



# Student Veterans in Higher Education: *A Transitional Challenge*

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*“[Veterans] don’t need care packages and quilts. They need a nation to understand the skills and values and discipline they have acquired--and the assistance they still require--and then give them an opportunity to make a difference on the home front . . . Saying ‘thank you’ at an airport is not enough. Standing for an ovation at a baseball game is not enough. To do right by our veterans--to recognize their value to our society and fulfill our solemn obligation to those who volunteered to protect the rest of us--we first have to understand what they have accomplished and what they offer our nation”*

—Howard Schultz and Rajiv Chandrasekaran,  
*For Love of Country*<sup>1</sup>

More than 2.6 million troops have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.<sup>2</sup> As these service members return to civilian life, many become students to build upon the skills they have learned in their military training and service, and prepare for the civilian job market. Over one million veterans received Veterans Affairs Educational Benefits in 2013 through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill<sup>3</sup> and with an increasing volume of service members separating from the military, the number of educational beneficiaries is expected to reach two million before 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Student veterans face many difficult challenges integrating into higher education. Having lived a regimented life in the military, veterans often find that their new lives as college students are vastly different. During military service, all instructions are given, for instance, and

seldom do service members question those orders. In contrast, college students typically have no strict schedule, the ability to question authority, a great deal of independence, and no orders. The challenges faced by the non-traditional group of veteran students, therefore, given such a change in their environment are important to address and understand.

In this article, I will provide a brief historical background of veterans' educational benefits, identify some of the current challenges faced by student veterans in their transition to higher education, and touch upon the cost of educating student veterans, particularly at for-profit institutions, which are receiving a growing share of Post 9/11 GI Bill education dollars.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I will discuss potential ways that higher education institutions can help student veterans experience a smooth transition to college and help them attain their educational goals.

### Historical Background

Since 1973, when the military draft ended, the United States has had an all-volunteer military, and educational benefits after completion of one's military obligations stand out as one of the major incentives to serve for many who enlist. Yet this incentive dates even further back to the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill), enacted in the waning days of World War II to provide veterans with benefits including home mortgages, low interest business loans, health benefits, unemployment payments, disability, and educational benefits.<sup>6</sup> The GI Bill has gone through a number of revisions in the past 70 years, most recently as the Post 9/11 GI Bill of 2008, which provides educational benefits for veterans of the most recent wars to attend postsecondary educational and vocational training programs. More than 500,000 veterans and their families received unprecedented financial support in the first year of benefits offered through the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Educational benefits, under this new legislation, are available for the veteran or can be transferred to a dependent. Many veterans and service members have used the benefit to enroll in or, in some cases, return to higher education. Department of Veterans Affairs data from 2013 shows an increase of 3,233,744 education program beneficiaries between fiscal years 2008 and 2012.<sup>7</sup>

### Challenges

Though student veterans have not been studied as closely as other subgroups such as student athletes, the existing literature shows that many factors contribute to a difficult transition for them from military service, and that they grapple with different challenges than non-veteran students.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in a recent study, Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, and Liu found that a majority of the student veterans arriving in college are first-generation students within

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their families, and are more likely to be first-generation students than their non-veteran peers. Sixty-six percent of combat veterans who responded to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2010 identified themselves as the first in their families to attend college, suggesting that much of the description of overall first-generation students prior to college matriculation will likewise apply for student veterans.<sup>9</sup> They arrive to college with a weaker academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, and a lack of knowledge in navigating the college environment.<sup>10</sup>

The millions of veterans and thousands of spouses and dependent children using veterans' educational benefits at colleges and universities often face veteran-specific hassles such as Veterans Administration delays and confusing paperwork. As noted above, student veterans' transition from the regimented military lifestyle to self-directed structuring of their schedules, making their own decisions, and challenging authority, requires a significant shift in mindset. Veterans also struggle to fit in with fellow students, who tend to be younger and may be unfamiliar with the realities of military service or critical of the conflict that veterans participated in.<sup>11</sup>

Financial issues around higher education, meanwhile, may depend on the type of college a veteran chooses. While the costs of attending college are increasing – tuition costs rose 683% at public colleges and universities between 1980 and 2005<sup>12</sup> – there are programs in place that aim to help veterans achieve their higher education goals without worrying about expenses. The Department of Veterans Affairs currently administers six educational programs for veterans, service members, and dependents. For most beneficiaries, the Post 9/11 GI Bill is the best option, but since there are other factors that determine eligibility and a decision to apply for certain benefits may impact other educational benefits, the VA Comparison Tool/Payment Rates site is a good starting point.<sup>13</sup> Most public and private institutions of higher learning are making strides to assist military service members and veterans, with the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon program covering most of the cost of a veteran's college education. Last summer, a review of the sixty-two members of the Association of American Universities (AAU), showed that only

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eight members did not participate in the Yellow Ribbon program. The Post 9/11 GI Bill will pay all resident tuition and fees for public schools, the lower of the actual tuition and fees or the national maximum for a private school per academic year. Degree Granting Institutions may choose to take part in the Yellow Ribbon Program by entering into an agreement with the VA and contribute a set amount to the veterans’ fees and tuition. The VA matches the amount and issues monies directly to the institution.<sup>14</sup> However, several for-profit institutions have recently been the focus of federal government scrutiny and lawsuits from the attorneys general of California and Massachusetts.<sup>15</sup> Findings in a recent Majority Committee Staff Report of the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee indicate that since the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in 2008, for-profit institutions have received a disproportionate share of the educational benefits, totaling over \$3.2 billion.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the report notes, in some cases veterans who attend these schools are unable to finish their degree program, and end up leaving school without a degree and with considerable debt due to the higher cost of tuition, despite tuition assistance from federal veteran education programs.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the financial cost of a college education, some veterans arrive with combat-related disabilities,<sup>18</sup> which often complicates the transition to college. Multiple studies<sup>19</sup> note that the injuries sustained by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans are more survivable than previous wars due to the improvements in body armor and medical care. Though physically survivable, however, disabilities connected to traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and related complications of alcohol abuse and troubled family relationships, among other challenges, often test a student veteran’s ability to successfully complete a college education. Faculty and disability service providers must be prepared to provide reasonable and appropriate accommodations as wounded warriors transition to campus, and establish a strong collaboration with one another to ensure that the accommodations provided in the classroom are effective in meeting current needs, and flexible

enough to accommodate future needs.<sup>20</sup> It is more difficult to recognize the impact of PTSD, TBI, and depression in the classroom because they affect cognitive ability and behavioral health, and signs of these conditions are not always clear to the eye.<sup>21</sup> Postsecondary institutions, however, may be better prepared than other public or private settings to serve student veterans with cognitive issues related to PTSD, depression or TBI. This is because colleges currently provide academic accommodations to students with learning disabilities, which are considered cognitive deficits. With some minor adaptations specific to student veterans with cognitive deficits, these students can attain more equal access to the full benefits of education.<sup>22</sup> Such combat-related, visible and invisible disabilities place a significant burden on student veterans, one that most of their fellow students do not have to grapple with and may not fully understand.

### **How Institutions of Higher Education Can Help Student Veterans Succeed**

With combat operations in Afghanistan coming to an end and America’s reduction in military force in fiscal year 2015,<sup>23</sup> a second wave of student veterans is due to arrive in colleges and universities soon, poised to pursue their education. Some institutions are ill-prepared for the large number of student veterans that are expected to enroll or return to school in the next ten years. In a recent study, Durdella and Kim describe the conflict between military and higher education culture as being a factor that complicates a veteran’s transition to college.<sup>24</sup> There is no doubt that the transition to college is difficult and complicated for veterans. Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen<sup>25</sup> suggest that institutions of higher learning have an opportunity to help veterans succeed in college by meeting the challenges of financial, mental health, social needs and providing veterans with a sense of safety and belonging through on-campus, veteran-specific programming and services.

New research provides insights as how best colleges and universities might ease this transition to higher education for student veterans and assist them on campus. Several groups, such as Student Veterans of America, the Pat Tillman Foundation, Got your Six Foundation, and the American Council on Education, have either sponsored or administered studies<sup>26</sup> that have begun to make some strides in research on student veterans’ transition to higher education. Of particular note are two studies: “Completing the Mission” (2011) and “Completing the Mission II” (2013).<sup>27</sup> The first research project was initiated to evaluate student veterans’ progress towards degree attainment. The 2013 follow-up project expanded the study from degree attainment to include a separate assessment of the commonality of on-campus programs and services at participating campuses. The 2013 survey highlights

some of the most prevalent support services on campus that are viewed as great assets to student veterans, service members and dependents. These include in-state tuition for student veterans, a student veteran campus steering committee, the Yellow Ribbon Program, a student-operated veterans club or association, and an on campus veterans' office coordinator. The latter two of these supports received 100% support from all the participants. While there are no plans to make this research project into a longitudinal study, it does provide a baseline of services, needs described by veterans, and programs that colleges or universities may want to implement at their institution.

Earlier this year, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers published *A Handbook for Higher Education Administrators, Helping Veterans Succeed*. Section I provides an overview of programs and needs and explains veteran educational programs, veteran demographics, and student veteran disabilities. Section II, Campus Strategies for Serving Student Veterans, provides a blueprint for administering a successful program and gives directions on how to best navigate the VA waters. Section III consists of two case studies from Salt Lake Community College and Eastern Washington University that provide a step-by-step creation of a successful program. The handbook also includes a series of appendices that will familiarize any interested party with

forms, school responsibilities for the Post 9/11 GI Bill, glossary of terms and useful websites.

### Conclusion

Colleges and universities should embrace these findings and heed the call to open their doors more consistently to student veterans, as it is clear that as a group, more veterans are interested in pursuing higher education than the general cohort of their peers. The U.S. Census Bureau, in data from the 2010 American Community Survey and 2007 Economic Census, estimates that compared with 86% of the total population, 92% of veterans 25 and older have at least a high school diploma. However, veterans are less likely to have fully completed a college degree; compared to 28% of the total population, only 26% of veterans 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree, suggesting that colleges could be doing more to ensure veterans both enroll in and finish their advanced education.<sup>28</sup> It is this last statistic that must resonate with everyone and encourage our higher education institutions to lead in this vein, heeding the words at the beginning of this article from For Love of Country: "to recognize [veterans'] value to our society and fulfill our solemn obligation to those who volunteered to protect the rest of us--we first have to understand what they have accomplished and what they offer our nation".<sup>29</sup> It is the least we can do. **CI**

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