

**Weber State University**

**2012 Veterans Services Survey**

**Conducted by**

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### Introduction

Weber State University (WSU) is located in Ogden, Utah consisting of 25,000+ students. WSU is a coeducational publicly supported university offering professional, liberal arts and technical certificates, as well as associate, bachelor's and master's degrees. Near WSU is Hill Air Force Base (HAFB) which is 12 miles from the Ogden campus and only 2 miles from the WSU Davis campus. HAFB employs many Veterans in the Davis and Weber County area who often seek WSU out for their higher education needs.

Our task was to evaluate the Veterans Services Office procedures to find ways to improve their services for Veterans and Dependents (When the word "Veterans" is used we are referring to family members as well) who are using the numerous GI-Bill programs. We found elements and procedures which could be improved. We as a panel, determined once we found anything needing change would also provide recommendations and possible solutions.

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The Veteran Service Office (VSO) is achieving its goals of providing excellent customer service for the student population within the current space provided by the university. The first thing we noticed was the limited office space provided by the university. We were told the space had just been increased and the VSO is now larger. Our panel agreed the space is still too small for the volume of traffic the VSO works with on a day to day basis. With us doing the survey during the summer, we know student traffic is down, but we know during the Spring and Fall semesters the office will be inundated with students waiting for services. Charlie and his staff do a superb job of caring for the students and get them processed as quickly as possible. A larger space would ease the problem of being cramped, which limits them to providing services to three or four students at a time. This will be an ongoing theme from this review team, the need for more space.

We then moved to the interviewing process beginning with Charlie Chandler, the Veterans Services Coordinator.

- What do you think needs to be improved?

### **Admissions Area:**

It was pointed out there is no way for a Veteran to self-identify themselves as a Veteran in Banner on the Admissions form. Could this be changed to allow students to do so?

This adjustment will provide the VSO with valuable information needed to track students utilizing the various GI-Bill programs. The Panel suggests the following changes to the Admissions application “Are you a Veteran?” “And “Do you plan on using Veteran benefits?” “Have you ever served in the military?”

We also found out there is no Veteran specific new student orientation for them to attend. If there was a program, it would provide Veterans with a second opportunity to flag themselves as Veterans. Nevertheless, WSU does provide a new student orientation. However, it is not mandatory for students to attend.

We are aware that requiring Veterans and family members to attend a New Student Orientation will initially be a challenge. We couldn't decide if it would pose a challenge to the student or WSU with the time allotted us. Our discussion came up with: if the program existed it would provide another chance for the Veterans GI-Bill benefits to identify themselves, which would benefit the VSO immensely.

### **Registrars Area:**

The Registrar's office and the VSO have an excellent relationship with their present setup. We came across a couple of issues which need attention. First, the VSO is not being notified of Complete Withdrawals. The VSO staff indicated reports are currently being developed by the University IT staff to notify the VSO of withdrawals.

The critical piece for the report to function properly is the Veteran students' need to be correctly identified in the student database system consistently. Identifying Veteran students has been partially addressed through the admissions application. Nevertheless, the VSO needs to ensure that all students who visit their office are correctly identified in the student database system. Second, the same applies to notifications of Student Schedule Changes. This information is needed especially for CH-33 participants to help prevent over-payments. Veterans are notified

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verbally and are asked to sign a Veteran Services MOU that they will comply. Notifying the VSO through the school system would make it easier for the VSO and the students, and will prevent overpayments for all the GI-Bill programs.

### **VA Work-Studies:**

The VSO Work Study program is working exceptionally well within the constraints of limited space. The training provided by Charlie is good and will continue to allow his office to maintain the high level of efficiency in processing WSU Veteran population. Charlie's method of training is more "on-the-job" with periodic structured meetings. We would encourage the VSO to develop a knowledge base for the all work studies to access while on the job. This will allow consistency in training and ensure the correct information is disseminated effectively. Work study students are not always available depending on their class schedules and eligibility for GPA and ¾ time enrollment. It is also not unusual for Work study students to quit with little notice, thus creating a steep learning curve for new work study students. The Veteran work study students Charlie currently has are conscientious and sensitive to the needs of the student population and provide exceptional customer service. In fact we praise the work study staff for their passion to help Veteran students.

Our next interviewee was Dr. Jan Winniford, Vice-President of Student Affairs. We continued with our theme question.

- What do you think needs to be improved?

### **Veterans Services Office:**

The Vice-President is conscious of the space issue and will continue to work for larger accommodations for the VSO. She is aware the **Military Outreach for Veterans Education, MOVE** Committee, was formed to provide better support for Veterans and it seems to have a positive effect on the institution concerning Veterans awareness. She also understands the need for an Orientation Program. There is one in place, but attendance is not mandatory or required for any students at WSU. If the Orientation is established, perhaps there could be a Veterans Breakout Session put in place, which would give Veterans a chance to receive more campus information and see they are not alone in their education endeavors.

Jan did not know of the data gathering issue the Veterans Services Office was having. The need for Veterans to self-Identify, during the application process and tracking of schedule changes are crucial and will improve the processes in the VSO.

Both Jan and Charlie are aware that Faculty and Staff need to be better informed of Veterans needs while they are students at WSU. The Panel recognized it is a challenge to get faculty to attend training as evidenced by previous attempts. Making Faculty and Staff more aware will remove some of the barriers faced by Veterans making the transition back to school. Contacting college Deans to be present during faculty meetings may be more effective.

From all the information gathered, the VSO needs to be creative in methods of making the WSU campus community more knowledgeable of how Veterans impact the institution and what challenges they face. Jan agreed Charlie can accomplish this by scheduling Faculty and Staff training sessions, attending and scheduling Orientation breakout sessions (once established) for Veterans.

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We then met the Dean of Students, Dr. Jeff Hurst and asked him the same question.

- What do you think needs to be improved?

Dr. Hurst came up with questions for us. He wanted to know “How the University could be more conscientious in the handling of Veterans?” He mentioned his idea of WSU developing a process of welcoming Veterans to campus, which would help them re-integrate into becoming students, which is a challenge for Veterans right now at the university.

He also posed the question, “Are Veterans comfortable coming back to the VSO for things other than VA educational entitlement paperwork?” Jeff also asked how the WSU office was similar to the Boise State Veterans Center. I will address this area in our conclusion.

Jeff was the first to mention the Davis Campus located at Hill AFB. He addressed the issue of a work-study being used to provide services. This hasn't worked well for the VSO, due to the work-study having no direct supervision which is required by VA policy. We will address our solution in the conclusion. He also was first to state the ability for Veterans to register early, but they must be tagged in the Oracle system to be able to do so. This takes us back to the problem of identifying Veterans during the admission's process.

Our next interviewees were the WSU VA Work-Studies. We had Ms. Jen Comer, Mr. Tyler Hall, Mr. Dan Johnson, Ms. Debra Wagner, and Mr. Josh Wood in attendance.

- What improvements would you make to the Veterans Services Office?

Everyone was eager to respond because they have contact with the students on a day to day basis and know first-hand the challenges of receiving access to Veteran Services and GI-Bill programs. The work study students are always willing to take on these problems and bring them to Charlie's attention so he can address them at an institutional or strategic level. They said their primary focus was the Veteran as a whole and not just the processing of VA paperwork.

It was brought to our attention that the Work-Studies try to make the VSO a safe haven for Veterans. They feel overwhelmed at times; some commented they are spread too thin and could use more work-studies to accommodate the increase in Veterans, which again proves the need for more room. Work-Studies said they were not equipped and staffed to be a “once-source” resource center. The review team believes that the VSO must take on the role of a resource center when it comes to Veterans, but in order to do so, they must have the resources. The VSO should be able to provide information and connect to services that Veterans need to prevent frustrations they may have encountered from other offices. The work study students also raised the issue of a better IT system to track Veterans. The University needs to make it an immediate priority. The current process is so antiquated it is creating a work-load that cannot be sustained with the current staff limitations. This again accentuates the need for more office space.

There were small grumblings about the lack of structured training and frequent changes in VA regulations. However, the general feeling was they were satisfied because Charlie was always around if needed and if he wasn't they knew how to contact him to get the answers. They also

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had frustrations about the inability to access some Banner systems and what a “nightmare” it was to get approval.

We would suggest the VSO be cognizant of office coverage and work with the work-studies to have more consistent coverage of the office. A standard, if possible, is to have a minimum of two employees (full time or work-studies) covering the office throughout the work day. Consistent coverage will ensure that consistent service is offered Veteran students.

The MOVE Committee was next on our list, and we asked them a slightly different question:

- How can the MOVE committee assist the VSO to improve services to WSU’s Veteran population?

The Committee cited their goals were to:

1. Provide a broader range of campus support
2. Leverage resources
3. Assist in Recruitment

We found there is great potential with the MOVE committee. We would encourage the MOVE committee to develop more awareness of the Veterans’ needs, not only to the surrounding community but more importantly, to the campus community.

Concerns:

Changes in VA policy and procedure, as well as lack of personnel, keep Veterans from receiving their benefits in a timely fashion. The VSO website needs to be updated. They also cited the EO as an issue for the VSO, but that is something Charlie can assist with, but the final decision will come from a higher authority.

We then spoke to Student Affairs and University Partners. Our guests were Donna Hernandez and Debbie Cragon.

- What does Student Affairs and University Partners do to assist the VSO?

Our guests were quick to point out they were uneducated on Veterans issues on campus. We got a lot of feedback from the Bursar’s representative. They want the VSO to put comments into Banner for CH-33’s so they can be better identified to help Veterans avoid being sent to collections. The VSO is doing this but they were unaware of the issues with collections. CH-35 students (family members whose sponsor is 100% disabled) need to be better educated by the VSO about paying their tuition. The Bursar’s office also said Veterans should pay more attention to their school email account because they are missing vital information sent to their accounts.

Our final guests were the most important, they were Veteran students. They were Sam Acosta, Shaun Franks, Justin Linneman, and Stephanie Worley.

- What do you think needs to be improved in the VSO?

All the Veterans were quick to praise the VSO for its efforts and services given. All the students said they were satisfied, when they asked a question and the answer was not known, they would get an answer the next day, if not quicker.

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One student started their experience at the Davis campus and was disappointed there was not a representative available there to provide services.

Another stated when he transferred to Weber State, he got better service from the VSO than at the other two schools he previously attended. They also felt the need to socialize more, but again the present area limits what they can do.

The last comment they had was the necessity for a larger office. They told us the computer lab (which consists of two computers) is inadequate, and the lounge is just a couch and two chairs in a very cramped area. They are hoping for a larger space to provide them a space to relax and make the services they seek easier get.

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### Veterans Survey Summation

We posed questions to a myriad of folks and listened intently to come up with this summation of the Weber State University, Veterans Services Office.

Overall the VSO is run in a proficient manner and provides exceptional customer service to the WSU Veterans population. As with all programs there is always room for improvement, which is why this survey was initiated.

Mr. Charlie Chandler, the Coordinator of Veterans Services is extremely knowledgeable of his job and provides WSU Veterans with exemplary customer service in the VSO. His managing of the VSO keeps Veterans and VA Work-Studies happy and satisfied. These two elements go hand in hand and play an important part in the education process for your WSU Veterans. We also know, even though the goal is to keep everyone content, this is an impossible task. There are always individuals whom, no matter what you do, you cannot satisfy their needs. To accomplish this is a goal of Charlie's, even though he knows the odds are against him.

We found the Office Space to be too small for the amount of traffic the VSO contends with each semester. Having said that, we also found out the current space was new, which provides the VSO with more room than they had. The Panel came to the conclusion the VSO still needs more space. For the VSO to make a better argument for more space they need to provide data that shows the utilization of the office and why it is inadequate. Data needs to be generated on the traffic to the office (in person visits, phone calls and email). Also, students need to be identified in the student database system to get a real number of student Veterans. The Vice-President Jan Winniford assured us the University is looking for a larger space to relocate the VSO to improve the VSO services for Veterans.

Our next finding was the need for Veterans to self-identify themselves when applying for admission to the university. If procedures are put in place, it would make VSO's tracking of Veterans much easier and would help with the processes for Veterans used by the VSO. By this we mean the tracking of class changes, and complete withdrawals. Casey Bullock, one of our panelists, and the Associate Registrar, stated the university could make this happen. We would encourage the VSO to work with the Director of Admissions, Scott Teichert, to make the appropriate changes. In addition to Veterans self-identifying through the Admission application, the VSO needs a means to ensure that all Veterans using their services are identified in the student database. This needs to be a standard procedure the VSO establishes as part of the student review process.

The Davis Campus issue of utilizing a VA work study to man the office was brought to Charlie's attention. Because of inconsistent work study hours there, we recommend Charlie work with the school to correct this. With Weber State having an office there, maybe they can accept the VA paperwork for the VSO.

We would encourage the Student Affairs Division to consider an hourly employee to assist in office coverage. Specifically, the hourly employee could be stationed at the Davis campus to provide a wider range of services to the Davis campus students and Hill Air Force Base.



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### Veterans Survey Summation cont'd

I have read and re-read what I have been saying in this summation and now I have to speak to you all from my heart. First, I have to say this might sound like a comparison to my VSO at Boise State, it is not. The situation at the Weber State VSO is similar to my circumstances at Boise State, before our Veterans Center was established. My office was 16 feet by 12 feet; I called it, "my Cubby-hole", which I worked out of 18 years. Charlie's office although larger than my few feet, is still in need of more space to accommodate the Weber State Veterans population.

The new Post-9-11 GI-Bill brought a whole new dynamic to institutions across the nation. It made Boise State re-think the way Veterans were being served. Boise State came to the conclusion, things had to change. Like Boise State, schools have had to make adjustments to accommodate their Veterans. In some cases this has been a slow process due to budget and space constraints, but they are being made. Boise State has made those adjustments and it has improved our services to our Veterans tenfold. I was asked to compare Charlie's VSO with that of Boise States, here goes. The Weber State VSO is in the same state which I labored in for 18 years, the facilities are much too small for your current Veteran population, which is going to grow every year.

The impact of Veterans on campuses is tremendous and in some cases VSO improvements are given a low priority. This is not the case here, improvements have been made and this panel must recommend more changes to accommodate the Weber State Veterans population. Our observation is driven because your Veterans population will be increasing each year, with approximately 875 Veterans attending per semester, you should anticipate a 3% increase each year, which will bring even more attention to your VSO's need for more room.

We were asked to examine the Weber State University Veterans Services Office (VSO) so they can enhance their Veterans Services Office. I was chosen to head the panel for the survey by Weber State and graciously accepted. I must say, I was astounded being picked. I have been a School Certifying Official at Boise State University for twenty years which I hope, has provided me with the knowledge and skill to head this panel. I hope our findings will help in the growth of the Weber State University Veterans Services Office.

I have a plan, which I hope to put into effect. I would like to propose a trip so that your Dean of Students, Jeff Hurst and Veterans Coordinator, Charlie Chandler can visit the Boise State campus to see the strides we have made. Maybe it will provide Jeff and Charlie with ideas of what Weber State can do? The plan is one which I will work to make happen.

We have listed all of the suggestions and possible solutions to assist and guide Weber State to a better Veterans Services Office. If you feel we have left anything out fell free to contact me and we can discuss your concerns.