific criteria in its VonApp process for submitting for this benefit use.

"Once the VA approves transferability, we can process the student for college just like we were putting that active duty member or veteran in school," Randolph said.

Randolph noted that, as a veteran himself – and married to a veteran – he and his wife used their VA educational benefits for their son. "We gave our son some of my wife's benefits to attend college," he said. "We are going to transfer some to our younger son when he is ready for college."

Randolph is seeing a rise in transferred benefits at Vista and other colleges with whom he networks. He attributes the rise to senior military members who do not intend to attend school at retirement and thus are free to transfer benefits to young dependents.

A Trend toward more Military Veteran Students

Randolph has seen an upswing in the military student population and in interest from active duty and veteran military personnel. As one close to the military and veteran population, he has an 'insider's view' of what is driving the increase.

"Some are coming to school because they legitimately want to go to school to get an education," he said. "Others are taking advantage of their [federal] benefit and simply attend because it's an opportunity to go to school and maybe collect what they call a 'backend stipend,' a VA [Department of Veteran Affairs] benefit that goes to the vet, not to the proprietary school."

The biggest driver, Randolph believes, is the vet's focus on career goals. "We're seeing guys who don't want to deal with the rigors of a four-year university after coming out of the field," he said. "They're looking for something more accelerated and hands-on, career focused opportunities where they can go out and get a skill set that's going to give them gainful employment within a short period of time, versus a 36-year-old trying to go back to college for a four-year degree when they can come to school for 10 or 14 months and

get the same Information Technology education and be able to go out there and get gainfully employed at the age of 38 instead of the age of 40.”

Proprietary vs. Community Colleges for Military Students

Randolph sees the proprietary school’s growing popularity among the military veteran population as a loss for community colleges.

“I initially went through a community college myself,” he said. “I utilized one of my benefits at that time, which was tuition assistance. What I found was that at a community college, I ended up taking a lot of courses just to be taking courses, what we call Gen Ed courses. Whatever my particular career set or degree or ambition was in life, I couldn’t quite grasp why I had to dissect a lab rat or play with chemicals. It seems like it was just all about filling a curriculum path to ultimately get to where I wanted to get.”

Randolph’s personal frustration with his community college experience is in sharp relief to his focus for Vista College. “The mindset now is for me to go out and get gainful employment. To work at Best Buy at the Geek Squad as a young IT specialist, I don’t necessarily have to go do a whole bunch of Math and English and Science and things such as that, I just need to go learn about computers.”

Randolph still sees the value in a liberal arts education but believes a realistic assessment of the economy is necessary for today’s student.

“I understand that the more education you have, the more sound and developed are you,” he said. “But in today’s world, our economy is more of a skillset driven economy and it’s looking for folks with a certain skill set to do jobs.”

Driven by a Passion to Serve

Randolph is more than 10 years removed from his military days, but he retains a passion for his experiences with his fellow military mates and the culture of service.

“I have a deep passion for these guys,” he said. “A lot of our student veterans went into the military for a mix of positive and negative reasons. On the positive side, they wanted to serve their country. The negative is that they didn’t want to deal with the rigors of a four year university. Maybe they couldn’t afford it, whatever the case may be. Now that they’ve served their country for three, four, six years, or whatever it may be, it still doesn’t make them automatically prepared to go deal with the rigors of a four-year university, or even a community college.”

Randolph makes a point of spreading his passion and advocacy to his faculty and military advisors, and to display it when he’s with his military vet students.

“At Vista, we try to work with the student. The last thing we want is to have the student drop, withdraw or fail because they couldn’t keep up. So we’ve implemented programs such as free tutoring, student organizations and peer to peer organizations to help the student cope with the transition from military to civilian life. I think our approach brings

GA

great value and service for our student veterans. What I've been hearing out in the field is that close to 90 percent of our student veterans are having a positive experience.”

-30-