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Academic and Student Affairs

Veterans to Agriculture Pilot Programs at South Central College

Minnesota State

Veterans to Agriculture Pilot Programs

Background

The 2015 legislative session created Senate File 0005, which established a pilot program at South Central College, North Mankato Campus to support a veterans interested in pursuing a career in agriculture after completion of their military service. The Veterans to Agriculture pilot program is designed to facilitate the entrance of military veterans into careers related to agriculture, food production, processing, and distribution. This is accomplished through an intensive four to eight week academic training program in relevant fields of study. Job development programs include outreach to potential employers and appropriate career-building skills development designed to assist returning veterans in entering the civilian workforce. Upon successful completion a student will be awarded a certificate of completion or other appropriate credit.

Need to replace retiring farmers

There are currently 74,542 farms in Minnesota. A report from the Minnesota State Demographic Center has identified the average age of Minnesota farmers to be 55 years, based on the 2012 Agriculture census. There has been a shift to older farmers as the 'principal operators.' Minnesota's principal farm operators are an average of 56.6 years of age. The 2012 census reported 8,880 principal operators who were age 75 or older. More than 80 percent of farm operators, 60,000, were born before 1963.

The 2014 farm bill authorized USDA to establish a military veteran agricultural liaison to serve as a resource in assisting veterans and potential veteran farmers in participating in agricultural programs. Many of the USDA programs support individuals with their respective farm or ranch business. The Congressional Research Service has identified several resources to assist beginning military veterans as farmers and ranchers as well as those from other underserved groups with priority or set set-aside funding.

Investigation of employment needs in agriculture-

In fall 2015, South Central College's agriculture faculty surveyed the employment needs of Thirty-three businesses for employment opportunities in the short term (1 year) and long term (within the 5 years) for future employment needs. The regional survey reflected 375 employment opportunities in short term and 663 employment opportunities within next five years. The employment opportunities were represented in the following agriculture career pathways: agribusiness office and administration; agricultural mechanical systems; plant systems; and animal systems. Industry partner focus groups were surveyed on employment needs, challenges for employment, and opportunities to employ veterans in their respective companies. The industry partners provide inputs and services to farmers in Minnesota and

were selected because of their willingness to hire veterans in their companies. Employers identified four core 'knowledge principles' of agriculture: safe operation of equipment, basic agronomy or livestock knowledge, agricultural communication or terminology, and business operation procedures.

Program Implementation

South Central College, Mankato has made much progress in developing and implementing the program, as follows:

- Program approval was completed at SCC for the AgSPARK Farm Business Management and Agronomy Certificates. The awards have progressed through the entire review process and have consequently been shared in general formats with current partners. This allows other institutions to quickly mainstream the documents into their respective curriculum approval process.
- Completed development of two certificates for entry into agriculture careers: Agribusiness Agronomy Certificate - providing support, input and logistics in agriculture and a Farm Business Management (FBM) Certificate - providing a beginning farmer the education and support to establish his/her farming enterprise and business structure.
- Eight colleges expressed interest in offering South Central College's Farm Business Management Certificate. The certificate will require approval from each respective college through their curriculum committee, approval from Minnesota State system office, and also receive approval from Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Thirty-two County Veteran Service Officers in Southern Minnesota were invited to an agriculture career fair and will be supporting recruitment efforts.
- South Central College is coordinating military review of training and alignment with programs in agriculture VETS*, the Veterans Education Transfer System
- The college has collaborated with the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (Southern Minnesota) case workers and Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) Veterans Employment Representatives to identify short term training needs of individuals and employment opportunities. The college has also coordinated with Congressman Tim Waltz field staff on rural Minnesota employment.
- The program has been branded 'AgWarriors' to increase visibility of the program (logo permission granted) and a website has been established www.agcareers.com. The program is co-promoted through the "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon."

Over 1,300 veterans and their families have been introduced to the program through outreach events, including:

- "Military Stand-down" events in Mankato (two events in 2015 and 2016)
- Military assistance program offered by Minnesota State, a south-central Minnesota
- "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon" membership meeting in south-central Minnesota
- County Veteran Service Office outreach (12 state officers)

- Agribusiness Day at South Central College
- Regional planning meetings among agribusiness employers, colleges and DEED

Challenges for the pilot project

At the inception of the program, there was no approved non-credit, short term training among Minnesota State colleges for agriculture certificates or farm business management degrees. Program design and approval processes take time and the program requires Minnesota State system office and Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs approval (to allow veterans to use their education benefits for the program).

Another challenge is to identify veterans interested in the program. To promote the program, the college established relationships with County Veteran Service Officers to seek their assistance in identifying eligible participants. Another goal of the project is to find colleges willing to offer an urban agriculture program to reach more participants in the metropolitan area.

Next steps

The program is off to a successful start. Efforts are being made to expand recruitment efforts to connect with more veterans. As a part of this effort, an increase in communications with state colleges and universities will take place, informing greater numbers of veterans about the AgSPARK Program. A key touchpoint for program awareness has been through the MN County Veteran's Services Officers statewide. This partnership continues and will be enhanced to assure thorough awareness of program benefits for our Vets. Finally, actions are underway to also enhance communications within agriculture businesses community about opportunities to link with Veterans.