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# GETTING TO WORK

## SVC's Veterans Club looks to help vets

By ERINN UNGER

### Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — During the first meeting of winter quarter for Skagit Valley College's new Veterans Club, members and supporters were gathered to get to work.

Skagit Valley College President Gary Tollefson summed up what the new club was about, urging club members to be advocates for the veteran student population to ensure its needs are met.

"Make sure you advocate for your cause," he said.

As one of its first charitable activities, the club is arranging for veterans to get help signing up for their veteran ID cards, which allow them to get the various medical and other benefits afforded to former military.

Many aren't aware they can get the ID cards, said assistant secretary Martha Aguilera-George, and without them a veteran would have to lug around large volumes of sensitive paperwork.

Club members will drive the student veterans to the Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Mount Vernon, where they'll assist with the paperwork and help the veterans get everything in order. The college's campuses at Mount Vernon and Whidbey Island are hosting 441 veterans this quarter and 68 active duty military personnel among 6,500 students, according to the Student Services Office.

The club was started this past fall quarter with help from faculty and students. Almost 30 people attended the first meeting, and membership is rising.

During the club's beginnings, club president and Army veteran Michael Thom recruited the now assistant secretary, Aguilera-George, from one of his classes.

"He told me, it's a place where we can get together and talk about what our experience has been," she said. Aguilera-George was a master at arms at Naval Air Station Whidbey. After five years of service, she was medically discharged, she said, and then went on to work with the Department of the Navy and in the Department of Homeland Security. She wants to be a resource for veterans who need help with paperwork, be it a resume or medical forms, and that's the club's mission too.

"If we don't know it, we'll find it out for you," she said.

Club members talked also of assisting with free oil changes for veterans at the Smokey Point Community Church and holding a barbecue to raise awareness and funds. The barbecue this past year was a kick-off for the club, telling the campus they were there to help, through free hamburgers and hot dogs.

"We had such a great turnout," Thom said. "It was a good time."

Outpourings of support for the new club took the form of the comfortable couches, desks and computers in the college's new lounge for veterans, as well as a donation from former Defense Secretary Robert Gates and a note of support, which Thom passed around at the meeting.

For now, during the winter, the new club is in planning mode, looking toward warmer barbecue weather and other ways they can help more people.

All are welcome, Thom said, even those who aren't veterans. If you want to help and be helped, come on board, he said. That's the only requirement.

"I really wanted this to be an all-inclusive club," he said. "...You can be what you want. I just want this to be a community that helps one another."

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Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Students Whitney Aday (left) and Will Prouty, both Navy veterans, listen to another veteran during the first winter quarter meeting of Skagit Valley College's new Veterans Club.

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## If you go

▶ Meetings are at 12:30 p.m. every other Monday in C-36, Gary Knutzen Cardinal Center, Skagit Valley College campus

▶ **Information:** Michael Thom at [mthom2313@mysvc.skagit.edu](mailto:mthom2313@mysvc.skagit.edu)