Center to bolster support for vets

The end goal of Bellevue University's new site is to direct veterans toward careers in the state.

By Steve Liewer  World-Herald Staff Writer

After military deployments to New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina and to Baghdad during the Iraqi insurgency, Air Force Staff Sgt. Crystal Ditto thought she could handle just about anything.

Who would have guessed that daily dramas and the petty bureaucracy of campus life would throw up a challenge?

"It was very difficult," said Ditto, 29, who received her bachelor's degree from Bellevue University on Saturday. "All of us (veterans) who come in here, we're surrounded by young people. It's very intimidating."

That's why Ditto and other student veterans took comfort in the opening Friday of the college's new Military-Veteran Services Center at the college's main campus. A Bellevue University graduate, Army Brig. Gen. Jason T. Evans, cut the ceremonial ribbon in front of about 250 veterans and guests.

The center will house the university's Student Veterans Organization and its five-member military outreach team. It will offer a support group for service members and veterans, mentoring and tutoring services, and a cybercafe for quiet study. It's part of a larger initiative to steer veterans into the right careers and, hopefully, to place them with employers in Nebraska.

Through Skype, the many student veterans who take classes online can use the services, too. The university has kept close ties to the military since its founding in 1966 through the efforts of an Air Force veteran of World War II. It draws hundreds

See Veterans: Page 2
Veterans: Bellevue University offers new services

Continued from Page 1

of its students from nearby Offutt Air Force Base and Omaha's veterans community. The current president, Mary Hawkins, was a longtime military spouse.

"We were created in the shadow of Offutt for a reason," said Jim Biernesser, a retired Air Force colonel now serving as the college's director of military programs. "We were created to cater to the military."

That's what drew 12-year Air Force veteran Amy Wattier, who left the service in 2007. She just completed her first term at Bellevue.

"It's so culturally diverse and so military-friendly," Wattier said. "We have our own little lingo. You can talk the way you normally talk around people who understand."

Still, more than 60 percent of the students have no connection to the military.

Ditto said veterans and non-veterans frequently segregate themselves. It takes effort to bridge the gap in age and experience.

"We don't always relate well to the civilian side," she said. "It's because of what we've seen."

Biernesser said some students get lost dealing with the red tape involved in securing GI college benefits and then nailing down a degree. Now they can come to volunteers such as Ditto, who recently won a prestigious health-services scholarship and will be commissioned as an officer.

"They need help, but they will never ask for help," he said. "You have to go out and find them, or their buddy has to tell them."

Until the service center opened, the support services were scattered and ad hoc.

"It wasn't robust, and it wasn't well-known," he said. "But now it will be."

Contact the writer: 402-444-1186, steve.liewer@owh.com