Education Fair informs Sailors of higher learning opportunities

By Dan Bowen, CFAY Public Affairs

The Yokosuka Navy College Office held their first Education Fair of the year at the James D. Kelly Fleet Recreation Center on board Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) Jan. 13.

The day-long fair gave CFAY personnel the chance to learn about the myriad educational and financial programs available to active duty, civilian and family members residing in the area. Additionally, representatives from Navy College Program for Afloat College Education (NCPACE) as well as the other organizations and schools from the Navy College office greeted and counseled individuals on the benefits of pursuing a college degree.

"We are here making sure that active duty military, their spouses and also high school students are abreast of the opportunities and resources they have here on the base," said Yokosuka NCPACE manager Shaundra Dinkins. "So we're just here to promote education, [to help] everyone excel with education in 2010."

Although the Navy College regularly offers seminars and workshops aimed at helping people navigate the constantly evolving programs and benefits offered to active duty personnel and their families in their offices, counselors and coordinators are eager for opportunities to take their message out to the community.

According to Central Texas College NCPACE Program Assistant Distance Learning Coordinator Miles Leader, getting an education should be a top priority for everyone on board CFAY.

NCPACE Assistant Distance Learning Coordinator and Volunteer Navy College Education Advisor Miles Leader, gives a motivational speech to active duty personnel on the importance of obtaining an education while serving on both shore and at sea in the Navy.

Photo by Shaundra Dinkins

"Education is the key for success. In order for a person to live the kind of lifestyle that they would want to live, they need to be educated," said Leader. "There are so many people out there in the military and their spouses who have no idea of the importance of what education can do for them; so, it's a passion for me to help them do what's necessary to earn their college degrees."

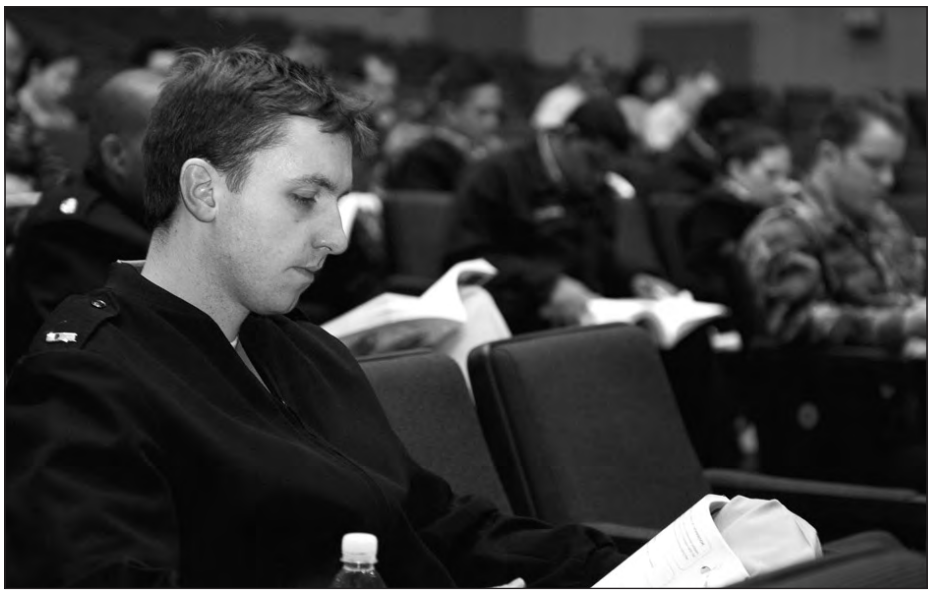
For many Americans, the current economic downturn has helped bring into focus the need to be as competitive as possible in an ever-changing world. It has become clear to active duty members that to excel in a time of continuous force restructuring in the Navy, perform-to-serve, continuation boards and the rising demands and expectations placed on junior Sailors looking to advance in their careers, maintaining a competitive edge with education is of the utmost importance. And for members who are planning to separate from the military, earning a college degree is vital to ensure they will be able to transition into civilian life while maintaining a similar standard of living they have enjoyed while serving.

"I have witnessed Sailors who have gotten out of the Navy without a college degree and their lives were nowhere near the same as it was while they were active duty," said Leader, who retired five years ago after serving 26 years in the Navy. "[Sailors] become accustomed to certain benefits, certain pays and allowances that they just don't get outside in the civilian world unless they have a college degree."

Sailors, civilians attend VITA training, prepare for upcoming tax season

Story and photo by MC2 Matthew R. White, Navy Public Affairs Support Japan

Sailor and civilian volunteers of the Yokosuka community attended the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) training program Jan. 11-14, so they can help their shipmates and neighbors in the community correctly complete their tax forms during the upcoming tax season.



Lt. j.g. Daniel Leary, assigned to Navy Legal Service Office, Sasebo, attends the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) training held at CFAY Jan. 12. The VITA training teaches volunteers how to properly file taxes, so they will be able to assist their shipmates and neighbors on how to properly file their taxes.

"The VITA program is geared for people of low and moderate income and it is a free service," said IRS agent Monica Merchan, senior tax consultant and VITA course moderator. "We give them information on who should file a return, why it is necessary to file a return, what qualifies as benefits and what kind of credits they can take on their returns."

VITA is a free service offered through the IRS and is run by Sailors helping fellow Sailors complete their taxes.

"Tax season is usually a big burden on a lot of people," said Lt. Cmdr. Robert Moore, assigned to Navy Legal Service Office and is a VITA course instructor. "So we have people here who are qualified to conduct taxes and can assist tax payers and their families in preparing tax [forms] proficiently and accurately and hopefully get back a refund."

The volunteers attend four days of classroom instruction before passing an exam with an 80 percent or higher score in order to become VITA certified.

Moore said VITA was initially intended for personnel in the pay grade of E-5 and below, but has been opened to service members of all pay grades and civilian contractors.

The Yokosuka VITA Office will also feature seven self-serve kiosks where Sailors filing 1040EZ tax forms can complete and submit their taxes. If they run into any snags or have questions with the process, VITA assistance will be just a few steps away.

"If they feel uncomfortable, we have tax preparers available to assist them in walking through the process," said Moore. "They can prepare both state and federal taxes and they'll be able to e-file their taxes using Military One Source, which is also free," he added.

Moore said that regardless of whether a Sailor uses the self-service kiosk or requires VITA assistance to complete their taxes, they still need to bring their important tax documents with them.

"They should bring anything they got in the mail that says important tax information," said Moore. "At the minimum they should bring their W2, 1099INT, which is interest, 1099DIV, which is dividends, social security card, ID card, bank account information, routing number and their taxes from the prior year."

The VITA office is located in the Yokosuka Community Center and will be open Feb. 2 and will continue to assist Sailors with their taxes until the IRS due date of April 15.

Free online tax filing services offered

Military OneSource is once again providing free tax consultation and free online tax filing services to military service members and their families during the tax season. Participants will have free online access to H&R Block At Home (formerly TaxCut) Basic tax product.

Participants must register for Military OneSource and log onto the site for access to the H&R Block At Home Basic product. A separate logon for the H&R Block At Home Web site is required.

Those eligible for the program are active duty, guard and reserve (regardless of activation status), family members authorized in DEERS, family members handling the affairs of a deployed service member and severely injured service members or family members handling their affairs.

Participants will have free access to the H&R Block At Home Basic product. Those with more complicated returns may incur charges if they upgrade to the H&R Block At Home Premium product.

Participants can file up to three state resident returns for each federal return that they file using the H&R Block At Home Basic product.

Participants can speak with a Military OneSource tax consultant if they have tax related questions, or need assistance using the services provided.

Go to www.militaryonesource.com for more information.