

Date of Hearing: April 7, 2015

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Jose Medina, Chair

AB 421 (Calderon) – As Introduced February 19, 2015

[Note: This bill is doubled referred to the Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee and will be heard as it relates to issues under its jurisdiction.]

SUBJECT: Community colleges: veterans counselor

SUMMARY: Requires the governing board of a community college district to provide in each California Community College (CCC) within the district, a veterans counselor; and, requires the CCC Board of Governors (BOG) to adopt regulations to establish and maintain the minimum qualifications for services as a veterans counselor.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires the California State University (CSU) and the CCC and encourages the University of California (UC) to coordinate services for qualified students who are veterans or members of the military by clearly designating Military and Veterans Offices and individuals to provide specified services to qualified students. Current law defines "qualified student" as a student who is any of the following: an active duty member of the Armed Forces of the United States, the California National Guard, a reserve component of the Armed Forces of the United States, a veteran of the Armed Forces of the United States, and/or a family member of a person (as described above) who is a legal dependent under 28 years of age or living in the household of that person and eligible to be claimed as a dependent on federal or state tax returns (Education Code Section 69785).
- 2) Requests the UC, CSU, the CCC to report annually to the California Department of Veterans Affairs the number of qualified students assisted by a Military and Veterans Office; the number of qualified students assisted who are active duty members of the Armed Forces of the United States, the California National Guard, or a reserve component of the Armed Forces of the United States, or are veterans of the Armed Forces of the United States; and the total education benefits by all qualified students assisted by an office (EC Section 69786).
- 3) Requires the CCC BOG to adopt regulations to establish and maintain the minimum qualifications for service as a faculty member teaching credit instruction, a faculty member teaching noncredit instruction, a librarian, a counselor, an educational administrator, an extended opportunity programs and services worker, a disabled students programs and services worker, an apprenticeship instructor, and a supervisor of health (EC Section 87356).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: *Purpose of the measure.* According to the author, "While the State of California and the CCC have made strides recently in the area of reintegrating veterans to civilian life and addressing their educational needs, the State of California can do more to ensure student veterans are adequately prepared to meet their educational goals. Currently 54 CCC campuses have Veterans Resource Centers [VRC] which provide an environment for student veterans to relax and unwind with other students that have shared their experiences. Still, nearly half of CCC

campuses do not have a VRC; with student-to-counselor ratios hovering around 719:1, it is easy for student veterans to get lost in the fray of overcrowded campuses and the difficulty of navigating the transfer process."

The author contends that, "By requiring each CCC campus to employ at least one academic counselor specified for student veterans, AB 421 will ensure a minimum level of services for student veterans at each community college campus."

Current student veterans outreach. According to the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet), with an estimated 1.8 million veterans residing in California, our state has the largest population of veterans in the nation. According to the CCC Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), many of the increasing number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will look to one of the 112 community colleges as the most easily accessible and affordable educational option available. More than 60,000 veterans and active duty service members enrolled at a CCC in 2013-14. The CCCs serve nearly five times the combined number of student veterans enrolled at the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) systems.

The CCCs are providing more services to a growing population of student veterans; the CCCCCO recognizes the need for continued support of our student veterans and as such has been the lead on several statewide projects, including:

- 1) Veterans Resource Center Project: At VRCs student veterans can interact with one another and obtain information and services. The CCCCCO partnered with the High Tech Center Training Unit at De Anza College (in Cupertino, CA) to offer free hardware, software and on-site training in assistive technology to colleges that promote academics, camaraderie, and wellness; provide a dedicated space for student veterans; and offer coordinated services such as financial aid and counseling to veterans. As a result, 24 additional colleges have established a VRC on their campus.

To note, because the individual campuses do not have to report to the CCCCCO whether they have a VRC, it is presently unknown the exact number of campuses that have VRCs, however, it is estimated that at least half of the CCCs have a VRC. Additionally, VRCs are staffed by either full-time employees or a mix of volunteers and student mentors.

- 2) Zellerbach Family Foundation Project: "Welcome Home: Creating a Campus Community of Wellness for Returning Veterans:" In March 2010, the CCCCCO received a \$75,000 grant from the Zellerbach Family Foundation to support the development and implementation of a training program for faculty and staff to increase awareness on military culture, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression in order that faculty and staff can better understand the challenges faced by many community college student veterans. The training has been provided at 21 colleges and six statewide conferences since its inception.
- 3) Veterans Summit: In December 2014, the CCCCCO co-hosted the fourth Veterans Summit in San Jose, California. Topics at the summit included VA benefits and education plans, creating Veterans Resource Centers, women veterans, academic counseling, best practices in serving student veterans, mental health issues confronting veterans and accessing federal, state and local resources.

Additionally, according to CalVet, they work very closely with the CCCCCO in the Summit and with several local campuses on veteran issues, including the VRCs.

- 4) **Regional Representation Structure:** The CCCCCO has organized a Veteran Services Regional Advisory Committee and hosts regular meetings of this group to better identify student veteran needs across the system and encourage the exchange of innovative ideas and effective practices for serving them. The Committee met twice in 2012, three times in 2013, and four times in 2014. In addition to meeting in person quarterly, the committee holds recurring monthly conference calls.
- 5) **System-wide Email List:** The CCCCCO established an internal system-wide email list, through which it communicates information and reports relating to veterans and veterans' services to each of the 112 CCCs and designated college staff. This list provides a way to promptly disseminate urgent and important information to all veteran programs and service providers at each college, and serves as a forum for the exchange of ideas between colleges about issues related to student veterans.

Committee considerations. This measure tasks the governing board of a community college district with providing in each college within the district, a veterans counselor. This measure presently does not include a date by which the governing boards shall add a counselor nor does it give into account that some CCCs do not have large numbers of student veterans, thus creating cost pressures for some campuses to unnecessarily hire a veteran specific counselor.

Committee staff recommends the following amendment: The governing board of a community college district shall, *on or before 01 July 2018*, provide each college, within the district a veterans counselor, *to campuses with 200 or more enrolled student veterans, as defined by the California Community Colleges Board of Governors.*

Additionally, current law is silent as to the definition of a veterans counselor. While the committee amendments task the CCC BOG with developing a definition of a veterans counselor, it is important to provide some specificity as to what the definition should entail.

Committee staff recommends the following amendment: *EC 87356 (new b) - When the board of governors adopts regulations to establish and maintain the minimum qualifications for service as a veterans counselor, the board of governors shall consider, but not necessarily be limited to all of the following when establishing the minimum qualifications: Definition and role of a veterans counselor, including but not limited to, a person who has demonstrated experience of the unique social and psychological needs of veterans students; knowledge about Veterans Educational Benefits (GI Bill), and Veterans Affairs; experience in designing and preparing Veteran Student Educational Plans for community college student veterans; knowledge of California Community College Student Success and Support Programs; ability to use a broad range of technology pertaining to data collection and analysis for student success; experience in developing and presenting counseling related workshops and orientation sessions; ability to effectively serve as a liaison, communicate effectively with faculty, staff, and external community veteran resource providers concerning veteran specific issues, learning processes, combat stress injuries, moral injuries, trauma, traumatic brain injuries, and other disabilities; and, knowledge of occupational opportunities and internships for veterans, community agencies, and other organizations serving students who are veterans, issues facing veterans, and state and federal guidelines and services to veterans.*

Related legislation. AB 393 (Hernández), which will be heard by this Committee today, would, among other things, create the Veteran Resource Centers Grant (VRCG) Program and the VRCG Fund housed in the State Treasury.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

American Legion-Department of California
AMVETS, Department of California
California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
California College and University Police Chiefs
California State Commanders Veterans Council
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters
Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of California
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

Opposition

None on file.

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