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Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Irvine Valley College's Veterans Resource Center Operations and Spending Survey Results 2019-2020

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March 2020

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Executive Summary

The 2017–18 State Budget Act allocated \$5M to the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges (CCC) to support a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) grant program designed to help CCC establish or enhance on-campus VRCs. In an effort to better understand the current state of VRCs in the wake of this funding, Irvine Valley College contracted with The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) in fall 2019 to develop and administer a *VRC Operations and Spending Survey* focused on how Veteran Resource Centers (VRCs) operate, how they are utilized by students, and how they allocate their funding to support students. IVC sent this online survey to colleagues at the 114 California Community Colleges (CCC) with VRCs to gather information on VRC operations and budgeting. Personnel at 35 CCC VRCs completed the survey, a 30% response rate.

This report is designed for the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), administrators and funders focused on veterans affairs in the CCC system to gain a better understanding of how VRCs operate, how they used funding from the State Budget Act, where their strengths lie and what challenges persist. It is the hope that this information will be used to help stakeholders tailor the supports they offer where they are needed most to best suit the needs of veterans across California's community colleges.

Operations

- Colleges vary widely in terms of who is responsible for their VRC's budget; at the same time, managers of VRC budgets can be categorized into two equally sized groups: (1) administrators overseeing Student Services broadly, and (2) directors/coordinators/supervisors of Veteran services specifically.
- Veteran population size and use of Veteran services also varies widely across colleges; however, the data also document the need for standardization in counting Veteran students, as it was clear that some survey participants provided headcounts (unduplicated counts of students), while others provided enrollment records (potentially duplicated counts of students).
- Veteran students most often utilize VRCs for academic counseling and financial aid enrollment, while very few veterans are utilizing VRC tutoring and mental health services (though this result may be a function of these services not being offered).
- More than three-quarters of the 35 colleges surveyed indicated tracking Veteran students' use of services (e.g., counseling visits, tutoring visits) and resources (e.g., computer lab, peer-to-peer mentoring, academic counseling), but fewer than half of colleges are tracking education plans completed, transfer rates, or Student Equity and Achievement Plan data.

Spending

- The large majority (82%) of respondents reported satisfaction with the funding process associated with the 2017-2018 State Budget Act, which appropriated \$5M for the expansion of CCC VRCs. Respondents appreciated the freedom to allocate funding and the communications from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) regarding funding.
- As a result of having state budget funds, most respondents reported entering into compliance with the standards associated with high-functioning Veterans Resource Centers set forth by the CCCCCO Veterans Services Advisory Committee with respect to their study areas and computer labs.
- State budget funds increased the ability to hire additional staff, the most highly cited need. Over 40% of VRCs reported using funds towards hiring a dedicated director or coordinator. Over one-third of VRCs used the funds for an academic counselor with Veteran-specific training, yet compliance in that area has not yet been fully achieved.
- Overall, respondents indicated that enhanced funding has resulted in more positive, student-centered environments, predominantly due to increases in staffing.
- The desire for more staff and space persists. While these two areas were most frequently highlighted as unmet needs of VRCs both *before* receiving these new funds, they remained the top two areas of need even after receiving funds. Respondents clearly noted that VRCs would benefit from additional funding for even more staffing and space, though also they highlighted the need for enhanced mental health resources and additional supplies.

Conclusion

The results from the fall 2019 VRC Operations and Spending Survey provided valuable insights into the state of VRCs at community colleges across California. **While colleges vary in terms of how their VRCs are managed and utilized, they are quite aligned in their needs, notably the persistent need for additional staffing and space.** Funding from the 2017-2018 State Budget Act was well-received and allowed VRCs to achieve compliance with many of the standards associated with high-functioning Veterans Resource Centers. More broadly, respondents reported that enhanced funding resulted in more positive, student-centered environments.

Looking forward, respondents are **eager for the security of sustained funding** such that they can continue to provide (and improve) the diverse array of supports they offer to their Veteran students. They are **willing to be held accountable** to how they are spending these funds and are **seeking a community of practice** to learn best practices from their peers around the state.

Introduction

The 2017–18 State Budget Act allocated \$5M to the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges to support a Veterans Resource Center (VRC) grant program designed to help California community colleges establish or enhance on-campus VRCs. In an effort to better understand the current state of VRCs in the wake of this funding, Irvine Valley College (IVC)¹ contracted with The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) in fall 2019 to develop and administer a *VRC Operations and Spending Survey* focused on how Veteran Resource Centers (VRCs) operate, how they are utilized by students, and how they allocate their funding to support students. IVC's VRC staff administered the survey to colleagues at the 114 California Community Colleges (CCC) with VRCs. Personnel at 35 CCC VRCs completed the survey, representing a 30% response rate (see Appendix A for a list of responding colleges).

Survey respondents held a variety of roles (see Appendix B for the list of roles). Twenty-five of the 35 respondents (71%) held titles that indicated responsibility of Veteran services on their campuses (e.g., Veterans' Services Coordinator, Veteran Certifying Official, VRC Coordinator/Director), with the remaining 10 respondents (29%) holding titles suggesting more general responsibility (e.g., Director of Admissions, School Certifying Official, Dean/Director of Student Services, Director of Student Equity).

In This Report

This report is designed for the California community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), administrators and funders focused on veterans affairs in the CCC system to gain a better understanding of how VRCs operate, where their strengths lie and where they need additional supports. This report begins with an overview of how VRCs operate, including students' frequency of use of the various services provided and the data they monitor to assess programmatic impacts. The second section of the report provides detailed information on VRCs' experiences with the additional funding they received as part of the 2017-2018 State Budget Act that appropriated \$5M to support the expansion of these centers across California's system. Included in this section is an overview of what VRCs' needs were before receiving funding, how they used funds to reach compliance with the standards set forth by the CCCCCO Veterans Services Advisory Committee (see Appendix C), and what their current needs are. The report concludes with suggestions from VRCs as to how allocated funding could be prioritized to help these centers better support Veteran students.

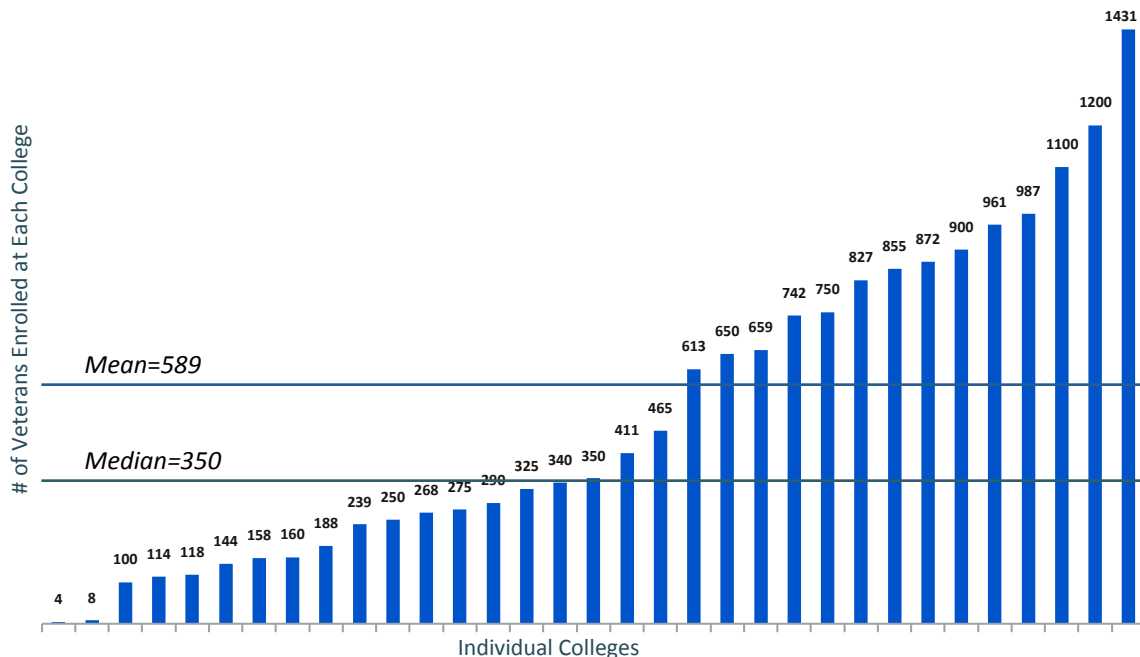
As part of their statewide Innovation grant focused on improving Veteran services

Survey Results

Operations

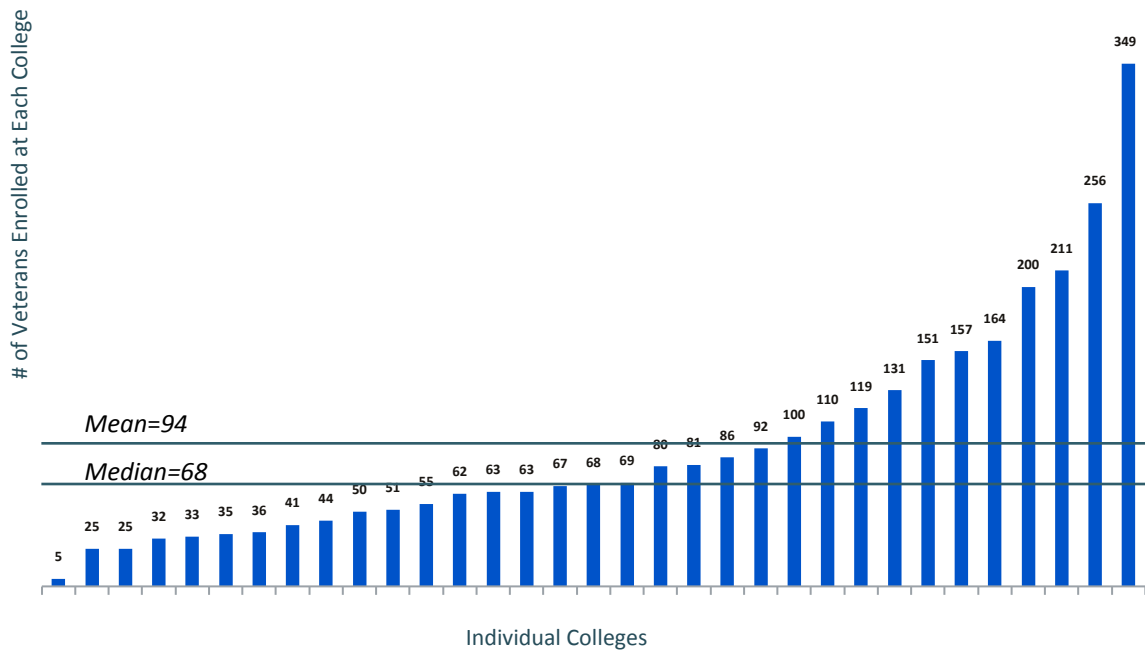
Across survey respondents, there was a great deal of variation with respect to who manages the VRC budget at each college (see Appendix D for a full list). However, managers of VRC budgets generally belonged to one of two equally sized groups: (1) administrators in the area of Student Services (n=17), and (2) directors/coordinators/supervisors of Veteran services (n=16). Reported veteran population sizes also varied widely across colleges (see Figure 1), with a mean of 589 veteran students and a median of 350. The wide range of responses is likely a result of college taking different approaches to tracking data on their veteran population. Some respondents likely provided headcounts (unduplicated counts of students). Others likely provide enrollment records (potentially duplicated counts of students); these colleges reported veteran population sizes much larger than those found in the DataMart. The RP Group used the reported count of veterans as a denominator when calculating the percentages articulated throughout the report.

Figure 1. Distribution of Enrolled Veterans across Colleges



Respondents also shared how many students used their respective college’s VRC services in the past year. The RP Group then divided the reported number of students using VRC services at each college by the number of enrolled veterans at the college to get a percentage of veteran students using the VRC at each campus. Figure 2 displays the percent of students served out of the number of veterans at each college. These percentages range from 5% to 349%, again due to the issue of differences in how respondents calculated counts of students (duplicated vs unduplicated). Note, if one were to remove data from the 12 colleges for which the number of served students exceeded the number of reported veteran students, both the mean and median percent of veteran students using VRC services would equal 55%.

Figure 2. Percent of Students Utilizing VRC Services at Each College



Survey respondents were asked to report the average number of veteran students visiting their college's VRC per week and per year to utilize various resources and services. As shown in Figures 3a and 3b, veteran students most often utilized VRCs for academic counseling and financial aid enrollment. Very few veterans were reported as utilizing study/lounge areas, VRC tutoring, or mental health services. However, we caution over-interpretation of these data given the issues presented above with respect to potential duplication of veteran student headcounts. Further, it is unclear whether all of these services are *offered* at VRCs; as such, low use of a resource may actually be a result of that resource not being offered.

Figure 3a. VRC Services Utilized by Students per Week

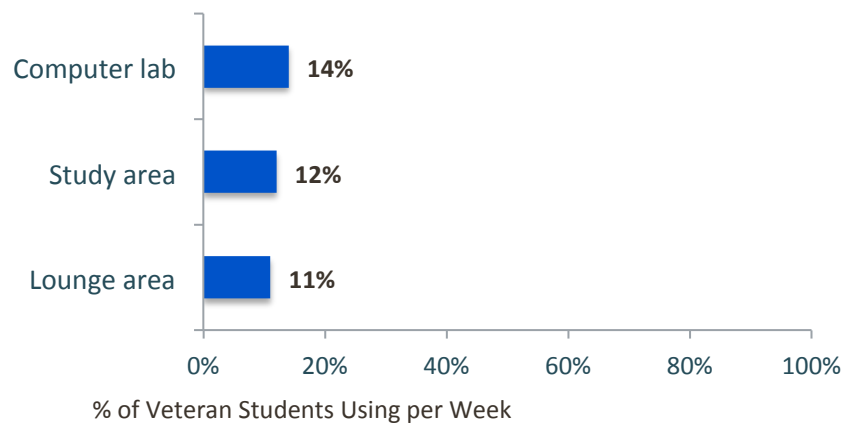
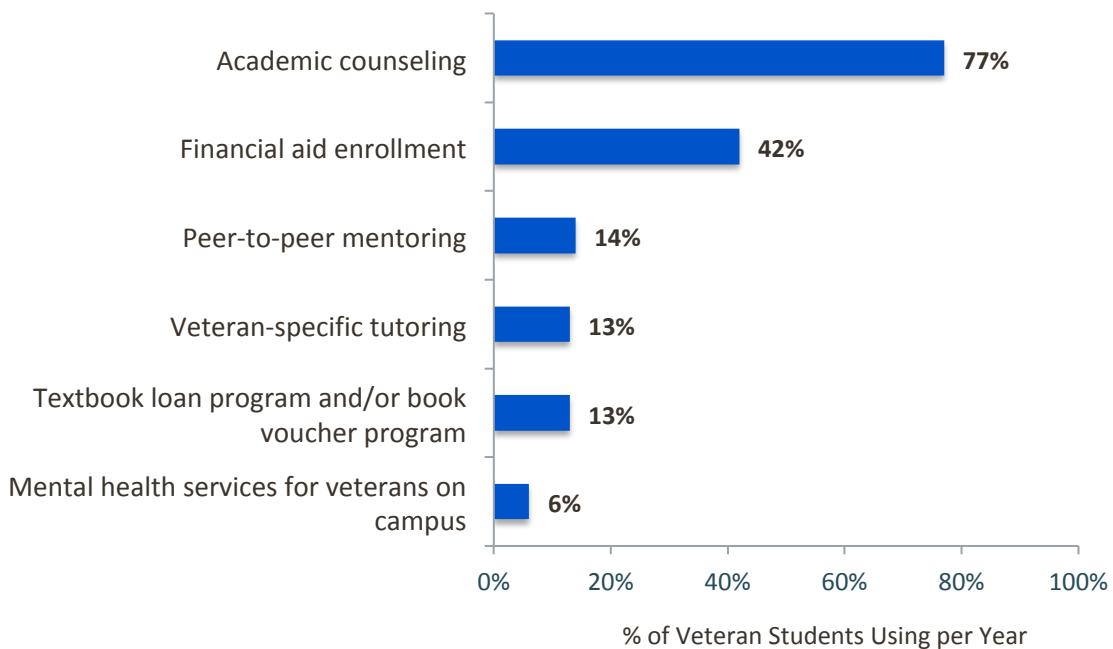
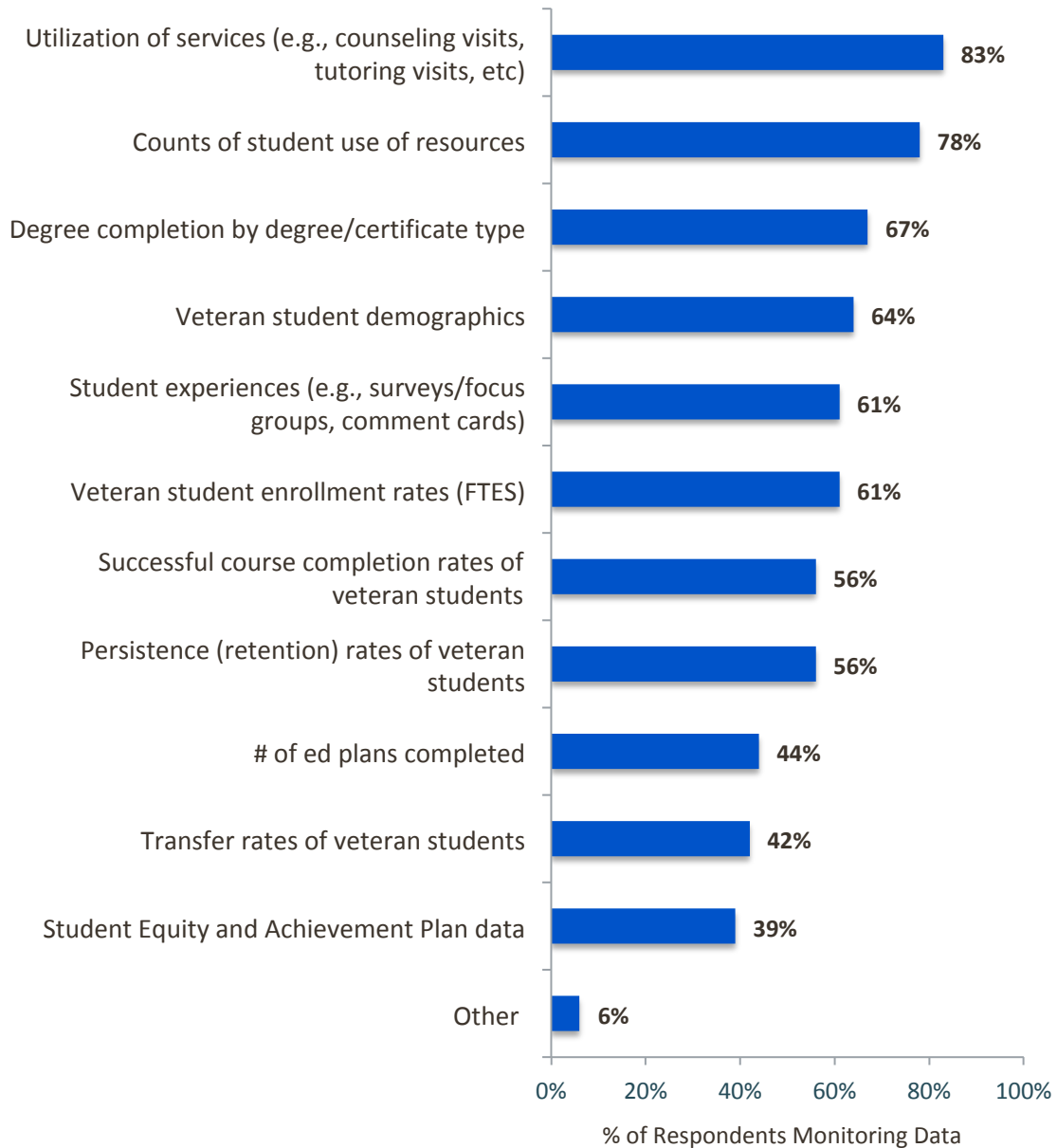


Figure 3b. VRC Services Utilized by Students per Year



Survey respondents were asked about the data they collected to track and monitor their VRC’s impact on veteran students’ success (see Figure 4). More than 75% of respondents across the 35 colleges reported tracking utilization of services (e.g., counseling visits, tutoring visits) and counts of student resources (e.g., computer lab, peer-to-peer mentoring, academic counseling). However, less than 50% are tracking education plans completed, transfer rates, or Student Equity and Achievement Plan data.

Figure 4. Type of Student Data Monitored by VRCs



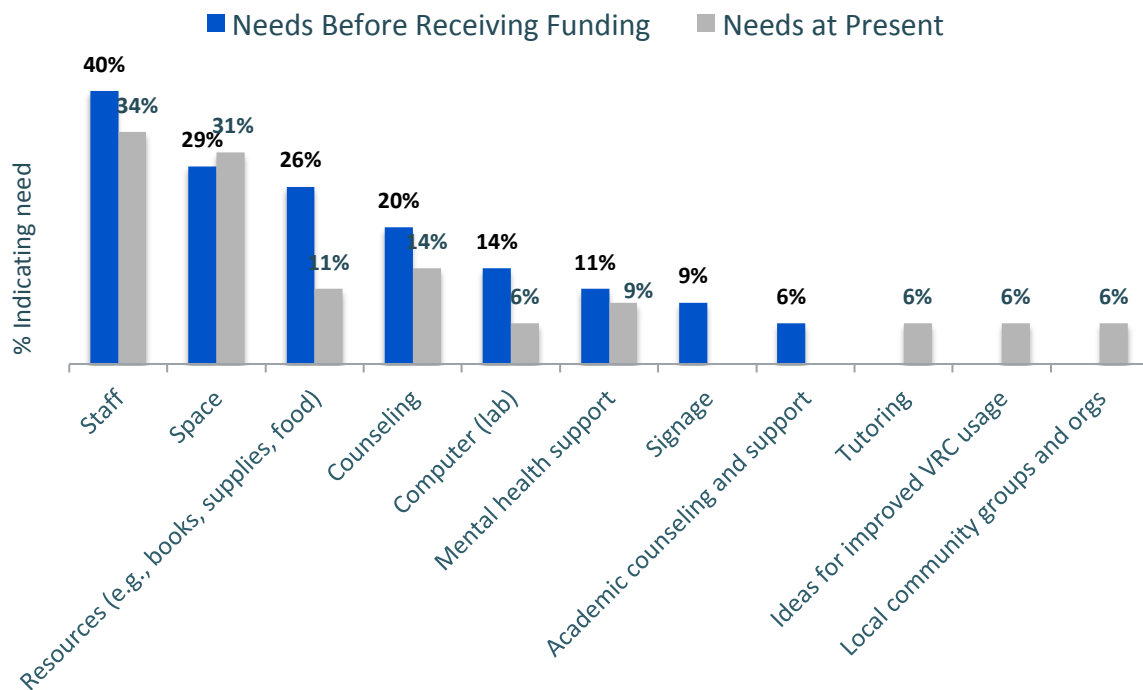
Spending

Satisfaction with Existing State of VRC Funding

The 2017-2018 State Budget Act appropriated \$5M to support the expansion of CCC VRCs across the state. **Eighty-two percent of survey respondents reported satisfaction with the funding process.** Respondents were then asked to explain the greatest resources that their college's VRC needed before, and then after receiving funding (see Figure 5). A number of interesting patterns emerged when comparing needs before and after funding:

- Both before and after receiving funding, the most frequently referenced needs of VRCs included more staff followed by more space.
- Degree of need shifted somewhat over time, whereby the proportion of respondents citing the need for staff decreased after receiving funding (yet still remained the top need), while the proportion of respondents indicating the need for space *increased*.
- Funding appears to have quelled the need for resources (e.g., books, supplies, food), as this area saw the largest decrease in need after receiving funds.
- Three new needs arose after receiving the additional funding: tutoring, ideas to improve usage of VRCs, and connecting with local community groups providing veterans services.
- Conversely, the need for signage and academic counseling and support, while not incredibly frequent to begin with, were no longer present after funding was received.

Figure 5. Resources Needed by VRCs



When asked what barriers currently exist to meeting current needs, the following were listed as **the top barriers to providing needed services to student veterans:**

- Staffing (22%)
- Outreach/Marketing - Getting students to use VRC services (16%)
- Space (16%)
- Need for more counselors at the college (9%)
- Access to housing (6%)

In addition to being asked about their satisfaction with the funding process initiated by the 2017-2018 State Budget Act, respondents were also asked to describe what contributed to their satisfaction, or what suggestions they had to improve the funding process. Overall, respondents reported being most satisfied with simply having funds to spend, with one respondent explaining:

We were excited to receive funds from the state; in the 10 years of serving veterans at a community college, we have never received funding like this.

Others were satisfied with the freedom to allocate funding based on needs at their colleges. One respondent shared:

[We were satisfied] that we could decide how to spend and allocate the funding. We created resources to directly benefit our student veterans, such as daily snacks, book vouchers, school supplies, activities and events such as our holiday party, student veteran orientation, pizza days at the Veteran center, etc.... We also were able to remodel our space with the VRC grant. We have a lovely center now. We are very grateful for everyone involved in making this happen.

Other respondents explained their satisfaction with CCCCCO communications, with one noting:

Great communication from the Chancellor's Office, a continued discussion of the funding during our region meetings and support from my college administrators.

Some respondents mentioned that they would like greater funding stability, accountability in spending, a more streamlined reporting process, and opportunities to learn best practices from one another. Some comments from respondents included:

It would be nice to hear how others are using the funding. The expenditure guidelines are very vague too as far as what is allowable and not allowable.

Make funding amounts more predictable from year to year, designate additional, separate funding for Veteran mental health services at VRCs so we don't have to compete with our on-campus Student Health Centers for funding and MH personnel.

I think we need to make schools accountable to how they are spending the money to make sure they are following the guidelines and using funding properly.

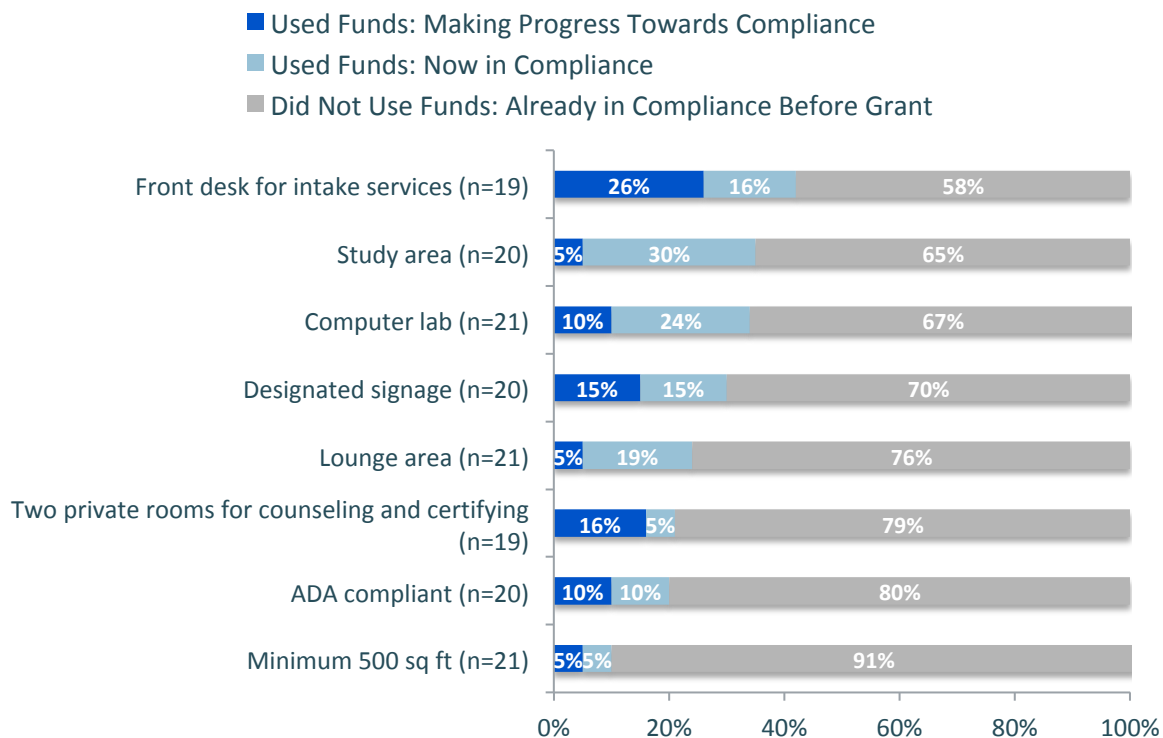
Achieving Compliance with Funds

The CCCCO Veterans Services Advisory Committee members put forth a set of standards associated with high-functioning VRCs as part of implementation of the 2017-2018 State Budget Act. In order to receive funding associated with the Act, colleges were required to commit to meet, or make progress towards meeting, these standards. The current survey asked how funds associated with the 2017-2018 State Budget Act were used to achieve compliance in each of the core standards area: (1) spaces/structures, (2) services, and (3) staffing.

In terms of spaces and structures, as shown in Figure 6a below:

- Over one-third of respondents used funds to either achieve compliance with their front desk for intake services (26%), or make progress towards compliance in this area (16%).
- Almost one-third (30%) of respondents used the funds to come into compliance with their study areas.
- Nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents were able to come into compliance with respect to their computer lab by using funds from the budget act.
- Nearly all (91%) of respondents indicated that their VRCs were already in compliance with respect to their square footage, and therefore did not use funds in this area.

Figure 6a. How CCC Are Using VRC State Funds on Spaces/Structure²

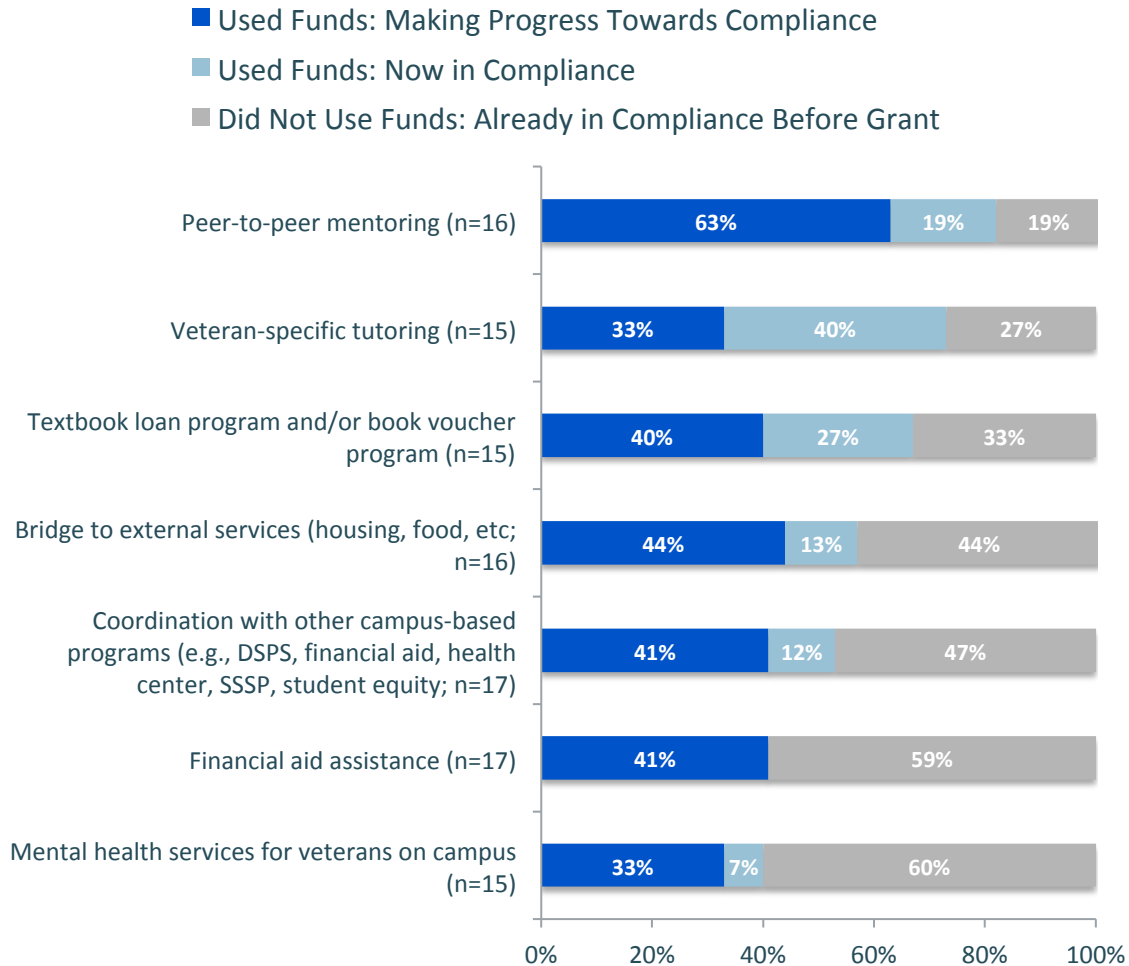


² Figures may add up to either 99% or 101% due to rounding.

Similarly, respondents were asked how funds associated with the 2017-2018 State Budget Act to support the expansion of CCC VRCs were used to fund *services*. In general, while many VRCs put funds towards improving their compliance with various services, many are still working towards compliance, as shown in Figure 6b. Specifically:

- Although 82% of respondents used funds for peer-to-peer mentoring, 63% have not fully reached compliance in that area.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents used funds for Veteran-specific tutoring, with 40% able to come into compliance in this area.
- Two-thirds of respondents used funds for textbook loan programs and/or book voucher programs, though 40% have yet to reach compliance in that area.

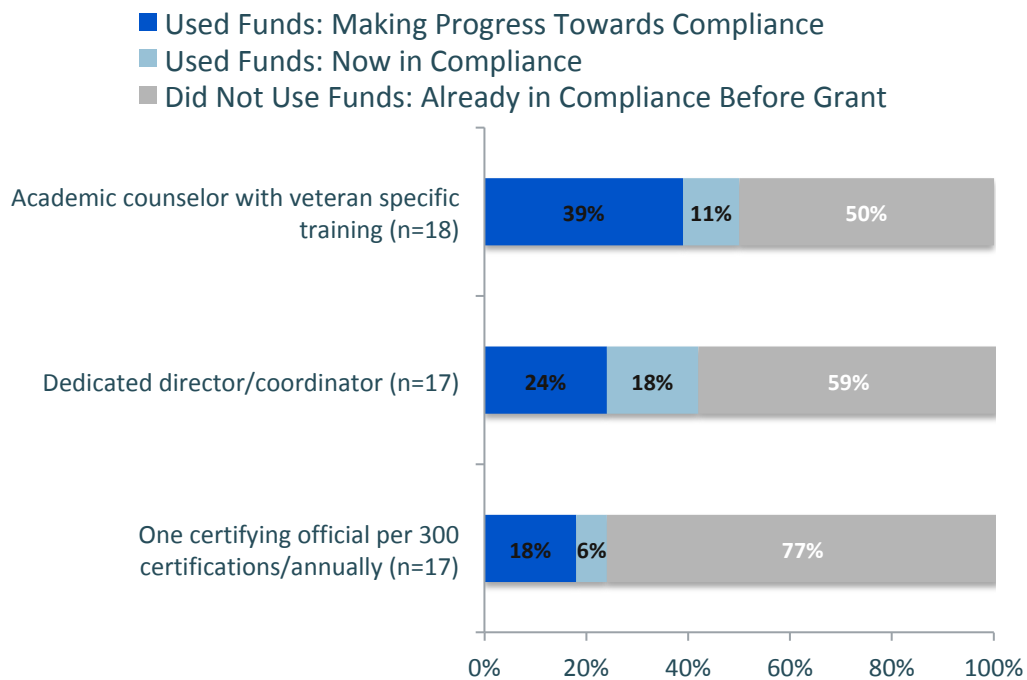
Figure 6b. How CCC Are Using VRC State Funds on Services



Lastly, respondents also reported how they used funds associated with the 2017-2018 State Budget Act to support the expansion of CCC VRCs in terms of *staffing*. As seen in Figure 6c:

- More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents indicated that their VRC was already in compliance with respect to requirements for certifying officials.
- Forty-two percent of respondents used funds towards hiring a dedicated director or coordinator for their VRC, but only 18% indicated that they were now in compliance, with the remaining 24% working toward compliance.
- One-half of respondents indicated using funds for an academic counselor with veteran-specific training, yet over one-third were still not fully in compliance.

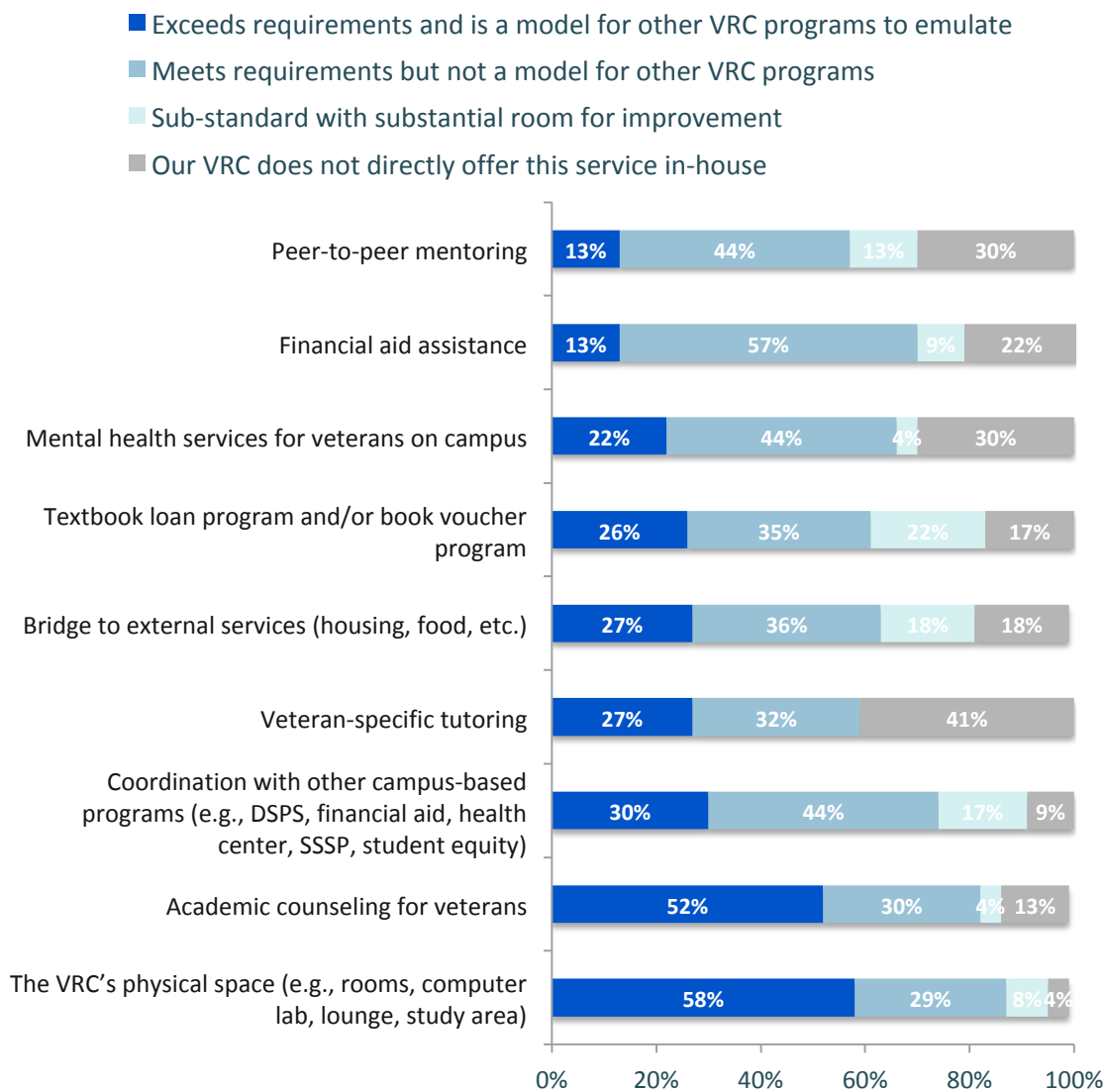
Figure 6c. How CCC Are Using VRC State Funds on Staffing



After reporting on the use of funds, survey respondents rated the quality of various VRC services and programs. As seen in Figure 7:

- Over one-half of respondents indicated that their VRC’s physical space and academic counseling for veterans exceeds requirements and is a model for other VRCs to emulate.
- Conversely, colleges most often selected bridges to external services, textbook loan programs, and coordination with other campus-based programs as VRC services in need of enhancement.
- Thirty percent or more of respondents indicated not directly offering Veteran-specific tutoring, mental health services for Veterans on campus, or peer-to-peer mentoring on site.

Figure 7. Quality of VRC Program and Services



Respondents provided a rich picture of the biggest impact and/or change they have seen as a result of the additional funding to support veteran students. Overall, respondents indicated that enhanced funding has resulted in more positive, student-centered environments, predominantly due to increases in staffing. In their words:

Since we hired a veteran-specific mental health counselor, we've created a culture where the service is less stigmatized.

We now have additional staff, and are hiring one more so that our students have more access to professional support and timely certifications.

We are able to have more positive, student-focused events that attract more veteran students to the VRC. I have been in my position for 11 months and have seen an increase in traffic as well as more satisfaction with VRC services, events, and customer service.

Veterans are more at ease coming to the VRC. We have more appointments available for them. We provide more information they did not know regarding their benefits.

Certifications are being processed faster due to the additional hours given to our part-time certifying official. Students are able to receive their book stipends faster because of this. The Veterans' Assistant is ensuring files are being prepped quickly and efficiently so the SCOs (School Certifying Official) are able to get needed files.

With an eye towards continuous improvement, participants were also asked how allocated funding could be better prioritized to help VRCs further support veteran students. Respondents mentioned that VRCs would benefit from additional funding for even more staffing, space, enhanced mental health resources, and supplies. In their words:

A full-time Office Assistant to directly implement programs, provide customer service, manage student workers and conduct admin duties.

I would like to have on-going funding for mentors/tutoring to support the veterans. At this point, the veterans are reaching out to their peers (mentor/tutors) for help with the academic work.

A director is needed ASAP to help find and understand the grants/funding received. The body cannot move if the head and spine are not there. That is where everything begins, establish that, and the rest will move along much easier.

We also would like specific funding to offer MH (mental health) services in our VRC. We can work with intern providers but need funding for liability insurance, MH intern supervision, and to pay user fees for MH case note documentation software.

Childcare support for our student veterans that are struggling with care to make it to school and study. Funding for equipment upgrades such as copiers, computers, vouchers for laptops or surface pros, and staffing to support coordinator.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The fall 2019 VRC Operations and Spending Survey provided valuable insights into the state of VRCs at community colleges across California. While colleges vary in terms of how their VRC is managed and utilized, they are quite aligned in their needs. **VRCs are grateful for the additional funding that resulted from the 2017-2018 State Budget Act and were quite satisfied with the funding process.** These funds were used to increase compliance with the VRC standards set forth by the CCCCCO Veterans Services Advisory Committee in all areas, from enhancing their physical space to adding services such as veteran-specific tutoring and textbook loan programs, to adding staff. They reported that **enhanced funding has resulted in more positive, student-centered environments, predominantly due to increases in staffing.** Overall, these funds strengthened the state of VRCs in CCC, and VRCs are proud of what they have to offer now: over one-half of respondents indicated that their VRC's physical space and academic counseling exceeds requirements and is a model for other VRCs to emulate.

That said, **while staffing and space clearly rose to the top as needs before receiving funding, these needs still persist.** Further, the data clearly indicate that **VRCs need additional funds to increase availability of mental health supports.** While grateful for the recent influx of funds, VRCs want to ensure this investment is sustained such that they can continue to provide (and improve) the diverse array of supports they offer to their veteran students. They are willing to be held accountable to how they are spending these funds and are eager to learn how other VRCs are using their funding.

These findings present the CCCCCO (and any funders focused on improving veterans services across CCC) with an opportunity to even further improve upon a seemingly impactful funding program. The **addition of accountability metrics tied to future funding would better allow for both a more concrete measure of impact,** as well as differentiation of how funds are being used to elevate the successes of individual campuses. Colleges want to learn from one another's successes and challenges. Thus, in addition to accountability metrics, the CCCCCO may consider the **development of a community of practice across VRCs, both in the spirit of ensuring CCC are using funds wisely and in ways that have proven positive outcomes for veterans.**

Appendix A: College Represented by Survey Participants

Allan Hancock College	Long Beach City College	Orange Coast College
Berkeley City College	Los Angeles Southwest College	Palo Verde College
Cabrillo College	Los Medanos College	Palomar College
College of San Mateo	Mendocino College	Pasadena City College
Copper Mountain College	MiraCosta College	San Bernardino Valley College
Cuesta College	Mission College	Shasta College
Feather River College	Santa Clara College	Sierra College
Glendale Community College	Monterey Peninsula College	Solano Community College
Grossmont College	Moorpark College	Southwestern College
Hartnell College	Mt. San Jacinto College	Ventura College
Irvine Valley College	Norco College	Victor Valley College
Las Positas College	Ohlone College	West Hills College Lemoore

Appendix B: Roles of Survey Participants

Veteran Certifying Official (5) (VRC) Coordinator (3)	Director of Admissions and Records/SCO	Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and VRC Director
Program Coordinator (2)	Director of Financial Aid/Veterans Certifying Official	Student Success and Equity Specialist-Veterans
School Certifying Official (SCO) (2)	Director of Student Equity	Supervisor, Veterans Services
Coordinator, Veterans Services (2)	Director of Student Services	Veteran Center Manager
Counselor (2)	Director Veteran Services	Veteran Program Coordinator
Coordinator, Veterans Upward Bound	Financial Aid Specialist/School Certifying Official	Veterans Affairs Coordinator
Dean Student Services	Program Director, DSPS and Veterans	Veterans Services Coordinator
Director Financial Aid and Veterans Services		Veterans Supervisor
		VRC Staff

Appendix C: VRC Minimum Standards



California
Community
Colleges

Veterans
Resource
Centers

Veterans Resource Center Minimum Standards

Structure

- Minimum 500 square feet
- ADA Compliant
- Front Desk for intake services
- Computer Lab – Min. of 2 computers and 1 printer
- Study Area
- 2 Private rooms for counseling and certifying
- Designated signage
- Lounge area

Services

- Financial Aid Assistance (Required for schools participating in Principles of Excellence)
- Veteran specific tutoring
- Peer to peer mentoring
- Text book loan program and/or book voucher program
- Mental health services for veteran on campus (may include outside organizations)
- Bridge to external services (housing, food etc....)
- Coordination with other campus-based programs like, DSPS, Financial Aid, Health Center, SSSP, Student Equity, etc.

Staffing

- 1 Certifying Official per 300 certifications/annually
- Dedicated Director/Coordinator
- Academic Counselor with veteran specific training
- VA Work Study Students – To support program operations

Appendix D: Managing Role of VRC Budgets

Coordinator, Veteran Services (3)	Director Financial Aid and Veterans Services	Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and VRC Director
Dean of Admissions and Records (3)	Director of Learning Assistance Project (LAP)/Health Services/Veterans Center	Student Equity Manager/Vet Specialist
Vice President (VP) of Student Services (2)	Director of Student Services	Supervisor, Veterans Services
Dean of Student Services (2)	Financial Aid Director (2)	Veteran Center Specialist
Director of Student Equity (2)	Program Coordinator – Veterans	Veteran Certifying Official
Director, Veterans Services (2)	Program Director	Veterans Affairs Coordinator
Associate Dean of Student Services	Senior Manager, Student Retention Services	VP Instruction and Student Services
Dean of Counseling		VP of Student Affairs and Program Coordinator

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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