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OU takes teamwork approach to assisting veterans in any way possible

By Dan Bodene, contributing writer

Military service is all about teamwork. And after serving in the military, veterans at Oakland University know there's a knowledgeable, dedicated team in place to serve them.

It's a team composed of members from the university's Office of the Registrar and Veterans Support Services. Although members in both groups report to different parts of the university, they share a common passion: helping veterans in any way possible.

Veterans who want to study at OU meet that team right away, and for good reason – there can be a lot of complexity involved in not only getting signed up for veterans benefits, but also in making the transition to campus life.

Mike Brennan of Veterans Support Services may be the first person a veteran (or veteran's dependent) will see. "About half my job is answering questions," he said. "How to apply, where to go. Then I steer them to Ann."

Ann Besaw of the university's Office of the Registrar is one of the experts in veteran's certifications. With either first-time applicants or transfer students, she sets up files, connects the veteran with an advisor and ensures they have a plan of study to qualify for benefits. Veterans are encouraged to research various benefit programs to choose one that is right for them.

There are several to choose from, covering many situations: veterans of active duty, reservists, reservists who are deployed, veterans with disabilities and survivors and dependents. The programs range from those that pay students directly to the newer but much more complicated Post-9/11 G.I. Bill that pays tuition and fees to the university, with stipends going to the veteran for housing, books and supplies.

"I'd estimate the amount of our paperwork has doubled in the past year," Besaw said. "But if there are any problems, we're always willing to work with the veteran to help."

The Veteran's Certification Office helps veterans and dependents negotiate the complexities in many ways: assisting with applying to the university, and for Veterans Administration benefits; certifying school enrollment and any enrollment changes; providing grant and scholarship information; and helping veterans work with other university departments.

"It's a well-oiled process," says Registrar Steve Shablin. "We've made a commitment to care for veterans. In fact, in the weeks before each semester starts, Ann sees her vets full-time."

There are 162 veterans taking classes in the current semester, although more than 200 have been admitted to OU for the academic year. Most are undergraduates and the most common majors are sociology, psychology, nursing, biology and accounting.

But after classes start, the team's work isn't done. Assistant Registrar Joann Denby says her office assists citizen-soldiers who are deployed in the middle of a semester, and veterans who change their classes or who transfer into or out of OU. In many cases, veteran's certifying officials from different universities help each other. "We go to regional conferences to talk about issues, and to network with each other," Denby said.

Brennan stays busy as well. A six-year veteran of the Army, he began his work as OU's Veteran Liaison in September 2009.

"We're always working on making Oakland University a vet-friendly campus," he said. "We're trying to do more veterans events." In fact, the Veterans Support Services office and SVOU are sponsoring a veterans' night at the OU men's basketball game on Thursday, Feb. 18.

From the Veterans Support Services office at 103A North Foundation Hall, Brennan helps students in their transition from the military or from deployment to campus life. Sometimes, it takes outside help. "We can refer vets to Graham Counseling Center, to Disability Support Services, to the Academic Skills Center – even to the Pontiac Vet Center. We work with as many organizations as we can to offer help."

The efforts of the entire veterans support team have been noticed: OU was recognized as a "military friendly school" for 2010 by GI Jobs magazine, which awards the honor to only the top 15 percent of all universities, colleges and trade schools in the United States.

Brennan believes OU's reputation could mean that even more veterans will want to study here. "I hope that the more our name gets out there as a vet-friendly campus, the more veterans we'll attract."

For more information on veteran services, contact veterans@oakland.edu, visit the [Veterans Support Services](#) Web site or call (248) 370-2010. For detailed information on veteran educational benefits and certification, visit the [Veterans Certification Information](#) Web site.

SUMMARY

Military veterans at Oakland University can rely on the fact that a knowledgeable, dedicated team of professionals is in place to serve them.

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