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EMCC serves vets with GI Bill, new center

Rachel Trott
staff writer

Veterans go through intense training at basic training to learn the ins and outs of military life and their jobs.

Once they leave for civilian life, many choose to use an educational benefit called the GI Bill to return to school.

With multiple GI Bills and eligibility requirements, one thing the Office of Veterans Services at **Estrella Mountain Community College** does is help guide new veteran students through understanding exactly what education benefits they are entitled to.

"A lot of students contact me via email right from the combat zone or from their duty station with questions about their GI Bill. They're getting a briefing although it's not real comprehensive as to how the GI Bill actually works," Director Nancy McNeill explained. "So the biggest thing that we serve here is information."

Understanding specific benefits of each GI Bill is especially important when students plan to earn a bachelor's degree, McNeill added.

"There are only 36 months of benefits, so if they want to achieve a bachelor's degree, they really need to seriously get with us, their family and advisers to get moving in a certain direction."

If the Office of Veterans Services doesn't have the answer to a particular question, it can help the student get the information from other resources such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, she said.

Transition

Once a veteran is enrolled and understands his GI Bill benefits, the next step is helping him transition from military to civilian life.

"Part of my mission is to help them learn the language of the GI Bill and the language of being a student," McNeill said. "It can leave them feeling pretty vulnerable because there's a completely new routine and set of expectations."

To help the process, EMCC offers a mentor program composed of veteran students who have already taken classes on campus.

The program allows the veteran mentor to earn money through a non-taxable, federal work study program in order to support himself through school, as well as provide insight for new veterans



ESTRELLA MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS Julio Saavedra, of Avondale, right, and Chris Chavez of Litchfield Park work in a new center for veterans last month at the Avondale school. Saavedra and Chavez, both veterans, work closely with other veterans who attend, or will attend, EMCC. View photo by Michael Clawson

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about classes, registration and life in **college**.

To Chris Chavez, who separated from the U.S. Army, the key to being a successful mentor is the fact that he's a veteran helping other veterans.

"I think it goes back to the bond that's built, the fraternity of military service. Vets tend to trust other vets; it's just a common bond that you have, whether it's in war or peace time. It just feels good to be served by another veteran."

Veterans helping veterans

Veterans Services staff knows first-hand the importance of veterans' being an integral part of the office. McNeill served four years in the U.S. Air Force on the flight line in avionics.

"I went into a traditionally male position; I was one of three women in the squadron," she said. "To me, anyone who makes that choice to enlist is the best of the best. Being [a service member] myself was great, but to have the honor of serving those individuals here is better."

The number of veterans using GI Bill benefits has been on the rise, according to staff in the Office of Veterans Services.

At EMCC specifically, the number of veteran students has nearly doubled in the past two years, rising from 350 to 600 students, with even more expected to enroll in the coming years.

"The military is cutting back, so a lot of individuals are getting out and utilizing their benefits. The increase that's occurred here has been steady," McNeill said. "It's something that's happening across the board; all schools are seeing this increase. It's exciting, but also very challenging."

To help meet the needs of veteran students, the Office of Veterans Services is planning on moving out of their current offices and expanding into a bigger, more centralized space in the student union next semester.

"The veterans center is primary, we have to have a place for the veterans center," she said. "We have really seen that there needs to be a space where veterans can hang, where they can gravitate toward, where we can implement programs of transition and support. It's pretty exciting to see where we're headed in the future."

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