More vets graduating local colleges

San Diego schools see jump in veterans earning degrees

By Gary Warth

5:22 p.m. May 29, 2015
Updated 5:22 p.m.

MiraCosta student and veteran Deverson Lochard celebrates during this year's graduation ceremony at the school. MiraCosta and other area community colleges have seen a noticeable increase in the number of veterans graduating. — MiraCosta College

Some community colleges in the county saw a surge in veterans graduating this year, possibly sparked by greater support on campus, more open classes and an influx of students who left the military in recent years, among other factors.

Jack Beresford, spokesman for the San Diego Community College District, said the 120 veterans who graduated from San Diego City College this year represented a 50 percent increase from last year. Mesa College graduated 90 veterans, a 70 percent increase, and Miramar College graduated 130, a 35 percent increase.
Districtwide, the 340 graduates represent a 45 percent increase in veterans earning degrees and certificates in the three colleges, he said, significantly outpacing the district’s overall 25 percent increase.

Some recent graduates said their success was possible in large part because of the support they found for veterans on campus.

“Even though the transition was hard, I was extremely lucky to stumble upon San Diego Mesa College and its amazing faculty,” Mesa graduate Ana Gallo, 25, wrote in a commencement web page about the Student Veterans Organization on campus. “I was also fortunate to find a group of dedicated individuals who share the same goals that I have and come from similar military backgrounds.”

MiraCosta College in Oceanside did not see a significant increase in veterans graduating this year, but did see a tremendous growth in the number over the past five years, said the school’s public information officer Cheryl Broom.

The number of graduates at MiraCosta has doubled since 2010, and the number of veteran graduates has increased by 150 percent in that same time, she said.

The veteran population at MiraCosta overall has increased from about 800 students in 2003-04 to almost 1,800 in 2013-14.

“The college also is focused on providing specialized programs and services to our veteran students,” Broom said, noting the new Veterans Information Center that opened on campus last November.

The Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District did not see an increase, and Palomar College does not track the number of its veteran graduates. Numbers at Southwestern weren’t available.

The increase in veteran graduates follows an influx of service members who went back to school after the U.S. began withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beginning in 2011, local universities and colleges reported a bump in veteran enrollment. Campuses responded in the years since with more programs and new or expanded centers to serve that population.

It’s unclear whether the local graduation rates reflect a national trend, but one professor who works with the veteran population at his school said the increase is the result of several factors, including a greater number of classes after years of cutbacks.

“Certainly with California’s budget windfall, I can tell you that community colleges are saying it’s time to open the spigots a little bit,” said Peter Haro, adviser for the Veterans Club at San Diego City College.

Although more service members were leaving the military and seeking higher education in recent years, they and other students found it hard to graduate on time because so
many classes had been cut. With many of those classes restored in the past two years, Haro said more veterans are opting for community colleges instead of private schools.

"There’s some anecdotal evidence that veterans are starting to move away from a lot of those for-profit universities that were targeting them," he said. “So many veterans were getting worthless degrees or not finishing at all, the word got out.”

Some for-profit private schools have been criticized in recent years for aggressively recruiting veterans, yet having a low success rate with them.

The growing graduation rate at community colleges could be at least partly attributed to the expanded services for veteran students on campuses, Haro said.

Ricardo Hernandez Gomez, a 25-year-old Marine veteran who just graduated from San Diego City College, credits the school’s growing graduation rate with its support for veterans.

“I think we had a solid family at the Veterans Support Center,” said Gomez, adding that he chose City College because he had been warned about the low success rate of some for-profit, private schools.

Miramar College graduate and Navy veteran Javier Chen, 24, also credited campus support with helping him and other students graduate.

“It helped motivate students and brought some veterans together,” he said. “I feel that sometimes the veterans are lost in the student population. Most (students) just got out of high school, but veterans, they’ve been the service four or five years, they’re older, and they’re seen as nontraditional students.”

One veteran who has been out of the military for 20 years also credited his school’s veterans support services with helping him graduate.

“My college success was solely based on that resource center, in and of itself,” said recent Mesa College graduate and Navy veteran Angelo Lorenzoni, 41.

“I can’t even begin to put into words the amount I owe to all the guys over there.”

Four-year universities also are doing more to help veterans transition into higher education and new careers. San Diego State University, UC San Diego, Cal State San Marcos and the University of San Diego all have student veteran centers.

UCSD also does outreach at community colleges and at Camp Pendleton to for veterans interested in learning about the school’s program, said public information officer Christine Clark.