

## **Veteran's Transition Course at the University of Wyoming**

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Dr. Steven F. Barrett, P.E., received the B.S. in Electronic Engineering Technology from the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1979, the M.E.E.E. from the University of Idaho at Moscow in 1986, and the Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1993. He was formally an active duty faculty member and professor at the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado and is now professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering and associate dean for Academic Programs, College of Engineering and Applied Science, University of Wyoming. He is a senior member of IEEE and chief faculty advisor of Tau Beta Pi. His research interests include digital and analog image processing, computer-assisted laser surgery, and embedded control systems. He is a registered professional engineer in Wyoming and Colorado. He authored/co-authored several textbooks on microcontrollers and embedded systems. His book, "A Little Book on Teaching," was published by Morgan and Claypool Publishers in 2012. In 2004, Barrett was named "Wyoming Professor of the Year" by the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching and in 2008 was the recipient of the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) Professional Engineers in Higher Education, Engineering Education Excellence Award.

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Cameron H. G. Wright, Ph.D., P.E., is a Professor with the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY. He was previously Professor and Deputy Department Head in the Department of Electrical Engineering at the United States Air Force Academy, and served as an R&D engineering officer in the U.S. Air Force for over 20 years. He received the B.S.E.E. (summa cum laude) from Louisiana Tech University in 1983, the M.S.E.E. from Purdue University in 1988, and the Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1996. Cam's research interests include signal and image processing, real-time embedded computer systems, biomedical instrumentation, and engineering education. He is a member of ASEE, IEEE, SPIE, BMES, NSPE, Tau Beta Pi, and Eta Kappa Nu. His teaching awards include the University of Wyoming Ellbogen Meritorious Classroom Teaching Award (2012), the Tau Beta Pi WY-A Undergraduate Teaching Award (2011), the IEEE UW Student Branch's Outstanding Professor of the Year (2005 and 2008), the UW Mortar Board "Top Prof" award (2005, 2007, and 2015), the Outstanding Teaching Award from the ASEE Rocky Mountain Section (2007), the John A. Curtis Lecture Award from the Computers in Education Division of ASEE (1998, 2005, and 2010), and the Brigadier General Roland E. Thomas Award for outstanding contribution to cadet education (both 1992 and 1993) at the U.S. Air Force Academy. He is an active ABET evaluator and an NCEES PE exam committee member.

### **Marty Martinez**

# **Veteran's Transition Course at the University of Wyoming**

## **Abstract**

In late January 2011, two engineering faculty members at the University of Wyoming (UW) with over 50 years of combined military service were contacted about establishing a transition course for returning veterans by the UW Veterans Transition Task Force. As veterans themselves, they were honored to be asked to serve fellow veterans in this capacity. To construct this course, they elicited the assistance of experts in veterans' affairs and challenges. The experts help guide the development of overarching goals for the course. The goals drove the development of a detailed course syllabus.

The course began as a "small footprint" course of one semester hour. That is, a course framework was developed such that any interested colleague could teach this course. Attempts were made to use already existing resources wherever possible. In mid-2015, to accommodate the major revision of the University Studies Program (i.e., general studies) at the University of Wyoming, the course was expanded to three semester hours, with additional material for written, oral, and digital communication.

This course has been taught annually since 2011. In this paper we share course development, content, evolution over time, successes, and areas for further improvement. Also, we discuss in detail additional veteran services provided by the campus Veterans Services Center that dovetail into the course. We provide student feedback from previous students as a form of assessment.

## **Overview**

In September 2009, Vice President for Student Affairs Sara Axelson established a Veterans Task Force of representatives from university departments, state agencies and community service organizations. The task force, chaired by Associate Dean of Students Dr. Dolores Cardona, established a goal to identify high impact methods to enhance veteran services already in place to smooth the transition from military to college life. The task force identified four immediate priorities: establishment of a multi-use veteran space, creation of an informed community cognizant of the challenges facing the student veteran, building and maintaining a dedicated veterans informational website, and establishing a learning community consisting of several veteran specific courses [1].

As a result of the Task Force findings, Barrett and Wright were contacted by Vice President Axelson about interest in establishing a Veteran's Transition Course. They were honored to be asked to serve fellow veterans in this capacity. Although veterans themselves, with over 50 years of combined military service between them, and also seasoned educators, they had little experience in working with student veterans. To begin development of the course, they elicited the assistance of experts in veterans' affairs and in challenges faced by returning veterans.

In this paper, we share course development, content, evolution over time, successes, and areas for further improvement. Also, we discuss in detail additional veteran services provided by the campus Veteran Service Center that dovetail into the course. We provide student feedback from previous students as a form of assessment.

## **Background**

After accepting the invitation to develop the course, Barrett and Wright met with multiple groups with expertise in veterans' affairs and veteran challenges including:

- Army Reserve Officer Training Commander (Army ROTC) and staff
- Air Force Reserve Officer Training Commander (USAF ROTC) and staff
- Veterans Affairs, Local Recovery Coordinator
- Veterans Affairs representative, Associate Dean of Students
- Various information sources including "Combat2College" [2]

The discussion and background research resulted in a list of potential course topics. The course topics were grouped by area and organized into course goals. The goals of this course were established to provide returning veterans:

- A smooth transition to college life (time management skills, financial management, wellness skills);
- Basic tools for academic success (basic writing skills, library skills, oral presentation skills, and advising);
- Information on resources available to returning veterans (VA benefits, academic services, career services);
- A sense of community, camaraderie, and belonging (interaction with fellow veterans, community service opportunities);
- Information on veteran-related challenges (post-traumatic stress disorder awareness, AWARE (Alcohol Wellness Alternatives, Research, & Education), Gatekeepers suicide prevention training, and stress reduction techniques).

Originally, the course counted for University (General) Studies credit for the Intellectual Community (I) and the Information Literacy (L) component and Communication, with a "small footprint" of one semester hour.

## **Methods**

With course goals in hand, Barrett and Wright developed a course syllabus to blend desired course topics into a cohesive student experience. Provided in Table 1 is a list of course topics and assignments by area. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of all course concepts and assignments. Instead, we concentrate on three selected items.

**Reflective paper on proactively solving a past challenge.** In this assignment, students are required to report on and describe how they have proactively solved a past challenge. One of the sacred ground rules for the course is that information shared with fellow classmates and the instructors stays safely within the course. This has provided students the opportunity to write about past unresolved personal challenges. Some have reported on adjusting to combat related injuries, adjusting to civilian life after forced medical retirement from the military, unresolved feelings of losing comrades in combat, and horrific war experiences. Some students have confided that this was the first time they were able to openly confront their feelings about some of these situations.

**Career plan paper and oral presentation.** An important aspect of this course is helping students set a career goal and develop a plan to prepare for the career. Through completion of a career plan paper and oral presentation, students develop a detailed plan of how to pursue a specific job, obtain the education required for the position, and research the job prospects they can expect upon graduation. The sharing of detailed career plans with fellow students allows plans to be strengthened through the peer review process.

**Table 1.** Course topics and assignments.

| Topic Area   | Number of Lessons |
|--|-------------------|
| <b>Smooth transition to college life</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time management seminar</li> <li>- Develop detailed weekly schedule, identify “collisions” in upcoming semester</li> </ul>   | 1                 |
| <b>Basic tools for academic success</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mini-modules on library use</li> <li>- Seminar on basic library research skills</li> <li>- Seminar on academic advising</li> </ul>  | 2                 |
| <b>A sense of community, camaraderie and belonging</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get acquainted - share military experience, major of interest, dream job</li> <li>- Get Acquainted - teams of two, exchange biographical sketch, introduce your team member to the rest of class with 5 minute presentation</li> <li>- Seminar on UW Outdoor Programs</li> <li>- Orientation to the Veterans Services Center</li> <li>- Closing ceremony and presentation of course coins</li> </ul>                                       | 4                 |
| <b>Information resources</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career Services seminar I</li> <li>- Identify dream job: research required education, experience, job prospects</li> <li>- Seminar on TRIO Student Success Services – McNair’s Scholar, academic success services available on campus</li> <li>- Career Services II: professional small talk, dress for success, resumes and cover letters</li> </ul>  | 3                 |
| <b>Information on veteran related challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seminar on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</li> <li>- Seminar of Gatekeepers suicide prevention program</li> <li>- Seminar on AWARE (Alcohol Wellness Alternatives, Research, Education)</li> <li>- Stress management and personal counseling</li> </ul>   | 4                 |
| <b>Communication skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One page biographical sketch</li> <li>- Introduce team member to the rest of the class</li> <li>- Review basics of grammar – grammar quiz [3]</li> <li>- Seminar on communication basics [4]</li> <li>- Seminar on basic paper outlining skills</li> <li>- Complete a reflective paper on proactively solving a past challenge</li> <li>- Seminar on oral presentation basics – difference between military briefing style and civilian oral presentations</li> </ul> | 15                |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seminar on the basics of communicating with MS PowerPoint</li> <li>- Peer review of draft written assignments</li> <li>- Paper and oral presentation on Career Plan providing a path to the dream job</li> <li>- Student papers on “Speak with Confidence”</li> <li>- Seminar on web design basics</li> <li>- Construct resume and cover letter</li> </ul> |  |
|---|--|

**Closing ceremony and presentation of course coins.** Over the duration of the course, strong relationships are developed. Although good natured, inter-service rivalry remains strong; however, students recognize that they share a common bond of serving their country and evolve into a cohesive unit by the end of the semester. During the first offering of the course, students developed a course coin reflecting this ethos (see Figure 1). On the last day of the course, students share cake and punch, and course coins are presented by the instructors.



Figure 1. Course coin [Courtesy of UW News Service].

As mentioned earlier, the course began as a “small footprint” course of one semester hour. That is, a course framework was developed such that any interested colleague could teach this course. Attempts were made to use already existing resources wherever possible. In mid-2015, to accommodate a major revision of the University Studies Program (USP, i.e., general studies) at the University of Wyoming, the course was expanded to three semester hours, with additional material for written, oral, and digital communication. This added communication material was presented in such a way as to provide an effective bridge between the communication style common in a military environment, and the communication style expected in a university and

civilian environment. This made the course more approachable for veterans than a more traditional course covering similar communication topics. This revised version of the course was first taught in the Spring semester of 2016. The revised course counts as a Communication 2 (COM2) for USP; a typical COM2 course would be a second non-majors English course. The choice to transform the course into a COM2 was based on feedback from past students of the previous version of the course, who identified COM2 as a course most appropriate for veteran students who often already have a first English class and who would typically not be taking courses such as Freshmen Seminar.

### **Development of the Veteran's Service Center.**

The 2009 Veterans Task Force also recommended establishment of a multi-use veteran space. In the spring 2010 semester, the UW Veterans Services Center opened its doors to serving the 300-400 student veteran population with a dedicated space for study, social interaction, and resource connection. The VSC was designed to provide a lounge, student computer laboratory, study area, and social gathering space and within the first year, the VSC recorded nearly 1000 student visits. The Veterans Services Center (VSC) received annual grant funding from the Marna M. Kuehne Disabled Veterans Foundation, a philanthropic foundation dedicated to supporting disabled veterans initiatives within Wyoming, providing financial support for one (1) non-benefitted, full-time staff and annual programming budget.

Since its simple beginnings, the VSC has expanded from a gathering and social place for veterans to becoming the central aspect of the Veterans Program at UW. The VSC now houses the full-time Project Coordinator and seven (7) VA funded workstudy students to plan/coordinate/and oversee more than 40 academic and social events each year. With the increased activity, the VSC experienced a 400% increase in usage growing from approximately 1000 student visits to more than 4000 recorded during the 2015-2016 academic year. As well, veteran enrollment at UW grew to over 700 student veterans during the same time.

The Task Force envisioned the VSC mission as an agency to aid the well-being of student veterans through advocacy, supportive services, and connection to assistive resources. The Veterans Services Center lives that mission, but has also created a "safe" space for our community – our students refer to the VSC as "our place 'inside the wire' " – where young veterans can connect with like-minded individuals that share similar experiences and challenges. These young veterans, much like previous generations of veterans returning from war, struggle with re-connecting to a civilian population that does not understand their experiences, emotions, tragedies, triumphs, and challenges. This drives many veterans to solitude, anger, frustration, and apathy that often result in abusive behavior and/or drug or alcohol use. Programs such as The Veterans Transition Course become a vital means of expression and understanding through which students gain a new perspective in personal expression, social acceptance, tolerance, personal challenge, living with disability, and ultimately re-connecting to society.

In response to its mission – aiding the student veteran in their transition from military to civilian life - the VSC entrenched itself in connecting with the new student veteran at the earliest opportunity to welcome, invite, and expose the new veteran to the many services provided. This has proven vital to creating a sense of connection, acceptance, familiarity, and assistance for the new students from their first moment on campus. While the VSC provides space for student

interaction and socialization, it is also widely used as a reference and connection point for campus, local, and regional veterans support services such as Regional VA Hospital, VA Mental Health counselors, VetCenter Readjustment counselors, and numerous other veteran's resources.

Today, the VSC expands its functionality to improve student success by providing free tutors, a Veterans First Year Seminar, scholarship search classes, employment resume and interview classes, student engagement and volunteerism opportunities, awareness training for staff and faculty, policy advising and advocacy, etc. As well, the target community has expanded from only military and veterans to now include military families and dependents utilizing transferred VA education benefits, enlarging the supported community to over 700 military connected students. To better accommodate the current and projected numbers of student veterans, the VSC is being expanded from its current space of 670 square feet to a new facility over 1900 square feet in size. Not only will this produce greater living space but will also allow for more growth and development of the Veterans Program.

Without a doubt, the Veterans Services Center and the Veterans Transition Course experience great individual success, but one without the other would miss the operative or academic ability to enhance student success and improve the quality of life for our military connected students. Likewise, the contributions of military veteran professors are not only based on their academic credentials, but also their previous military experience and understanding of veterans issues. Feedback shows that professors who are veterans enjoy a degree of credibility and trust with the student veterans that would be difficult to achieve for a professor with no military experience.

## Results

Since the initial class offering of 2011, the course has been offered once annually serving a total of 45 students. Periodically, students are asked to respond to the effectiveness of course concepts on a 10 point Likert scale, where a score of 10 represents the highest level of effectiveness. Representative results are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Representative results effectiveness of course concepts.**

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Academic Skills – time management   | 8.56 |
| LEARN Program – academic support services   | 7.81 |
| Academic Skills – Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning, effective writing skills | 8.44 |
| Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)   | 8.44 |
| COE Library – effective use of library resources                                      | 8.75 |
| Gatekeepers – suicide prevention  | 8.33 |
| Veterans Center resources   | 6.88 |
| University Counseling Center – dealing with stress and anxiety                        | 9.00 |
| Smoking/Tobacco cessation   | 8.22 |
| Center for Advising and Career Services   | 9.33 |
| Academic Skills – Advising  | 8.88 |
| AWARE: Alcohol Wellness, Alternatives, Research, Education                            | 8.44 |

Since 2011, UW Veterans Services Center has participated in surveys and questionnaires from professional publications interested in ranking schools and institutions of higher learning based upon support and services focused toward improving success within their military connected population. Over the past five years, UW has participated in surveys from G.I. Jobs [5], Military Times Best for Vets [6], Military.com [7], and Military Advanced Education & Transition (MAE&T) [8]. While the Veterans Program at UW has continually increased its ranking in each of these publications, over the past 2 years (2014-2016) UW was identified as one of the few MAE&T TOP SCHOOLS, achieving the top 2% ranking of 664 two year and four year colleges and universities surveyed.

We do not take this ranking as a positive reflection on the course. It is a reflection of the commitment of many at the University and other service agencies who are dedicated to the well-being of student veterans and their future.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Since its inception, the Veteran Transition Course has evolved over time to best serve the student veterans. The students have had considerable input into the content and changes in the course. For example, the choice of many topics and guest speakers for the course resulted from frank student input. We are continually open to course improvement. In the short term we are working at an improved integration between a veteran first year seminar and this course. We will also be working with the UW fine arts faculty to determine methods for veterans to express their feelings through the arts.

Based on both formal and informal feedback from students who have taken the course, we are pleased to report that the course has been significantly helpful, in one way or another, to nearly all of them. It helped them realize what was needed to transition into the role of a student in a civilian environment, gave them a “safe” place to discuss and normalize their feelings about their new situation, provided the tools they needed to succeed in their courses, and introduced them to a like-minded support network of fellow veterans on campus. We are working hard to advertise the course to student veterans. In closing, we are deeply honored to serve our fellow veterans in this way. We believe this is the least we can do for the service they each provided to this great country.

The authors would be happy to communicate with interested parties at other universities who may wish to develop similar programs and facilities for their own student veterans.

### **Acknowledgements**

We dedicate this paper to Vice President of Student Affairs Sara L. Axelson who had the vision for the Veterans Program at the University of Wyoming.



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