

We will soon be seeing more student veterans enrolling in institutions of higher education than since WWII. David T. Vacchi provides guidance on how to serve this important population of students.

By David T. Vacchi

# Considering Student Veterans on the Twenty-First-Century College Campus

**T**HE NEW GI BILL OFFERS the best educational benefits for veterans in the history of our nation, and although the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may bring closure to the era that began on September 11, 2001, we are just starting to see the influx of student veterans to our campuses. While many campus officials believe a surge of student veterans is under way, 2012 is the first year of college eligibility for veterans who enlisted specifically for the Post 9-11 GI Bill benefits signed into law in the summer of 2008. Further, the ends of these wars, coupled with recent budget cuts to the Department of Defense, may result in a military downsize of as much as 20 percent of the total active force. The generosity of these new GI Bill benefits will draw significant numbers of a downsized military into higher education. Therefore, the expected influx of student veterans requires higher education faculty, staff, and administrators to both understand

veterans and prepare to meet the needs of this rapidly growing student population.

Student veterans are a diverse subpopulation on campus, and we should not expect universal comprehension of, or blanket policies for, these students. However, there are several ways we can thoughtfully consider student veterans in our classrooms and provide services to these former military members. First, considering student veterans requires an understanding of the term and the inclusive definition we should use to ensure we consider the right people in the most effective way. Once we come to agreement about the term and members of this burgeoning student population, we must consider the background and experiences of student veterans in order to understand them better as people. All too often we view younger student veterans as traditional students, thus diminishing the varied background experiences of student veterans. Finally, once we begin to understand student veterans, we can consider ways that faculty and staff can interact

# What higher education needs is not hyperbole surrounding the experiences of student veterans, but quality empirical observation.

with student veterans to positively impact their college experiences, particularly their learning, which is not only why veterans come to college, but also the reason for GI Bill benefits.

Unfortunately, in a dramatic attempt to draw attention to an expanding student-veteran population, some scholars exaggerate the difficulties of student veterans and draw improper inferences about student veterans based upon larger veteran population stereotypes. One of the greatest mischaracterizations, both by popular media and some higher education scholars, is about posttraumatic stress disorder and other disabilities, suggesting that as many as 40 percent of student veterans have visible or invisible injuries. While this number is twice the informed estimate, it underscores a false premise that can accompany any issue: the perceived need for high drama in order to get attention. In addition, much of the contemporary literature on student veterans presumes that student veterans have difficulty transitioning as a population without offering any empirical evidence. Contrary to news reports, the evidence offered by the few scholars who have undertaken qualitative inquiries suggests that student veterans, currently numbering over 800,000, do not experience any more transition difficulty than other student populations. Ironically, history suggests that student veterans not only adjust well to campus, but equal or best their nonveteran peers in the classroom on their way to earning their degrees. What higher education needs is not hyperbole surrounding the experiences of student veterans, but quality empirical observation. Exaggerating the challenges of student veterans is not only disingenuous but can also encourage campus members to keep their distance from veterans, which is not what student veterans need in order to succeed in college.

## THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF A COMMON DEFINITION FOR STUDENT VETERANS

A GOAL IN CONSIDERING THE STUDENT-VETERAN POPULATION should be to be as inclusive as possible to all students who may experience challenges to success because of their military background. A common and inclusive definition for *student*

*veteran* has been elusive, due to legal, historical, and perception challenges. Based on this lack of a common reference for student veterans, various institutions have developed their own labels for student veterans they serve, but it is unclear if these are inclusive groups. For example, some colleges refer to *military-affiliated students* and include active duty, National Guard, Reserves, and dependents as members of the population. Another example refers to *military students* as enlisted personnel, veterans, and dependents using GI Bill benefits. Still others refer to *veteran students* and *military undergraduates*, but most commonly higher education refers to *student veterans*. A problem with many of these labels may be in the inappropriate suggestions connected with the words in the label. For example, student veterans may no longer consider themselves *affiliated* with the military or *military students* upon separation from military service. Certainly, not all student veterans are *undergraduates*, and *veteran students* might just be students who earn sequential degrees and never leave campus. The result of using different labels and including different populations depending on the campus creates a problem in accurately referring to student veterans. The most widely used term is *student veterans*.

## WHAT DOES THE TERM VETERAN MEAN ON A CAMPUS?

THE WORD *VETERAN* IS A LEGAL TERM with multiple definitions depending on the source, such as federal or state government agencies. Discussions about what the term *veteran* means regarding educational benefits is critical to determining eligibility for state and federal financial benefits and thus requires specificity. That said, identifying this student population for purposes of meeting their needs as students

---

*David T. Vacchi* is a doctoral student researching the impact of college on student veterans in the higher education program at UMass-Amherst. He retired after a 20-year Army career including deployments for both Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Jean M. Henscheid (aboutcampus@pdx.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

requires a more all-encompassing definition. The significant differences in socialization and culture between academia and the military demand a more inclusive approach. It is also important to realize that student veterans include more than just those students using GI Bill benefits. Students who may experience the friction between military and campus cultures include wartime and non-wartime veterans of active duty, the Reserves, and the National Guard, as well as current members of those services, which include those currently serving on active duty and studying on campus. When considering the academic socialization of former military members to a campus while in pursuit of an academic degree, a *veteran* is any current or former member of the active duty, National Guard, or Reserve military regardless of deployment status or combat experience. Thus, I define a *student veteran* as follows:

*A student veteran is any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use.*

Using this common definition, educators can clarify who student veterans are and consistently refer to this campus student population to develop policies and services. Even if campuses do not use the term *student veteran*, the population should remain inclusive and consistent in national discussions about this student subpopulation. All students who are current or former military members are included in this definition, making it inclusive of the intended student subpopulation. This definition is more inclusive than that of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which Alexandria Radford notes, in her study for the Rand Corporation, does not completely account for National Guard members. Further, the NCES does not have a mechanism to identify student veterans who do not self-identify, which likely results in a failure to count thousands of student veterans across the nation. While my description of the student-veteran population is inclusive, it is also fair to believe that some student veterans may require more help than others based

on individual circumstances. Educators should keep in mind that veteran-friendly policies and practices do not require specific awareness of each student's veteran status and will benefit student veterans whether a student self-identifies or not.

While undergraduate and graduate students on active duty or graduate student veterans may have difficulties, the need to develop specific programming for these subpopulations is minimal. The support structures currently available to these students through the military and/or their degree programs are substantial. This leaves undergraduates who are military veterans, or National Guard and Reserves members, as the likely component of student veterans who may need campus services and support. Some scholars, such as Wade G. Livingston, Pamela A. Havice, Tony W. Cawthon, and David S. Fleming, have aptly observed that undergraduate students still serving in the reserve components (the National Guard or Reserves) may experience repeated challenges as they move back and forth between their lives as military members and students. With roughly 90 percent of the student-veteran population fitting the undergraduate student-veteran description, programming should clearly focus on these students.

### THE COMMON THREAD FOR ALL VETERANS: MILITARY SOCIALIZATION

UPON ENTRY, OR REENTRY, TO THE COLLEGE CAMPUS, veterans have experienced socialization into a military culture that is markedly different from the culture in higher education. Student veterans are part of a new generation of veterans unlike any in US history. Briefly, contemporary student veterans come from a professional all-volunteer standing military, seasoned by the highest-quality training, equipment, standards, and expectations, and by modern combat and deployments around the world. In short, we have never had this volume of quality veterans in our nation's history. The implication for higher education is that we should expect contemporary veterans to perform no worse than historical veterans in college,

**With roughly 90 percent of the student-veteran population fitting the undergraduate student-veteran description, programming should clearly focus on these students.**

# Veterans are in an awkward position as soon as they depart military service, and one of the most awkward places for a student veteran to be after military service is on a college campus.

who have generally outperformed nonveterans in the classroom.

To understand today's student veteran, it is important to understand the culture that produces veterans. Veterans come from a demanding environment, and veterans generally expect to meet or exceed those expectations. The military trains and develops leadership and initiative from the beginning of military service, and duty is marked by high levels of discipline and teamwork. A side effect of this environment is that no military member, or veteran, wants to be the weak link on a team. Failure is not an option for these veterans and being a burden to anyone, such as professors or campus administrators, brings back the specter of being the weak link on a military team. This is why so many cases of posttraumatic stress, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug addiction, and medical issues go undiagnosed and untreated: veterans do not want campus community members to view them as weak or dependent upon anyone for assistance.

The common experience of all military members is initial entry training, popularly known as *boot camp* or *basic training*. While this is typically not the experience for military officers, over 90 percent of student veterans are former enlisted members, not officers. Initial entry training and "unlearning" of youthful habits in order to learn the "military way" changes those who serve in the military. The longer the service of a military service member, the deeper the military socialization is for the veteran, but even a short tour of duty can create a strong military socialization. This socialization may be deeper when the veteran's résumé reflects combat experience. If a veteran chooses to go to college after military service, this may be the most difficult leap for a veteran, as the campus is not the highly structured, team-based environment of the military. Still, veterans' decisions to attend college are intentional, unlike some traditional-aged students who are not psychologically or academically ready for the jump to independence that college attendance represents. Scholars may consider this a stark contrast between student veterans and nonveterans, as the intentional decision of veterans to attend college may explain things such as greater per-

formance in the classroom, higher retention rates, and more successful transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions.

A frustrating circumstance for veterans when reentering civilian society is that it is hard for veterans to earn a similar level of trust and responsibility from the average American as veterans enjoyed while in the military. Many Americans have little understanding or appreciation for the level of responsibility, training, discipline, and competence of US military personnel. This alone can be frustrating for young veterans returning from combat, a time in which they were responsible for life-and-death decisions affecting their fellow service members. Veterans are in an awkward position as soon as they depart military service, and one of the most awkward places for a student veteran to be after military service is on a college campus. National Guard and Reserves members epitomize this dynamic as they move back and forth between their military and campus cultures.

The most difficult task for any veteran to overcome may be learning that it is all right to need help and even more important to seek help when needed. Veterans may feel they must live up to a false expectation: not to burden others with their problems. We should not overlook this characteristic, particularly in the classroom, when considering student veterans. Veterans' trying to avoid being a burden to others is an explanation for why veterans may not self-identify: if no one knows the student is a veteran, there is no shame in asking for help. Further, if a veteran's status is unknown, the veteran may feel that he or she has better access to help. It is critical for educational professionals to understand student veterans, because student veterans can mask their own needs even if they are simple to address.

## CREATING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ON CAMPUS FOR STUDENT VETERANS

VETERANS GENERALLY CAN ADAPT AND OVERCOME CHALLENGES due to a spirit of persistence ingrained into the military psyche. What puts

student veterans at a disadvantage is similar to what disadvantages first-generation students: lack of ability to navigate the systems and bureaucracy of a college campus. While veterans are used to being the focus of attention for military support services, they may find that they are not the focus of attention for support on a college campus. This may be a substantive adjustment for student veterans, particularly in their first year on campus. In addition, a critical point to consider with student veterans, as with all students, is to meet the veterans at their level, to assess their potential, and then to include them in developing their academic plan. The general environment on campus is important, but most veterans have experienced environments that are truly hostile, so pursuing labels of *veteran friendliness* may not be that important to veterans. It is more important to identify potential obstacles to student success and to focus policy and service energy there.

## STUDENT-VETERAN ENTRANCE OBSTACLES

**THE LIST OF ENTRANCE OBSTACLES FOR VETERANS IS GREATER** than for the nonveteran student. First, there is a disconnect between the military and higher education in that there is no consistent method for awarding credit for military service. Further, there is little consistency in awarding transfer credit for college courses taken while serving in the military. These two issues alone create a substantial point of stress for veterans entering college. Imagine the disappointment of a student veteran after taking numerous college courses while in the military, even earning some credits while deployed in combat, only to find that many of those credits do not apply to a chosen degree requiring more semesters of coursework than anticipated. The policy implication here is clear: colleges and universities should give every reasonable consideration to student veterans who have done prior academic work while serving in the military to award fair credits to student veterans. This is one of the requirements of inclusion in the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) consortium. SOC-affiliated institutions also practice fair and equitable

treatment of the nontraditional education credit for service of student veterans.

The next hurdle would frustrate the most seasoned veteran and perplexes all student veterans. Imagine serving in the military for four to six years, the average term of service for a veteran transitioning from the military, and being used to the discipline and teamwork of the small-unit environments of the military. Imagine how much you have matured over those six years and what high levels of responsibility you had as a junior leader responsible for the lives and well-being of other service members and what that has done to your work ethic and discipline. Imagine during that time you have not only made at least one deployment to a combat zone, but you have also taken several college courses and done some remedial work on writing and math; after all, your military service was intended to get you ready to succeed in college because you were not ready to go to college when you were 18. Now imagine that you're applying to colleges and the admissions clerk tells you that your seven-year-old test scores are going to be a problem in gaining admission to your chosen college. The perceived relevance of entrance test scores for veterans who completed high school several years in the past and for admissions personnel may be very different. It may well be that the entrance test score, waning at some institutions as a relevant admissions metric, simply is not an adequate predictor of college success for the average military veteran applicant. This is an acute case of needing to create a special policy for considering the college applications of most veterans.

## ONGOING OBSTACLES FOR STUDENT VETERANS

**I SEE FIVE MAIN AREAS TO CONSIDER** when enhancing the overall learning environment for student veterans on campus: GI Bill processing, health care insurance requirements, bursar practices, academic advising practices, and faculty practices. None of these are particularly complicated issues, and addressing these issues does not cost money but may require some energy from higher education professionals. First, acknowledge that certifying GI Bill benefits in

**Acknowledge that certifying GI Bill benefits in a timely manner is both a function of the certifying official validating the course load of a student veteran and of faculty cooperation.**

a timely manner is both a function of the certifying official validating the course load of a student veteran and of faculty cooperation. Some courses are restricted and require instructor permission to enroll. If it is not the practice of professors to enroll students early for restricted courses, then they may be creating problems for student veterans that typically require months of follow-up with the Veterans' Administration (VA). This may result in delayed payments to the student veteran. Two simple remedies to this problem are gaining faculty cooperation in enrolling student veterans for classes as early as possible and delaying the final certification process for veterans as late into the semester as possible. Either way, this is a special policy or practice consideration for student veterans.

Hand in hand with a timely certification process is bursar awareness of student veteran status. Administrators must acknowledge the inflexibility of the federal government's fiscal year and plan to accommodate student veterans using the GI Bill by not expecting payment until well after the first day in October during the fall semester. Harassing a student veteran for payments that are out of the student's control, and that have 100 percent assurance of being paid, may cause stress for student veterans, which may negatively impact their learning experience. A similar stressor for student veterans eligible for VA health coverage is matching these benefits with college-required health care. In order to waive college health care fees, adequate replacement insurance is typically required. The trouble with VA health care is that it is not a health insurance plan; it is simply free health care. The simplest solution is for campuses to establish a local policy that waives all relevant health insurance fees for student veterans with a verification of VA health coverage. A more effective solution is for states to establish a law lifting the requirement for colleges to mandate health care insurance for student veterans with approved VA health coverage.

Finally, contact between advisors or faculty and student veterans should be of good quality, as it should be for any student. The advisor should understand the nuances of transfer credits and understand the student

veteran's individual needs in order to provide the best advice. Advising in the military is a personal endeavor and considers the personal and leader development needs of each military member. With this background, student veterans expect no less from college academic advisors. The quality of contact between faculty and student veterans may be the most important nonfinancial key to ensuring the persistence of student veterans.

The list of examples of how a professor affects the veteran-friendliness of a campus is too long for this article, but I can offer a few examples. First, if the course content of the class has nothing to do with ongoing wars (most do not), opinions of the professor on war during class may be a waste of students' time and possibly offensive to student veterans. An example I use frequently is of a student veteran who enrolled in Greek Classics and subsequently dropped the course after the first day because the professor went on a rant about the illegality of the War in Iraq. Another example of how a professor can negatively impact a classroom environment is by offering opinions that the professor is clearly not qualified to give, such as a professor who has not been to Iraq asserting, "The Iraqis don't want us there." What if the issues are more complicated than that or the student veteran's experiences offer valid contradiction with this assertion? The professor has now created a hostile classroom environment for the student veteran. A final example may be failing to accommodate the needs of a student veteran for seating arrangements near an exit or with their back to a wall, or extra time requirements for exams and the like due to a documented disability. We cannot predict every scenario that might offend a student veteran, and these resilient students are likely to tolerate a lot. Creating a veteran-friendly campus environment begins with awareness and professionalism.

## LOOKING AHEAD

THE MOTIVATIONS FOR ATTENDING COLLEGE are common among most students, including student veterans. Some student veterans work part-time jobs, like to socialize, and join student orga-

**We cannot predict every scenario that might offend a student veteran, and these resilient students are likely to tolerate a lot. Creating a veteran-friendly campus environment begins with awareness and professionalism.**

## The proud current and former military member students aspire to the same challenges and academic standards as all students and do not want their military service to be a detractor to their educational experience.

nizations just like traditional students, and student veterans have as diverse a palette of political perspectives as do other students. What is reasonable to expect of veterans due to a heightened sense of mission accomplishment from their military service is that they should succeed, as long as unreasonable obstacles do not hinder their educational pursuits. Interestingly, some surveys indicate that some student veterans do not like the term *veteran-friendly* because of the implication that colleges might go easy on student veterans. The proud current and former military member students aspire to the same challenges and academic standards as all students and do not want their military service to be a detractor to their educational experience. A basic awareness of the resources available at a college or university, or to whom a veteran can go for assistance, and a generally helpful staff and faculty is the best way to help student veterans to succeed. None of these are unreasonable expectations of an institution of higher learning. Accommodating campus policies will go a long way to helping student veterans succeed.

Today's veterans enjoy the general support and approval of the American public. Therefore, it seems reasonable that all corners of American society would do what they can to help veterans succeed after these Americans answer the call to serve the nation during a time of war. On campus, this translates to reasonable efforts to make small policy modifications that increase the likelihood that student veterans will succeed. Some of the greatest motivating factors for young enlistees today are to get a solid job, to earn educational benefits, and to make a better life for themselves and their families. Higher education should partner with these student veterans to help them succeed.

---

### NOTES

- Livingston, W. G., Havice, P., A. Cawthon, T. W., & Fleming, D. S. (2011). Coming home: Student veterans' articulation of college re-enrollment. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48, 315–331.
- Radford, A. (2009). *Military service members and veterans in higher education: What the new GI Bill may mean for postsecondary institutions*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.



Copyright of About Campus is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.