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Good morning, good morning, Penguin nation. Welcome to the *Guided Pathways* podcast where we talk about all of the great work happening at Clark College related to Guided Pathways in student success.

So as a quick reminder, Guided Pathways is a student success framework that we utilize at Clark College to help provide a structure that helps our students get to the finish line and helps them to get onto the career pathway that they have chosen for themselves. We do this by articulating all of our programs in our program maps, by providing a robust onboarding system that gets students connected to the college and into the pathway of their choice, supports and services that help them to stay on that pathway, and then eventually connecting that pathway to career learning outcomes and assessing all of the good work that's happening towards these goals.

I'm Rhianna Johnson, and I'm the director of Guided Pathways at Clark College. And I oversee several different projects and initiatives related to student success. Today, we're going to be talking to Donna Larson, the Associate Director of the Veterans Center of Excellence at Clark College, and learning a little bit about how the Veterans Center assists students with their success. So welcome, Donna. Great to have you today.

Thanks, Rhianna. I am thrilled to be here and talk about the Veterans Center.

Fantastic. So let's start just by having you tell us a little bit about the Veterans Center of Excellence. What's your department structure, and what are the services that are provided in the center?

OK. The Veterans Center of Excellence has four employees. That's our structure. We have a school certifying officer, and that's the really important person because that's the person that tells the VA the veterans want to use their benefits, and then tells the VA what kind of benefits. And also, how many classes and what their tuition is so that the VA will cover it all for the students.

And we also have a veteran advisor, and the veteran advisor is there to help students understand what college is and what types of programs we have. They kind of look at that with them. And then they put them on a roadmap, on a pathway with a degree worksheet-- the VA requires a worksheet-- to make sure that they can be successful in their educational goals.

In addition, the VCOE also offers services for students. We have free tutoring. The schedule changes every term, so students are encouraged to go to the Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter sites, or the Canvas shell that we've set up for students to learn what the times are for our tutoring. We have science tutors, we have math tutors, and we also have a writing tutor that comes in.

We also offer students computers and a place-- a quiet place to work on those computers. We have a study area for students who want to bring their own computers and just sit down and study and do their work.

In addition, if somebody just wants to crash in between classes, we also have a lounge in the back. And we also have a microwave and a refrigerator so if they want to bring their lunch and they want to heat it up during lunchtime, they're more than welcome to do that and eat their lunch there with us.

Oh, fantastic. It sounds like a really welcoming space for veteran students. So I know that you're pretty familiar with Guided Pathways' work, being a member of the Guided Pathways Advisory Council, which is a cross-sectional group of staff and faculty who contribute and assist with creating Guided Pathways initiatives. How do you think the work of the VCOE intersects with the Guided Pathways model?

The first way it intersects is that we're both serving students. We want students to be successful. We want them to achieve their educational goals. And we are both working really hard toward that and to take away any barriers that might exist for students.

I think it intersects because our veterans advisor is well versed in Guided Pathways as well. And we talk to the students a lot about making that pathway because in order to accomplish a goal, you have to have a way to meet that goal. And the Guided Pathways roadmaps are absolutely invaluable for helping students stay on that pathway.

And we try to help them. We provide encouragement, support. We also have an emergency grants program in case they need it to keep them on that pathway. But I think that Guided Pathway gives us the structure to help students be successful, and we love working with the Guided Pathways folks so that we can all get them there.

That's awesome. I can imagine that for some veteran students it might be a little bit, you know, of a culture shock or a change if they haven't gone to school before and are just coming out of the military. So can you give us maybe an example or two of how the Veterans Center really helps them create that roadmap to get them from post-military into a new career pathway?

Well, when they come in we find out that the military, the active duty folks do not tell them about their GI benefits, their GI Bill benefits.

And what's the GI Bill? Can you explain that?

The GI Bill is a law passed by Congress that says when-- this is post-9/11, because there's a few different versions, depending on when people enlisted, but the post-9/11 is the most common. And when people exit the military, they have 36 months of free educational benefits, if you will.

And the educational benefits are paying for tuition and fees. They also get a book stipend. They also get a monthly housing allowance from the VA. And it varies according to location. And this helps them get into the civilian world, if you will.

And they can pay for their rent. So they have to figure out a way to get housing money. Or not housing, food money. But they have a chance to go to school and choose whatever program that they would like to enroll in and make that new career. And veterans choose all sorts of different programs, so we have to be knowledgeable about all the programs that Clark College offers so that we can help them make their best choices.

Now, the GI Bill, Chapter 33 is really important for people to realize that the VA has lots of requirements. So we try to scaffold it. We try to help them. We know that the military environment provides a lot of support, and basically if they need to do something they send out reminders, and they have them complete whatever they need to complete in a kind of regimented fashion.

So we try to be very proactive. We meet with students. We talk to students on the phone. We email them. We Zoom with them and try to talk to them and tell them what the process is. It's a lot of information to give to them, and it's a lot for them to take in, so we do repeat it occasionally. But we always try to make sure that whenever they need something, we send them a reminder so that they can get it done.

Fantastic. That sounds like a really structured onboarding system, which is a big part of Guided Pathways with a lot of supports along the way. So thanks for sharing about that.

At Clark College, we're really focused on equity and diversity and inclusion, making sure that all students feel welcome and supported at the college. Can you share a little bit about some of the specific things happening in the VCOE to address any equity gaps?

We have done quite a bit, and we're going to continue to do quite a bit. The equity gaps for us also include equity for veteran students as well. And during the spring term, we offered five different workshops, and we started with LGBTQIA+. Then we went into microaggressions.

We also did post-traumatic stress. We did trauma-informed mindfulness or trauma-informed care. We kind of tweaked the PTSD just a little bit and did a repeat of that, and then we also did mindfulness for vets as well.

Some of the issues that they may relate to post-traumatic stress syndrome, so we try to give them some ways to calm themselves, some ways to go into mindfulness, to take control of themselves when they are going to have a PTSD attack. But we try to make it - we try to make the center inclusive for everybody by offering these things and by just extending an open invitation and trying to be very caring and warm for the people that do come in.

That's wonderful. Wow. Thank you so much for giving us some of those details as well. So I really just appreciate you for your time today, Donna. I think that the Veterans Center of Excellence is a great representative program of the Guided Pathways model with all of the direct supports and services, in addition to that focus on equity and ensuring inclusion. So thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate your time.

It was my pleasure, Rhianna. Great talking with you.