

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

Welcome to La Louisiane, conversations brought to you by the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. I'm managing editor Marie Elizabeth Oliver, today we have in the studio Office of Veteran and Military Student Services Director Danielle Doucet and Kade Hessler, a junior in mechanical engineering. Kade served in the United States Army for four years and has one deployment to Germany. They're here today to talk about the new social center and physical expansion of Office of Veteran and Military Student Services here on the campus of UL Lafayette. Welcome Danielle and Kade!

Danielle Doucet

Thank you. Thank you.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

Can you share a little for those who don't know about the history of the Office of Veteran and Military student services on UL Lafayette's campus, a little bit about how it started and how it's evolved?

Danielle Doucet

Sure, so way back when I started at UL, (which was back in 2001) I started as a financial aid counselor over in Foster Hall, and we had a VA rep. That was it. It was just one of the financial aid counselors that was just her task, was to process VA benefits, and she had an office with some student workers. And it stayed that way 'til about well, she moved. And I took over that position, and then in 2010 people started talking. We need a place. We need to separate. So, we did. We, although still in Foster Hall, we became our own office. We were no longer under Financial Aid, and we became our own office. Now we are very lucky as an institution. I want to say that we are extremely lucky to have leadership that saw a need for this, because there are a lot of schools, the smaller schools, this office is tucked underneath Financial Aid, or it's tucked in the Registrar's office, so they don't have as big of an office, and the resources that we have. In 2010, we made the split again, same place, and in, we just moved to the center this past January, but that space has been looked at for a very long time. That was probably 10 years in the making that we found a place that we remodeled, and then we were able to move in. We had, we had launched, you know, we were out of Foster Hall. We were in our own place with our own furniture, and that's where students...so we've, we've definitely crawled, you know, to this space. But now that we're here, it's great. It's great. We love it. We love it.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

Well, it was so moving just to be at that grand opening event and see people from it, just so many different people, ages, coming from different backgrounds. I mean, it was, it was so neat just to see what a community exists and is there to support.

Danielle Doucet

Absolutely, absolutely. It was a huge success. I don't think we could have ever dreamed of.

Kade Hessler

It was completely unexpected. We were expecting a handful of people. We had a small list, and then the room filled up quickly, and I found myself having to step out to get some cooler air because it was getting quite hot in there with the amount of bodies we had. It was really awesome to see the turnout people we did not expect to show up, showed up and showed their support and appreciation.

Danielle Doucet

And not just campus. I mean, the surrounding community, you know, we had, you know, a couple agencies outside of the University that showed up. You know, we had the Louisiana Department of Veteran Affairs that showed up, Secretary Meginley, that's a big deal. You know, he showed up. The higher you know, the leadership administration on campus showed up. We had parents of dependents who don't even live in Lafayette show up. And this place just we kept looking at each other like there's so many people, there's so many people. And again, we could not have asked for a better turnout.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

And what do you think that says, just about the appreciation for, you know, veterans and active military students on this campus?

Danielle Doucet

It says a lot. It says a lot. I have gone on record several times thanking Dr. Bowie and Dr. Savoie for seeing a need for this social hub to see students take advantage of it is amazing. You know, we come from a place where it was a very small office in Foster Hall, so to have one or two students sit in one space, it got cramped, and you can tell, I could tell immediately by moving here. I know people can't see, but they deflate, and they just relax, and then they're smiling and they're talking, and they're amongst their peers, and that alone is worth every purchase order, every email sent, every hiccup that we that we hit, it was all worth it. It was all worth it.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

And can you describe for people listening who may not know just a little bit about what that center is like? I know there was the pool table was a big deal.

Kade Hessler

Oh, I love giving new people tours, being that this is the second day of classes like yesterday. I mean, the first week, two weeks, it's the busiest time of year. You got people trying to catch up in paperwork, and a lot of new faces coming in, brand new students. They might be a little intimidated, feel out of place, so I love to give a quick tour. I'm like, "OK, so you know this is so and so these people that work in here, we're here for you. We would love to have you here. Anytime you have questions, it does not have to be specific to anything veteran related. It doesn't have to be military. It can be just you're struggling with school. You don't know where to go. It doesn't have to even be school like we are here for you." So then once we get that out the way and figure out the paperwork, and I'm like, "All right, so this is your place. We got this for people like you and I, so that we can have somewhere to go to study, find help. We got an awesome computer lab where you can go and use the computers." And it's so I guess I should back up first. When you walk in, it's, mainly the Veteran Service Office, and off to the

side you'll see a glass door, and that's the veteran's lounge. But within the office is where Ms. Danielle, Mr. Ron Gonzalez, work. And then the student workers like myself, we have a little, a little nice pocket where we can do our work and help everybody out. But besides that, there's the little computer lab. I think there's five computers in there, there's four, there's four computers in there, and we have a printer usable to all the veteran affiliated students who are using benefits or not. And then the lounge. The lounge is the sweet spot. We got couches, we've got a really nice pool table. We've got a kitchenette, which we're so, so thankful to have running water accessible to us, and a really nice fridge and a microwave. So, if you wanted to bring your lunch or your breakfast and warm it up on your own, you could do that. We have a TV. You can connect to watch movies, play YouTube videos, help you study. You need a place to meet with your group. You can come and meet there. You have, you know, plan events there, you just let us know. Do Bible studies, whatever's in your interest. We host our Student Veterans Organization meetings there, and we host quite a few events just, I mean, it's great space for anything that we may need it to be.

Danielle Doucet

It definitely fosters a sense of community. And when I say community, I also want to definitely make it known that, you know, veterans is the key word in our office, but it is also for military connected students as well. So, we have dependents, you know, we have dependents of veterans that come in, and our dependents can sometimes get into it's a, it can be an intimidating office. I will say that if coming in as a civilian, if you have, if you've had no talks with anyone who was in the military, it can be intimidating, but you quickly put your mind at ease, you know. So, I'll let the dependents know as well. This lab is for you. This this lounge is for you, because they also traveled a different road to get to college. I had one student leave my office with his parents from orientation day, basically saying, "This is so cool. It's just like living on base." So, that says a lot, you know, because they're used to being around veterans and active-duty members. So, it was so nice to hear that from him. And I'm like, "Man, this is just another, you know, another, another win."

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

And, and you touched on this, but why is having this space so important to this population of students?

Danielle Doucet

Look, I'm going to let Kade answer that, but I'm going to say, and I believe I said it to you before I'd tell it to anyone. You know, you can have 100 brochures, you can have 100 handouts, 3,000 websites. You can have all of that. Their best resource is each other. So, when they are in the same room talking about — whether it's education or a disability claim or veteran loans or...it's always nice to have someone who's walked that path to say, "Oh, wait that step. Don't worry about just go to this one." Or if they say, "Wait a minute. You know, this could affect your education benefits." Because no one wants to sit and read 800 pages of guidelines and federal documents. You know, that's my job. That's my job. And I've quickly learned that if there is a big, long line of what VA is education is just this pin drop, and that pin drop is so much information, so I can about imagine how much else is out there. So that's when Kade can say, "You know what, guys, I went to this great conference in January, and this is what I learned." He has been on conference high since he got back, and he is so ready to hit the ground running with that, to give this information to our students, to be able to, you know, have events catered around this, to give to our students. But again, that's to be able to have each other is the best and a

space to gather, to be with like-minded people is very important. It's very important. Like it's vital to their success.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

I mean, that makes a lot of sense. If you're just joining us, this is Marie Elizabeth Oliver, managing editor for La Louisiane magazine, and I am here with Danielle Doucet, and Kade Hessler from the Office of Veteran and Military student services. So Kade, can you share, just from your perspective, what this means?

Danielle Doucet

You gave him an open mic. He's about ready to take off.

Kade Hessler

So just to introduce myself, yes, I'm Kate Hessler. I'm now a junior at UL. I'm studying mechanical engineering, and I just recently took over the presidency of the Student Veterans Organization. It is a separate entity. It is a club on campus, separate from the Veterans Service Office. But as you can imagine, it kind of works hand in hand. I'm also a student worker in the office. Have been doing that for, I guess, a year and a half now. So, it's really nice to be able to have direct communication with Ms. Danielle and Mr. Ryan on anything that may help or benefit the Student Veterans Organization. Also Mr. Ryan is the advisor for that organization, but the organization is just a chapter of a larger, I guess, would you call it? I guess another, an organization, right? Yeah, it's a chapter of a of the Student Veterans of America. And they host a conference each year, usually in January, the beginning of January, where they invite, and this is the 18th one they just did. They invite anyone who is a part of one of the chapters, or maybe not even the chapter, and it's just a huge conference where you can network, go to these breakout sessions and learn about specific things that may help you build your career, whether it be a resume, whether it be just building your chapter, how to fundraise, you, name it, there's a lot of booths that are looking to hire or just show their support. "How can we help you?" And it was great for me taking over presidency, because I now have all these great resources to now spread and share with all my classmates and my peers. But just to get back to your question, I find that the places, the Veterans Center is super important because it's a space to feel important, recognized, appreciated and supported. You can walk in and be seen. It's a place where you find people with similar experiences to relate to and find...As a vet, you aren't alone in this whole new chapter of life. It can be really scary for a vet who is a non-traditional student to go and step into the young man, the young woman's world. A lot of people think, I mean, I talk to many students, they forget that anybody can go to college. It's not you're fresh out of high school person, and it can be a struggle to try to fit in and not feel so just stood out odd, like you just feel uncomfortable. So, you step in our center, you're like, "Wow, I'm not the only person doing this." There are other people that have gone through this, and you might even find, I'm finding a lot of people who have the same major who are also veterans, and I can help them walk through it, get those steps taken, to feel like they're just any other student and know what they're doing. And it's really hard to explain coming out, especially for people I only spent four years. I don't think I did as much as some.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

Well, we appreciate your service. That's humble. Thank you.

Kade Hessler

But, some people, they spend 10 years and that's all they knew. They came straight out of high school. They were trained to think a certain way do things. They're told what to do every day of the week, and now they have their freedom, and they just want to advance education, and we want them to feel like this is the place for them to be, and that they can do it, and that it's not odd for them to want to better themselves and learn.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

Wow, wow. And I know that veterans just have such an important role in the history of our university with you know, I know so many people came here on the GI Bill, and it really helped to solidify this place.

Danielle Doucet

Very important. I mean, we, you know, it pays them to come to school, and so that's, it's one less stress, you know, one less stressor for them. So, we make sure that we stay on top of that game, make sure that money stays lined up, so that's something that they don't have to worry about. We do also work with a lot of outside agencies. So that's really important. It's not just fostering a community within campus. We like to stretch that out, because sometimes they don't always want to be on campus, and sometimes these agencies are able to help. You know, Louisiana Department of Veteran Affairs is great. We got them on speed dial. They are always willing to answer my question or say, "Hey, let me get back to you." They have a La Vet Corps program, which we're appointed a navigator. So, our navigator can help them, you know, go through certain waters that they haven't tested yet. We work with the Wounded Warrior program. They come in for a visit a couple times a year. They're actually scheduled, coming up in February, to just come and be available to let them know about their programs and what their support can look like. We work with Acadian Veteran Alliance. Andrew Ward and his team are amazing in the community, and they just started a new initiative called the Boot, and it's to keep transitioning veterans here in the state of Louisiana. And I am so very honored to say that our school was the first school that they visited that part of that first inaugural group that came in in fall. So that was really cool to be part of that program, to say, "look, you know, I know you're coming out of this, and you're, you're going to be discharged soon. Here's what we can offer." You know, or if it's not necessarily for them, some of them have kids, so some of them may have military benefits that they can pass on to their children. So, we want to make sure that we are available to their dependents as well. So that was, that was very exciting, and hopefully we'll work in the future with them as well. But having those resources, when they come in and say, you know, I can't, but these people can, right? And that way it's again, another stressor that's removed from their plate. That way they can focus on their studies. Because in I would tell all of them as they come, "if y'all goal is a degree, then that's what we're here for. We're going to make it happen."

Kade Hessler

We'll make it happen. If you got the ambition, the drive, and that's what you want. We will do what we have to, to make sure that you have the tools necessary to achieve that goal, achieve that dream.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

And how can people get involved, either, you know, potential students, current students, or people just wanting to kind of support the mission?

Kade Hessler

So right now, I guess the best way was just take a step in our office say "hi." It is located in Agnes Edwards Hall on Rex Street, right behind the bus stop. It's on the mezzanine floor. I like to call it the fake second floor. So, when you walk in the main lobby, you'll see the career services on the bottom floor, and we're right above it. It's room M 160, so you just take a step in there and say, "hi." And also, if you want to be more included in our news and our events, it would be to get involved with the SVO, Student Veterans Organization. Just talk to anybody in the office. They'll get a good point. You've got QR codes up there. We also have Instagram, and we have a Facebook if you just want to check us out. Kind of see what we're about, see what kind of events we've done in the past. Our Instagram is "ULstudentvets," and our Facebook is "Student Veterans Organization of UL Lafayette." Kind of a mouthful, but just basically put in "UL student vets," it'll probably like come up. We're going to be working on a Tiktok soon. But now with the what's going on with that? I don't know. Maybe not, but we're trying to get in some kind of short video format and make it more fun and inviting, because we don't want to look like an intimidating just veteran. There's a stigma with the word "veteran," and although that is the word we throw around a lot, I don't want people who are the children or spouses of veterans, or people who just want to support military affiliation or affiliated people, I want them to all feel like they can be included and be a part of this. This is not just for people who served. This is for anybody who is affiliated with the military or wants to just support the military, and if we actually have a meeting, our first meeting of the semester for the SVO next week at 5:30 in that office. So, if you just want to hear more about it and want to get involved.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

I mean, are they on a like, a monthly cadence?

Kade Hessler

It's going to be the first Wednesday of each month this semester. It may change next semester, but for this semester, the Spring 2025 is the first Wednesday at 5:30.

Danielle Doucet

So next week, it'll be on the Wednesday, too.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

And before we wrap up, is there anything else? I know we could keep talking.

Danielle Doucet

Especialy we got the right one here, honey. Well, we do a lot of things throughout the semester, so along with, you know, the they plan out everything so, so as you can tell they're military, they're plan out everything. We do have coffee hours every month, and I would like to publicly suggest that February be a king cake testing coffee hour.

Danielle Doucet

That's a great idea. Just stick that in your meeting as all I'm requesting. I'll stay out of all the rest of them. There we go.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

We heard it here first.

Danielle Doucet

That's right, that's right. We want all kinds of cakes. Again, Wounded Warrior will be showing up in February. Our also huge event in March is Operation Smoke Show. This is a huge event that happens out at Poche's in Breaux Bridge — Poche's RV Park. I'm not sure if we have a firm date on it yet, but it will be on our website.

Kade Hessler

I think it's going to be the 15th of March. That's what it's looking like. We actually are finding that out today.

Danielle Doucet

We'll have all that information published. It is our largest fundraiser. Operation Smoke Show is a huge, sanctioned barbecue contest.

Kade Hessler

It's recognized throughout the whole country. People from all states come to it.

Danielle Doucet

And actually, a couple years ago, Food Network showed up. What was his name, Michael Simon? We were on a barbecue show on Food Network, where we have 50 teams that come in, and they barbecue. And it's a competition, and so we can sign up for judging, and an SVO shows up, and they help whatever's not given to the judges for sampling goes to one tent, and everyone gets to try out all the different kinds of barbecue.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver

That sounds amazing. Yeah, looking forward to that in March! Well, thank you so much for joining us, Danielle and Kade. And thank you for listening to this conversation with La Louisiane, the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette since 1989. I'm Marie Elizabeth Oliver, managing editor. I hope you'll join us again next month for more discussions with members of our University community. You can listen to an archive of this interview by visiting [Louisiana.edu/magazine](https://louisiana.edu/magazine). KRVS is listener supported public radio for Acadiana, a service of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Thanks for listening!