

# **The City University of New York**



**Testimony of Roger Sherwood  
Associate Professor, Hunter College School of Social Work  
The City University of New York  
New York City Council Higher Education and Veterans Committees  
“Services for Veterans at CUNY”  
November 19, 2007**

Good afternoon, Chair Barron, Chair Monserrate, and members of the committees. I am Roger Sherwood, Associate Professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work, and Principal Investigator of PROVE: Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans' Education. The project is an initiative from the offices of Vice Chancellor Moore and Dean Robert Ptachik, University Dean for the Executive Office and Enrollment.

I am a Vietnam-Era veteran and have been very fortunate to have worked with the veteran community for 25 years. For the past twenty-one years, I have been a clinical consultant to the Veterans Administration Hudson Valley Health Care System, Montrose Campus, where I counsel veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I was one of the founding members of the "Hidden Client Conference: Veterans and Their Loved Ones" now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year.

The main purpose of PROVE is to enhance existing services and develop new ones in support of our veteran/students at CUNY. The idea is simple: utilize the experience and skills of the graduate students in Hunter's highly regarded school of Social Work to support veterans' services across the CUNY campuses. In less than three months, we have been able to hire an experienced Project Director/Field Instructor, Dr. Myra Marcus, a clinical social worker and previously an Associate Professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, recruit six graduate social work interns and place the interns in three sites. Two of the interns are with Wilfred Cotto, Coordinator of the CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs, two are at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and two are at Hunter College.

This project has several phases of development. The first has been accomplished with the hiring of the Project Director/Field Instructor, and the recruiting of six interns who are excellent. The second phase also has been accomplished with the introduction of PROVE at the three sites. The CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs was a smooth endeavor due to shared purpose, vision and excellent direction by Wilfred Cotto. We also received support at many levels at John Jay such as Matthew McGee a Vietnam veteran and social worker becoming our on-site supervisor. At Hunter College, we have received support from the Veterans Affairs Coordinator Dr. Crystal Schacter and the Personal Counseling Center. At this phase, we are assessing existing supports for veterans and facilitating the coordination of these supports to better serve veterans. The third phase already initiated is outreach to veteran/students in order to conduct an assessment of their needs and potential areas for supportive intervention. The fourth phase is providing the actual assistance in response to veterans' stated needs through consultation, counseling and the development of groups for veterans. The fifth phase is the development of a system of veteran mentors who would provide assistance to other veteran students. The final phase will be evaluation of the effectiveness of provided services as related to retention, graduation rates as well as making CUNY more attractive to enrolling veterans.

**Lessons learned** from our first six weeks of being at these three sites:

- 1) Veteran students are often not aware of the range of benefits or services available to them as veterans including educational benefits, health care, counseling, etc.

- 2) Even if aware of services, some veterans are unable to access these services because of difficulties navigating the institutional systems or internal sources of resistance such as a tendency to isolate.
- 3) Veterans have multiple untapped strengths and talents which often go underutilized.
- 4) With the provision of information and some support, these veteran/students are able to access additional benefits, become connected to other veterans and in turn help other veterans.
- 5) Some veterans are pursuing their educational aspirations while dealing with the effects of being in war and having symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.
- 6) Some veterans with PTSD are wary of accessing services through the Veterans Administration or Veterans Outreach Centers and thus go untreated.

In the first six weeks of having interns on site, the PROVE team has had contact with over 125 veterans and evaluative discussions with 25.

I have had the opportunity for in-depth discussions with 11 veterans—7 men and five women. Each has needs that are going unmet, for example, at least four of them were not accessing additional financial aid for which they were entitled. Two of them as OIF/OEF(Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom) veterans were entitled to free medical care at the Veterans Hospital but did not know of the benefit. All of them have had incredible, intense experiences and stories that they have not been able to discuss in detail with anyone. Some of them have PTSD or Traumatic Brain Injury. Their stories demonstrate why enhancing services to veteran/students at CUNY is so important. First, these veteran/students deserve all the benefits they are entitled to for

their service to our country. Secondly, a successful educational experience can promote healing from psychological trauma and facilitate re-integration into civilian society. Thirdly, services offered at an educational site can be made more easily accessible and can avoid the stigma of seeking formal mental health services. Groups for women veterans, groups for peer support, and groups for anger management are critically needed. The actual implementation of services to veteran/students requires consistent, assertive outreach to initially engage and to assist them in sharing their strengths and talents with others. Veterans are often cautious of others and skeptical of intention and it is imperative that they experience our genuine consistent support and commitment to them.

A key focus of PROVE is synergizing current services at each campus by, for example, integration of graduate social work interns with existing programs. We also believe that a critical element of continuing to enhance services is the development of veterans helping veterans through a mentoring system. A very tangible goal of effective service will be the completion of a support team sheet that identifies the resources available at each campus including names and phone numbers. The veteran/student will have a PROVE member assigned to them to provide information, assist with access and on-going support. (See Attachment 1)

I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk about this extremely important and exciting project.

Roger J. Sherwood DSW  
Associate Professor  
Hunter College School of Social Work

Principal Investigator  
PROVE

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**Testimony of Garrie Moore  
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs  
The City University of New York  
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Good afternoon, Chair Barron, Chair Monserrate, and members of the committees. I am Garrie Moore, vice chancellor for student affairs at The City University of New York. Testifying with me today are Roger Sherwood, associate professor in the School of Social Work at CUNY's Hunter College; Samuel Farrell, director of the Center for Veterans, Youth and Adults at CUNY's LaGuardia Community College; and Justin Whaley, a student and president of Students for Veterans at CUNY's Borough of Manhattan Community College.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about CUNY's services for veterans. While the country's recent commemoration of Veterans Day has focused much-needed attention on veterans, I am proud to note that serving veterans is a year-round priority at the University. We understand that, as an institution, our profound gratitude for our veterans' enormous contributions to this country is best expressed through services that will enhance their educational opportunities and advance their personal and professional aspirations. As a Vietnam-era veteran myself, I take a very special interest in ensuring that veterans find at CUNY the specific resources they need to successfully meet their educational goals.

Currently, there are close to 3,000 student veterans and reservists enrolled at CUNY. This places the University in the top 10 for veteran student enrollment among U.S. higher education institutions. The University's veteran population has grown by about 10 percent every year since 2004. We anticipate further growth: the Department of Veterans Affairs reports that about 6,000 veterans have recently returned to the greater New York City area, and 10,000 soldiers are expected to return to the city from Iraq and Afghanistan over the next year. Our veteran students are a critical part of our diverse student body, and the University offers a range of academic and support services to ease their transition to college and civilian life. But as these numbers indicate, our services must be expanded, and the council's assistance and partnership in this regard will be critical to our ongoing efforts.

In addition to CUNY's central Office of Veterans Affairs, each CUNY college has appointed a Veterans Affairs Coordinator to serve student veterans and reservists. The campus coordinators offer information and referrals in several key areas.

- Academic advising and tutoring is available, particularly for those who may not be familiar with navigating a college environment. Veterans may be older than other students and may not have a wide network of information about higher education.
- Our counseling services offer assistance with housing, day care, and personal finance. Special services are provided for post-deployment issues, particularly those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, and for disabled students.
- Advice on financial aid and benefits is also available, especially regarding deferred tuition and the necessary coordination with the Veterans Administration, as well as scholarships, short-term loans, and Social Security.
- Finally, job placement counseling assists with full- and part-time employment and employment-related legal aid.

I must emphasize that we make every effort to tailor these services to veterans' needs and to train our student affairs professionals to work specifically with veteran-related issues. For example, we are currently gathering data from our "CUNY Veterans Experience Survey" and have held focus groups with student veterans and reservists at several CUNY colleges. Feedback from these groups and from the survey will be used to shape our services and policies. Also, in April we held our first-ever Veterans Liaison Retreat to offer intensive training about veterans services for our liaison staff. We have sponsored membership to the National Association of Veterans Program Administrators (NAVPA) for all of our liaisons so that they have access to national resources and information, and last month we participated in NAVPA's national conference.

In addition, individual CUNY campuses have initiated expanded programming and services to meet veteran students' needs. For example, the School of Social Work at Hunter College has launched PROVE: the Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education. This program makes available social workers who are experienced in working with post-traumatic stress disorder to the University's colleges and schools. Roger Sherwood will testify momentarily about Hunter's efforts to maximize support for veteran students, particularly those returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Likewise, Sam Farrell will speak to you about LaGuardia's efforts, including a \$1.25 million grant the college recently received from the U.S. Department of Education's Upward Bound Veterans Program to offer

free GED and college preparatory courses to veterans. We are particularly grateful to the council for its recent funding to enable LaGuardia to coordinate a network of community-based initiatives to better serve veterans. Additionally, New York City College of Technology, which has implemented an online Veterans E-Office, and Queensborough Community College, which operates a Veterans Project, have developed innovative ways to recognize the growing community of veterans while incorporating them into the larger college community.

Our outreach efforts are also an important part of our commitment to encourage veterans' participation in higher education. For example, CUNY's Student Affairs Division recently co-sponsored a "Calling All Guards" event with the Brooklyn Cyclones, held an information fair at Fort Totten, and participated in the "Salute to Heroes" Job and Information Fair at the Javits Center. Last month, in collaboration with CUNY's Office of Admission Services, we hosted a Veterans Fair at Baruch College. We were also very pleased to sponsor an entry in New York City's Veterans Day Parade about a week ago, at which 40 of our student veterans participated.

Right now, the University is preparing for the CUNY Veterans Conference in February 2008 at City College. We are also collaborating with Roger Newman, the city's first commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, to host a citywide Veterans Services Day in the spring. This event will advise city employees who are veterans of the information and services available to them from city, state, and federal agencies.

I can assure you that the educational needs of our veterans will remain a top priority at CUNY. We deeply value their service and their experiences and welcome the countless ways they enrich our classrooms and our educational endeavor. Both our outreach efforts and our campus services are aimed at helping veterans readjust to civilian life and take full advantage of the lifelong benefits higher education offers—which our veterans so obviously deserve.

However, the expected influx of veterans returning to New York City over the coming year will test our resources and our responsiveness. In order to meet the needs of increasing numbers of returning veterans, we must expand our advising and counseling services, as well as our outreach to the growing veteran community in the city. Our hope is to establish a full-time service

coordinator at each campus to assist with enrollment, benefit claims, counseling, retention, and other issues. Additionally, we know that veteran student success depends on the implementation of a vibrant veterans' project on each campus, similar to those at LaGuardia Community College, New York City College of Technology, and Queensborough Community College. We know that veterans will avail themselves of outreach and support when they are framed appropriately.

Therefore, I respectfully request the council's assistance in building a comprehensive veterans' services infrastructure at the University, one that will give these men and women the opportunity to achieve an excellent post-active-duty education. In partnership with the council, I know that we can continue to fully serve those who have so selflessly served us. Thank you again for all you have done for the University and for our veterans.