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In The Early Years of Bunker Hill Community College: My Reminiscences As The College's Veterans Counselor

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My first recollection of Bunker Hill Community College goes back to the time one late September day I came to interview for a job. It was my first visit to the College, and I remember my first impression as if it were last week and not nearly twenty years ago. At that time of year,in the fall, when the days begin to get shorter, the sun gets low enough late in the day so that it can shine almost directly on the houses and other buildings on the hill in Charlestown that faces toward the College. Sometimes, when the weather is right (with the sun low in the western sky, and some overcast, perhaps, beyond the hill so the clouds act like a backdrop), those houses and buildings look as if they had been lit up for a painting or a movie. They can almost glow orange or gold or red, and then gradually they begin to fade into darkness as the sun goes down.

From inside the College, the sight can be impressive, even awesome at times. What I saw as I waited that day for my interview with Dean Waterhouse was a panoramic view of Charlestown, shining in the late afternoon sun of a fall day. For someone like me who had belonged to the Charlestown Boys Club as a kid living in Somerville, this

was surprising and strange. Up to that time, to me Charlestown had always been just part of the urban landscape, consisting of brick buildings, like the Boys Club, and wood houses, all connected by sidewalks and public transportation. When I left the interview it was dark and the view was gone, but the image has lingered with me through these subsequent years.

Shortly after that I started working at the College. It was 1974, and I was the College's veterans counselor. My first assignment was in the Counseling Center, then directed by John Curtis. In those early days of the College there was a lot of sorting out of roles and functions, and my position was no exception. I was funded by a federal grant from what was then the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), so we had to figure out if I was there to represent the veterans or the Veterans Administration. (To this day some people still think of me as having been the "VA rep." on campus.) My own understanding of the issue was that clearly my job was to work with the students, not the VA, but the reality was that there was an increasing amount of accounting that needed to be done to the VA.

At first we tried to separate out the two functions, with someone else (probably the Registrar) handling the administrative duties associated with the Veterans Administration, while I dealt with the veterans as students. However, it wasn't long before that arrangement had some

problems, because, in fact, I was the person that knew not only about veterans, but I knew the systems as well. So I was never really uninvolved, and gradually I got more involved with both aspects of the process.

The story of the relationship between the College and the VA is, I think, another matter and one that should be dealt with separately - or perhaps forgotten. Suffice to say that from the late sixties and through most of the seventies, the VA was much too slow in being ready and being able to provide services, including GI Bill benefits, to Vietnam and Vietnam era veterans. As a result, higher education (often through HEW programs) needed to compensate for what the VA should have been doing.

The relationship between the College and the VA got to be almost adversarial - culminating, in my mind, with then President Shively standing up at a meeting we attended together in Portland, ME., and saying something like, "Well, if this is the way it is going to be, then we won't let any veterans attend Bunker Hill Community College". I sat there like I knew he was going to say that. Anyway, higher education and the VA slowly worked things out, and eventually things got better as the VA became more responsive to veterans and higher education learned more about VA reporting requirements.

The grant that funded my position required me to recruit veterans to education, provide educational counseling, be an

advocate for veterans on campus, and even be involved with veterans in the community. Basically, that is what I did. I visited local veterans groups, made fliers and posters that were put up in local storefronts and anywhere else I could find space, talked with veterans who came into the College, helped those I could with whatever problems they might be having,and basically became a spokesperson for veterans on campus.

Although it may be inappropriate to generalize too much about veterans or any other group, there was a lot that this group had in common. For one thing, there were a great many returning Vietnam veterans. Some veterans had not been directly involved in the war at all, and some had been in prior to Vietnam, but for most, Vietnam was the experience they had in common. They came to school with various ideas about education and even more various backgrounds and experiences. Their opening line might be, "I want to go to school...", but one could never predict what would come next. These were not people who were following in their parents footsteps or preparing for careers that were marked out for them. They frequently had no clear goals or reasonable expectations, and their preparation for college was as unusual as their backgrounds.

They were veterans who often had been through terrible, harrowing, traumatic experiences. They were sometimes angry, confused, alienated, sick, hurt, and sometimes they were all

of those. I listened to their stories and tried to help them get going in some positive direction. As older students and as people returning to education they sometimes had difficulty getting started anyway, but once they got going, like other adult students, they did well. Still, whatever else they did, or whatever else I do, I will always remember those stories. I feel priviledged to have heard so much from these veterans who were relating to me the defining experiences of their lives. I suppose my own experience as a Vietnam veteran probably made it easier for them to talk with me, but whatever the case may be, they shared their stories and then were, hopefully, ready to go on from there. For these students, that process of relating their own story was critical to the process of a successful transition from military to civilian life - in this case from war to peace.

During my first few years at the College, the number of veterans enrolled increased dramatically. Although it was not the the result of any particular efforts on my part, but rather because of changes in the GI Bill and several other factors (like the official end of the Vietnam era), the number went from around two hundred (200) in 1974 to over eleven hundred (1100) in 1976 or 1977. Around that same time I became the Director of Veterans Affairs. I soon had a full time secretary named Doris Shepard, and we had part-time help through College work-study and a similar program through the VA. I mention this point about how many veterans there were then because that many veterans made a

significant impact on the College and even on the local economy.

Of course, it was principally the College that was affected by this influx of veterans, but the issue of the local economy is worth a brief mention. At the peak of the veterans enrollment at Bunker Hill, their total income from the GI Bill would have been well over a quarter of a million dollars a month. That's a significant amount if you use that formula I was taught in Economics: that for every dollar that goes into the economy it generates four more. Therefore, these students were responsible for approximately $1 million a month in the local economy. In an area where there has never been much money, that amount makes a difference.

This says something about the relationship between the College and the community. It is one of the many ways in which the College has had a positive impact on the community, even from the College's earliest days. We were able to provide an economic catalyst and be some kind of monetary conduit at this basic level, benefitting the community in a direct way. And it can't be said that the College made a lot of money from that arrangemant, because so many veterans received tuition waivers. (I realize that this is not entirely accurate because lots of veterans attended through DCE, which did not have tuition waivers at

the time, and they did pay. Generally, however, the point is valid.)

Although there is probably still some sentiment that in those days lots of veterans went to school on a lark (or, "for the money") and were not serious about education, the reality is that the vast majority were serious. Whatever problems there might have been with veterans going to school, those problems were more associated with the Veterans Administration than the veterans. For the most part, veterans were going to school then, as they are now, and always have, for purposes of improving their lives and the lives of their families. Education has been the opportunity that veterans have had to compensate for that time spent in military service, and the College has always been outstanding at providing that opportunity for the communities it serves.

In the College's earliest years, it was easy to see how veterans took advantage of that opportunity. Not only did enrollments increase dramatically, but involvement increased also. As older students, even by community college standards, veterans took advantage of being able to attend college, and they took advantage of being able to get involved in student activities. The first student governments, especially, included many veterans, often as officers, most of whom were Vietnam veterans, and all were Vietnam-era veterans. Veterans were also represented on the

Program Council and in other student sponsored programs. In these efforts, veterans demonstrated their leadership ability and their experience. It was during these years that these student activities got started, and so as the College was getting started, there were lots of student veterans around who were also getting started in their civilian life. And as the College provided them an opportunity, veterans were able to contribute their maturity and experience to making that opportunity successful for themselves and others.

Among the contributions that veterans made in those early years were two projects done through the veterans club, which was called the Veterans Student Organization (VSO). I was the faculty advisor, but the VSO was started by some of the same veterans who were involved in the student government. As part of their activities, they organized the first Toys for Tots program on campus. For several years this was a significant and successful effort that took coordination, hard work and dedication, but was certainly worthwhile. Another unique accomplishment of the VSO was to sponsor a family picnic for students and their families. The picnic was held, very successfully, at an MDC park in Belmont. The weather was good, the students came, brought their kids (and others), and a good time was had by all. The major significance of that event, I suppose, is that to my knowledge, the feat has not been duplicated. Perhaps it also says something about how large the College has grown that

now an off campus picnic for students and their families, sponsored by a student group, would probably be impossible - or at least impractical.

Another experience that stands out clearly from those days is being at the College when bussing started. During those first days, my office was on the first floor in Counseling and Advising. The only windows in the office were the continuous horizontal panes that run along the length of the building, and on the first floor they are close to ceiling level. In other words, looking through them you can only look up and the only view is of sky, because the windows begin about seven feet up the wall and are only about one foot high. So it isn't much of a view, but you can hear things from there, and one day I heard the sound of helicopters.

I got a chair and stood on it so I could look out. What I saw was an amazing sight, another one of those images that has remained so clear in my mind after nearly two decades. Not only were there helicopters flying over the area, but they were Hueys. These Hueys were being flown by National Guard personnel, or maybe even the State Police, but in any case they were the same as what had been used in Vietnam, and it was very unsettling. I could also see, from my vantage point of standing on the chair, that police were lined up on either side of Austin Street all the way up to Thompson Square. My vantage point was also like looking out

of a bunker, which was certainly a very odd feeling for someone who had been in Vietnam only slightly more than five years earlier. The extent to which the police were armed and dressed for combat also surprised me. They in fact were much more in the role of soldier, and they certainly were prepared for battle.

I don't know that there actually were any battles, but there surely was a tremendous amount of tension. Not only were police lining the streets to Thompson Square, but the number of helicopters seemed to increase every time I looked up toward the sky. They flew around the old high school up by the Bunker Hill monument, they flew past the College, they flew over the roads, and they flew with that distinctive sound that only a Huey makes and is probably still very familiar to any Vietnam veteran. I don't recall how long they stayed around that year, but it seemed like an awfully long time.

After those years, from late 1974 through the end of the 1970's, the student population continued to increase, but the number of veterans did not; and I suppose that is how it should be. That does mean, however, that I have the distinction of being not only the first, but, in all liklihood, the last veterans counselor at Bunker Hill Community College. History may prove me wrong about this, but I certainly hope not. Although I look back on those years with some nostalgia, I hope we will never see again

the conditions that led to there being a need for a counselor and a department that has the sole purpose of providing services for military veterans. I realize that the changes in Charlestown as a community and in Bunker Hill as a Community College present new opportunities, new views, and new images that look to the future and not toward the past. And that, too, is as it should be.