

Higher Education and the Military Community

Note: While many sub-populations in the military community struggle with higher education, this document focuses on veterans.

Education changes lives in unimaginable ways, and in the modern world nothing is so great a predictor of a person's future employment, salary or standard of living. America's military veterans face unique challenges in higher education; they are usually older, have dependents and some are suffering from invisible wounds of war. We owe it to them to help them overcome these hurdles and attain higher education so that they can be successful, productive citizens, and continue to do great things for themselves, their loved ones and their country.

Overview of the Issue

Every day about 3,000 service members separate from military service. Many of them are under the age of 24. In 2010, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics found that the rate of unemployment among this group was 21.9 percent.^[i]

In 2001, the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Survey of Veterans showed that of the first Gulf War veterans, 75 percent used their educational benefits for a bachelor's or graduate degree.^[v] The Department of Defense has shown that 17.9 percent of active duty service members and 19 percent of Reservists and National Guardsmen hold a bachelor's degree.^[vi] By comparison, Americans with bachelor's degrees or higher account for 27 percent of the population.ⁱ Higher education researcher at UCLA and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veteran Dani Molina believes, "this illustrates a significant achievement gap in veterans' education and signifies that many veterans understand the need to earn a post-secondary education to be competitive in the labor market" (personal communication, Aug. 24, 2011).

Although veterans are bringing their maturity and motivation to their studies, many of them are out of practice academically. According to a recent study from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), most veterans come from households that exhibit lower levels of parental education and income; have lower levels of behaviors associated with academic success; are more confident they have sufficient funds to cover their educational costs; are less likely to value academic reputation and future career potential as a reason for choosing their institution; and interact less with peers and faculty.ⁱⁱ

Molina, a co-investigator of the study, said, "this investigation demonstrates a significant difference in academic preparation and behaviors, financial concerns and resources, and institutional choices and involvement between veterans and non-veterans." The study shows that many veterans may come from significantly different parental income and educational households when compared to their non-veteran counterparts. To that end, many veterans may enter the military seeking to better their marginalized livelihoods, and the promise of making the most of the Post-9/11 GI Bill entices them to enlist to address that status. Student veterans from lower socio-economic backgrounds now have a historic opportunity to enter an institution of higher learning regardless of costs. However, there may still be a number of barriers that hinder their access, persistence and degree attainment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of these service members are older, have children, work and other responsibilities outside the classroom. They may, for instance, need time off from class to attend appointments at their VA medical center, which may be hours away and must be scheduled months in advance. They may also be overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of applying for and attending a university or vocational school, or feel unwelcome and/or out of place in that environment.

Education can change a person's life. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans with education beyond high school earn considerably more annually, around \$22,000 more^[viii]. Women earn an astounding 76 percent more with a bachelor's degree than without, and 18 percent of all veterans are women. While money cannot buy happiness, according to the Pew Research Center, those who earn more money are more likely to report being happy; those with household incomes in excess of \$75,000 a year were much more likely to report being happy than those making less than \$30,000^[ix]. Happiness aside, Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) has projected that not only will education be critical to success in the future economy, it will be the gatekeeper to a comfortable middle-class income^[x]. So while education cannot guarantee happiness, it makes a person far more likely to be a happy and productive member of society.

The history of World War II veterans shows what motivated, educated veterans can and have done for our country. This was the generation that went to the moon after all. President Lyndon Johnson noted in 1966, when he signed the Cold War GI Bill, that \$60 billion dollars had been returned on the nation's initial \$21 billion dollar investment^[xi], and there is no doubt that the GI Bill empowered the "Greatest Generation" to change the world. This illustrates the remarkable *return on investment* the U.S. public enjoyed after supporting veterans' education after World War II. At this point in history, America is once again presented with a group of young men and women equally eager to make their mark in the nation's history.

Successfully educated and reintegrated veterans also make it more likely that America's young men and women will continue to regard military service as a means of achieving the American dream.

Existing Services

The Post-9-11 GI Bill provides financial support for service members attending higher education – it covers vocational, undergraduate and graduate education as well as on the job training, licensing, flight training and correspondence training. It is considered by many to be a significant improvement of the Montgomery GI Bill, which is available to those who served before Sept. 11, 2001. The Post-9-11 GI Bill includes funding for books, fees and housing while the Montgomery GI Bill covers tuition only. In addition, the Yellow Ribbon program enables those service members who served after 9-11 to attend some of America's finest private universities. These programs are incredible tools that can be used to educate our veterans and, in some cases, their family members.

How You Can Help

Community leaders can make a difference in the lives of America's veterans and their families. The Montgomery and Post-9-11 GI Bills, as well as Federal Pell Grants, are already there, providing much of the funding needed for college. The community can adopt certain promising practices to help veterans get into college, do well in school, graduate and successfully t

transition into the workforce. These practices include: career counselor training, mentoring, scholarships, and welcome and reintegration events.

- Career counselor training is aimed to provide them with information on the concerns and challenges of veterans re-entering the workforce; this should include information about adapting their military occupational skills (MOS) to the civilian workforce and mating that with the education they receive at the counselors' university
- Mentoring focuses on providing new student veterans with other veterans, military family members or concerned faculty and staff to guide veterans through the college admission and transition process
- Scholarships cover the remaining financial need, particularly in the first weeks of the spring semester when GI Bill benefits are not available
- Welcome and reintegration events make the veteran (and their family members) feel welcome in the new environment and develop their post-military social network

Quotes

"You have a proven capacity to lead and inspire others, and you've acquired and tested that capacity often in situations of extreme complexity and often in cases of dire emergency. Your experience enriches the classroom and campus environments and enriches the education of your fellow students because you bring a unique perspective to them. Your commitment to service, which you've also demonstrated in such an extraordinary way, is an inspiration to students, and I think strengthens their own commitment to service."

- George Washington University President Steven Knapp
at Student Veterans of America's third annual National Conference on Oct. 3, 2010

"Given the choice between work and idleness, people will almost always choose work. Regardless of our station in life, the conditions of our bodies and minds, or the amount of money in our bank accounts, the need to work remains one of our strongest drives. Work is central to our lives and, as such, gives a large measure of structure to our days. Common sense tells us that we feel better about ourselves when we are working regularly.

- Robert E. Drake, M.D., Ph.D., the Andrew Thomson Professor of
Psychiatry and Community and Family Medicine at Dartmouth Medical School
and director of the New Hampshire-Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center

"The contributions that our servicemen and women can make to this nation do not end when they take off that uniform. We owe a debt to all who serve, and when we repay that debt to those bravest Americans among us, then we are investing in our future."

- President Barack Obama at the launch of the Post-9-11 GI Bill on April 3, 2009

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^[v] Santos, J. L., & Molina, Dani. *A True Vet Friendly University: The Need for Empirical Research*. Retrieved 15 June . (2011, from <http://www.studentveterans.org/?p=1284May>). *Veterans' Transition from Service to Higher Education: An Exploratory Analysis of Veterans' and Nonveterans' Pre- College Characteristics*. Research paper was presented at the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) national forum in Toronto, Canada.

^[vi] Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy) . (2009). *Demographics 2009 profile of the military community* Retrieved from http://cs.mhf.dod.mil/content/dav/mhf/QOL-Library/PDF/MHF/QOL%20Resources/Reports/2009_Demographics_Report.pdf

ⁱ *US Census Bureau, USA quick facts from the us census bureau*. (2011, June 3). Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

^{ii]} Santos, J. L., & Molina, Dani. *A True Vet Friendly University: The Need for Empirical Research*. Retrieved 15 June . (2011, from <http://www.studentveterans.org/?p=1284May>). *Veterans' Transition from Service to Higher Education: An Exploratory Analysis of Veterans' and Nonveterans' Pre- College Characteristics*. Research paper was presented at the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) national forum in Toronto, Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ Santos, J. L., & Molina, Dani. *A True Vet Friendly University: The Need for Empirical Research*. Retrieved 15 June . (2011, from <http://www.studentveterans.org/?p=1284May>). *Veterans' Transition from Service to Higher Education: An Exploratory Analysis of Veterans' and Nonveterans' Pre- College Characteristics*. Research paper was presented at the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) national forum in Toronto, Canada.

^[viii] Day, J. and Newburger, E. (2002) The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf>

^[ix] Taylor, P., Funk, C., & Craighill, P. (2006, February 13). *Are we happy yet?* Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/assets/social/pdf/AreWeHappyYet.pdf>

^[x] Cannevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted, projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Manuscript submitted for publication, Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/ExecutiveSummary-web.pdf>

^[xi] John T Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available on the World Wide Web; <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27461>.