Veterans’ Post-Secondary Education: Keeping the Promise to Those Who Serve

By Jonah Cunningham

Current veterans returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq who plan on pursuing a college education are facing new and unique challenges rarely faced by their predecessors. Despite having at their disposal the most generous educational benefit programs, many are finding success difficult. A combination of social, bureaucratic, and institutional barriers beleaguer a veteran pursuing a degree; accordingly, it is necessary for us to remove these obstacles since veterans enhance classrooms with their experiences. The United States government must also provide veterans with a bridge to integrate into the job market.

Current soldiers returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq who plan on pursuing a post-secondary education are facing new and unique challenges rarely faced by their predecessors. These difficulties are rooted not only in the social isolation they often feel upon return, but also in government and university bureaucracy, mental and physical disabilities, and familial obligations. All of these problems have resulted in the lowest graduation rate of veteran students from four-year universities ever. The national average for graduation from a four-year university has hovered just above 50% with the most current data indicating around a 57% success rate (Planty et al, 2010). The graduation rate for returning veterans from the same institutions is estimated at 3%.1 Although veterans are just as competitive as their peers when comparing grade point averages (GPAs), their graduation rate is much lower due many compounding social, political, medical, and bureaucratic factors. Today’s veteran students are facing more complex problems than their predecessors even though they are receiving more support monetarily for their schooling. The GI Bill benefits offered to soldiers are beneficial tools not only for military but also for society since it provides a vital bridge between the military service members and classrooms that are rarely exposed to their experiences.

HISTORY OF THE GI BILL

Educational benefits for veterans are a relatively new entitlement given to our servicemembers. It grew out of necessity and fear from a country just emerging from a great depression. Many feared that with millions of soldiers returning from the battlefields of World War II the already fragile job market would be flooded and trigger an even worse depression. Educational benefits were a way to postpone their integration to the job market while at the same time grooming veterans for professional jobs that the growing country would eventually need (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). Over time, however, the GI Bill, and the educational assistance it grants, have both evolved. Instead of allocating hundreds of dollars, it now grants thousands. From its beginning as an economic necessity for a recovering nation, it now is utilized as a powerful recruiting tool. This evolution of veteran education benefits correlates with new overseas conflicts. The inaugural beneficiaries from the post-World War II Servicemen’s Readjustment Act received generous amounts of tuition assistance and a living stipend in addition to low-interest home loans and unemployment benefits. Additionally, it provided for vocational and occupational education. Six million of the returning 8 million soldiers that used the newly minted “GI Bill,” opted for vocational or occupational programs and schools. The remainder enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide, which previously were reserved for mostly privileged students (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009).

Contrary to some beliefs, these returning soldiers faced some resistance on college campuses, mostly from college administrators, who according to then president of Harvard James Bryant Conant, worried that given the “sentimental pressures and financial temptations” offered by the new bill, universities “may find the least capable among the war generation, instead of the most capable, flooding facilities for advanced education” (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009, p. 77). Administrator fears were not restricted to the quality of applicants but also that increased admissions in general would cause their institutions’ educational standards to suffer (Ibid.). These reservations did not stop universities from making various changes still in place today—including expanding classes, building new dormitories, allowing graduate students to teach undergraduate courses,
and admitting more students. The state of New York even went so far as to create the Associated Colleges of Upper New York (ACUNY) in fear that current universities could not effectively educate the flood of returning veterans.

Returning veterans took advantage of the new program and signed up for classes in record numbers, almost doubling university enrollment. Enrollment in higher education went from 1.6 million, with 88,000 being veterans in 1945, to 2.3 million, with 1.15 million having served during the war (Mettler, 1973). This stream of veteran students allowed for easily accessible support groups, which could be as informal as another veteran in the same class or as formal as the “Mr. and Mrs. Club” that brought veterans and their spouses together once a week to socialize (Altschuler and Blumin, 2009). The prevalence of these support groups allowed veteran students the camaraderie of students who shared the same traumatic experiences and understood military service.

Another major factor aiding the success of World War II veterans in the classroom was their age and maturity. Many took their studies very seriously, thus earning them the nickname on many campuses as “bookworms” or “damned average raisers.” Even veterans whose college education was interrupted by the war raised their grades substantially upon return. They achieved this despite many of them being married or in the process of starting a family and often working part-time jobs to provide for those families. This studious lifestyle helped raise the graduation rate substantially. For ages 23-29, it more than doubled to 16% in just five years after the GI Bill’s implementation. For students ages 30-39, it rose from 14% before the war to 23%, and for students ages 40-49 from 16% to 25% (Historical Statistics of the United States, 2010).

The success of the original Servicemember’s Readjustment Act both as an incentive for enlistment and for the educational attainment of veterans inspired Congress to extend educational benefits to future veterans from the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War. Although these benefits were not as generous as the original bill—due to the rising cost of education and the nature of the bills themselves—it still aided the military as a recruiting tool and helped colleges by sending qualified candidates to attend without requiring them to worry about tuition assistance.

With educational costs skyrocketing in recent decades the need for an educational bill that covered the substantial cost of higher education was desperately needed. For example, the Montgomery GI Bill, also known as the Veteran’s Educational Assistance Program or VEA, that was introduced in the 1980s could not cover the cost of tuition at some elite public institutions. To be eligible the beneficiary must forfeit $100 a month for a year with the federal government more than matching the funds. For the first few years, the program payout was fairly close to tuition rates; however, with rising educational costs this program has not kept pace. For example the current monthly maximum payout for the Montgomery GI Bill is $1, 473—much less than what would be needed to attend many top schools (VA Resources, 2012). Instead, this program has become a better option for recipients looking to go to trade schools or programs.

With the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with dwindling retention rates in the all-volunteer military, a new educational incentive that gave soldiers generous benefits that could also be passed down to their dependents seemed like a promising way to entice new recruits to re-enlist while satisfying current members (Greenburg, 2008). Since the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 went into effect in August 2009, veterans have at their disposal more options regarding their post-secondary education than any other generation. Unlike the original GI Bill, which included provisions for low-interest home loans and up to a year of unemployment benefits that have subsequently grown into other programs, the Post 9/11 GI Bill was purely focused on educational benefits as a transitioning tool from military to civilian life.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill provides for the student veteran to receive the highest in-state tuition at a public, not private, university in addition to a book stipend and a living stipend based on the local cost of living. To obtain this GI Bill one must serve 90 days in active duty; however, those serving less time on active duty receive proportionally equal benefits. A notable exception to some benefits is that part-time students and those enrolled in a distance educational program are not eligible to receive the book and living stipend.

Additionally, those serving a minimum of six years with a promise to serve four more or those that have already served 10 years are eligible to pass their GI Bill benefits to a dependent (i.e., their spouse or child). However, this dependent, like any Post 9/11 GI Bill recipient, must have their schedule reviewed by the VA to ensure that their class schedule keeps them on track to getting a degree.

CHALLENGES OF BUREAUCRACY

Unfortunately, current veterans are facing difficulties obtaining the benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs due to the implementation of a new payment system, a debilitating backlog of applications, and little guidance from the Department of Defense or the Department of Veterans’ Affairs for transitioning soldiers. Since the Post 9/11 GI Bill was passed in 2008 and enacted in August of 2009, the department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has had difficulties implementing the new program. The money for tuition goes directly to the educational institution rather than the student, which required the creation of a new model of benefit delivery. The VA’s processing system provided $4.3 billion in educational benefits to 310,098 to students during the 2009-2010 school year (VA OIG, 2010). This delivery system for educational benefits was created after the passing of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in late 2008 and required much work to integrate the system. During the 2009-2010 school year, the VA hired a temporary staff while developing interim software to eventually have a fully automated system by December 2010, dubbed the “Long Term Solution.” This software is expected to increase the automation of claims and of the payment process and eventually limit errors in payments to veterans (VA OIG, 2010).

Development of the software has been timely and hiring a temporary staff has helped but has not eliminated the overwhelming backlog of educational claims and under- and over-payments of benefits. Current veterans who have received over-payments are often unaware until they are met with a bill from the VA. In contrast, under-payments often leave veterans searching for additional funds until they are paid in full (VA OIG, 2010). Along with the erroneous payment amounts, these benefits are often late and require the veteran to fight VA bureaucracy to obtain it in a timely manner. According to a report by the VA Office of the Inspector General in November 2010, the average monthly processing time for original claims peaked at 62 days compared to the 24 day goal the VA has instituted (VA OIG, 2010). This complicates a veteran’s ability to not only apply and attend school but also puts them in financial straits since the living stipend could be two months late. Additionally, these payments are made at the end of the month meaning many students must use their own personal funds until their payment is received.

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As previously mentioned, other restrictions exclude the classes they are taking aid them in a degree. This review restricts many students who oftentimes need to take classes in different areas of study to find out what field they would like to pursue. Additionally, this review is superfluous since benefits are restricted to 36 months (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009). As previously mentioned, other restrictions exclude students who are enrolled in distance education or as part-time students. The veterans who choose these options are only eligible for the tuition benefits and not the book or living stipend.

In addition to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, veterans can be beneficiaries of the Montgomery GI Bill. To obtain this benefit, soldiers in the field have their pay reduced by $100 a month for 12 months. The educational benefit they receive from this program is not as generous as the Post 9/11 GI Bill but it does not have as many restrictions regarding the type of education one can pursue. This bill does not include a living stipend or a book stipend but funding can be applied towards vocational or occupational education, which is often preferred by veterans who are eager to join the job market. Prior to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, those using the Montgomery version at elite schools like Columbia University or Harvard Law School only had 13% and 11% of their tuition covered respectively (Byman, 2007).

Since the Post 9/11 GI Bill covers public colleges and universities and the less generous Montgomery GI Bill is better suited for vocational or occupational programs, veterans wanting to attend an expensive private university are covered by a complex program called the Gold Ribbon Program that was ushered in along with the Post 9/11 GI Bill. This program, set up between the university and the VA, instructs the university to agree to cover a certain amount of the tuition while the VA matches up to half of the tuition. However, universities offer different rates to veterans, creating confusion and a potential requirement for the veteran to still pay thousands of dollars a year to attend (Field, 2008).

The web of bureaucracy and oversight oftentimes dissuades veterans from enrolling in higher education institutions. The absence of easily accessible information, ineffective outreach by the VA and universities, the confusing transition from the military to the VA, and errors with payments further complicate the process. In the words of one veteran in an American Council on Education (ACE) focus group, “The military tells you you've got this and you've got that. But once you get out, they don't tell you how to go about getting this stuff” (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 4). His predicament is far too common; veterans are often unaware of the specific educational benefits they are entitled to and even less aware of programs available to serve their needs. The VA and the Department of Defense have attempted to identify and counsel veterans who are planning to attend college, but if history is any indicator, identifying veterans is difficult at best.

This lack of outreach is not limited to government institutions; colleges and universities often lack easily accessible information regarding veteran benefits. Many veterans using the Internet to access their GI Bill benefit information often have difficulties finding the information on the main site of universities (American Council on Education, 2008). Roadblocks are not limited to cyberspace. When assisted by college administrators, veterans find that many administrators who are not well trained on the new GI Bill regularly and erroneously refer them to the VA (Strickley, 2009). Typically, these administrators, or “certifying officials,” are assigned other tasks that affect a larger portion of the student body. Since the passing of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the workers entrusted with implementing the legislation—college administrators, campus directors of military/veterans programs, and certifying officials—have reported that their caseload has increased anywhere from 50 to 200% (Strickley, 2009). Although 62% of institutions with a veteran population between 1-3% offer special services for veterans, only 49% of all institutions have a dedicated veterans service officer (Strickley, 2009). This can lead to ineffective outreach efforts to the veteran community and oftentimes leaves the veteran navigating the daunting bureaucracy in search of obtaining educational benefits alone. Far too regularly this lack of oversight by college administrators discourages veterans from even beginning the long process of earning a college degree.

The transfer of military training and experience into credits upon entrance is yet another important concern for veterans entering a post-secondary institution. Many veterans, hoping to finish college quicker while simultaneously avoiding redundant education, hope to receive adequate credit for their military training and experience. Due to a lack of uniform guidelines by college and universities, veterans are left shopping around in hopes of finding the best deal for their military service (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Even if their experience does transfer over to college credit there is no guarantee that it will count toward the degree program they wish to pursue.

**BARRIERS ON CAMPUS**

Admission policies of college and university further complicate veterans’ college experience before they even step foot in a classroom. Many colleges take into account that an applicant is a veteran; however, few heavily weigh this into acceptance criteria. The main criteria for accepting prospective students are their GPA and their test scores on the SAT or ACT (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). This greatly disadvantages veterans since they are in a sense comparing the grades they received years ago to other prospective students who earned these marks fairly recently. Veterans are older than most students and have more life experience that can transfer over positively in a campus environment, which may include relevant study and learning skills. However, with an admission process that does not fully take into account the maturity of these veterans and the fact that many did not take high school as seriously since they were anticipating military service rather than college, many veterans are put at a sizable disadvantage for admissions into the nation’s best universities.

Once accepted, the orientation programs, which are often the first introduction to the university veteran students attend, are usually designed for traditional college students ages 18-22 that are single and claimed as dependents by their parents. Many veterans do not fit into traditional roles of college students since they are older and have more direction than their younger peers. Few orientation programs are tailored to exhibit what they can offer specifically to veteran students and instead focus on the amenities applicable to traditional students.

When a veteran arrives on campus they face a culture shock. Transferring directly from an organized military base to a college campus, where individuality is praised and unstructured time abundant, is often difficult. Military life prioritizes certain goals into a soldier’s head, like unit cohesion, placing the mission first, and discipline. Once they arrive at school they have a difficult time relating to young men and women who are unfamiliar with these goals and military service in general. Former military servicemen and servicewomen are often frustrated in class by their peers’ lack of organization and often their comments regarding warfare and military service (Brown, 2009). Many veterans are even asked callous questions about their deployments and service.

This culture shock often leads to veterans feeling isolated. A recent study by Indiana University’s National Survey of Student Engagement
surveyed 11,000 veterans and found that first year veterans compared to non-veterans are less engaged in reflective learning, less engaged with faculty, and perceived less campus support (2010).

Isolation is compounded by U.S. citizens’ relative ignorance regarding military service and experiences. The U.S. population is well over 300 million people, yet with approximately 2 million currently serving either active duty, reserve, or national guard, less than 1% of the country is participating in the military. This is the lowest this percentage has ever been. By comparison, during World War II, 16 million people served during the war with a population just slightly higher than 100 million, making the ratio 16%. With 2 million of these servicemen returning to four-year universities, there were many on campus who understood the sacrifices military service entails, and it was accordingly easy to find social groups for veterans.

To complicate this further, veterans currently constitute only 3%, or approximately 660,000, of American undergraduate students, making them a small minority on campuses across the country (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Additionally, these students are more prevalent in certain geographical regions such as the Rust Belt and the South, so veterans on campus are highly concentrated in some states while being almost nonexistent in others. Of those students, 52% are enrolled in associate degree programs or certificate programs, while 42% are in bachelor degree programs (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). This means that veterans constitute a small minority on university campuses, which complicates the search for social support groups that understand their experience. The preference for associate degrees and certification programs is well documented throughout the history of the GI Bill, with a vast majority of the post World War II recipients opting for these forms of education. These programs offer a shorter commitment than a four-year university and often streamline graduates into the workforce, which is often appealing to veterans.

Another factor that contributes to the insulation of the general public and college age students in particular is that military service is no longer conscription based. Currently we have an all-volunteer army, unlike during the Vietnam War and World War II where the draft was initiated and tens of thousands of young men were required to join the military. The draft made the conflict it was associated with somewhat personal to those at war. This reflection often reinforces the isolation many of them feel.

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With veteran students being older, non-traditional students who prefer an education program with job-related curriculum, it is easy to see why they struggle to graduate from four-year universities. Four-year universities, especially public state-run universities, are much larger than two-year or vocational schools. The student bodies are much more diverse as well as the degree programs offered. It is easy for newly separated veterans and veterans serving in the reserves to lose themselves within this freedom. They transition from a highly regimented schedule where they have little free time to arriving on campus where they have ample time to reflect upon their past service and their current situation. This reflection often reinforces the isolation many of them feel.

The looming threat of another deployment also hangs over the heads of many veteran students. Unless they are honorably discharged from military service, a veteran student could potentially be deployed to a war zone since they are still under contract. When this happens it is often difficult for the student to maintain their studies since they are unsure of when they will be returning to campus. Additionally, mid-semester deployments further complicate veteran education, since some universities and colleges do not have regulations regarding issuing grades for those deployed students.

EASING THE CULTURE SHOCK

There are efforts to counteract the isolation of new veterans and the bureaucratic obstacles they face from both the government and the schools. Organizations like the Student Veterans of America hope to ease the transition from the battlefield to the classroom by creating a social group in which veterans can network with other veterans. They hold meetings, examine challenges, and create an interactive environment that helps improve a veterans’ transition to campus life. Student Veterans of America have over five hundred chapters in all fifty states. However, not all universities have a sufficient veteran population nor a well-organized and active chapter. Even when chapters do exist and function, it is still a difficult task for veterans...
to negotiate family obligations and jobs while simultaneously attempting to stay current on homework.

Other programs that have been initiated at some colleges try to simulate the post-World War II campus environment by placing veterans in all-veteran classes. This creates a unit mentality and a sense of cohesiveness among peers. One program in particular, the Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran (SERV) Program, pioneered at Cleveland State University in Ohio by John Schupp, has had tremendous success. After participating in the program grade point averages have risen, retention rates of veterans have gone up, and enrollment of veterans has increased as well.

The success of this program is based on the idea of mimicking the classroom environment that returning veterans from past wars, and most notably World War II veterans, encountered upon their return home. With 2 million post-World War II veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill to attend four-year colleges, it was easy to enroll in a class with numerous other veterans. This helped ease the transition from the battlefields of Europe and Asia to campuses nationwide. Current veterans are not necessarily afforded this luxury. With the veterans so sparsely populating four-year universities, their needs often go unmet. By placing them in strictly veteran classes they are allowed to transition from an environment that is not fully militaristic, like the occupation they just left, nor does it resemble the demographics of a normal college classroom.

The results of this program are encouraging. The inaugural class at Cleveland State consisted of only 10 students. However, since its inception, retention rates have increased from 71% in the first class to 80% in the next class and is currently sitting at 90%. Additionally, GPAs of veteran students have gone up, and while the non-veteran average GPA at the school is 2.9, the veteran average has reached a 3.3. Furthermore, a cohort of veteran students in this program who had an average high school GPA of 2.43 and a traditional college GPA of 3.02, raised it to a 3.31 GPA in veteran-only classes (Schupp, 2010).

The SERV program has since spread to the University of Arizona and Youngstown State University. Besides veterans-only classes, the program also includes veterans’ resource centers. Modeled after campus learning centers, they employ a specialist that is trained in veteran issues and has a background dealing with VA educational claims. The graduation rates of this program are not yet available but if retention rates and the increased number of veterans signing up are any indication, this program could be invaluable to veteran students returning to school.

**BENEFITS WASTED?**

Programs like SERV have greatly benefited the universities at which they operate, not only due to the valuable viewpoints veterans bring to campuses, but also due to the governmental revenue contributed by veterans’ matriculation. Some schools view veterans as a proverbial gold mine and often lure them with misleading and sometimes fraudulent marketing campaigns. This has been especially troubling with the significant rise of for-profit institutions, many of which have recently been questioned regarding whether the curricula they offer are relevant in the current job market. Accordingly, traditional institutions often do not accept transfer credits from these schools. Some of the tension between traditional institutions and for-profit institutions could be attributed to their competition for students, yet many new entrants to the education market have garnered suspicion based solely on their affiliation with these schools. Low graduation rates coupled with high dropout rates within the first year for some for-profit universities is concerning, but when coupled with heavy recruitment efforts toward military service members it becomes alarming (Harkin, 2010).

In recent years, numerous for-profit universities have drastically increased their recruitment of current and former military service members with some success. Between 2006, before the Post 9/11 GI Bill was passed, and 2010, the year after the bill had been initiated, combined VA and Department of Defense education benefits paid to 20 for-profit schools rose from $66.6 million to a projected $521.2 million in 2010. The increase between 2009 and 2010 at these same for-profit schools from military educational benefits was 211% from the previous school year (Harkin, 2010).

Likewise, in the first year of Post 9/11 GI Bill, $1.75 billion in total benefits were paid out, however of this money, $640 million, or 36.5%, was paid to for-profit schools even though these schools only enrolled 23.3% of all military beneficiaries (HELP Committee, 2010). The disproportionate distribution of benefits would not be as troubling if it were not for the fact that the high cost of these schools often forces veterans to not only exhaust their educational benefits but take out loans to finish their education. According to one recent study, over time the tuition at for-profit schools has averaged six times the cost of community college and roughly twice the cost of public four-year universities (Mullin, 2010). To further illustrate, during the inaugural year of implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the VA spent $697 million on 203,790 students attending both two-year and four-year public schools. In comparison, in the same year the VA spent $640 million on students attending for-profit schools, however, they funded only 76,746 students at for-profits schools (Harkin, 2010).

This would not be as alarming if the achievement rate of students at for-profit universities were superior to their public and private non-profit peers. But with dropout rates as high as 52% at some for-profit institutions for first-year students pursuing a bachelor’s degree—with many of the same students leaving school in an average of 180 days—it certainly is not the case (Harkin, 2010). There is obviously something wrong with the product these institutions offer to veterans.

The heavy recruitment of veterans by for-profit schools stems from the source of funds used for tuition. For-profit institutions receive a majority of their revenue from federal financial aid, most of it coming from financial aid authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act. The Higher Education Act bars schools from receiving more than 90% of their revenues from federal financial aid, commonly known as the “90/10 rule.” Money from veterans’ educational benefits do not fall under Title IV thus making them attractive prospects, especially when the average percent of revenue received from Title IV funds by 14 for-profit colleges is 87.4% (Harkin, 2010).

Title IV was originally enacted so that students using GI bill benefits during the Korean War could not enroll in educational programs with more than 85% of the enrollees receiving federal benefits. This was to ensure that schools could maintain their quality by limiting the portion of students reliant on federal financial aid in case these students were unable to repay their loans. However, this dynamic has shifted dramatically. Title IV, originally designed to protect schools from loan defaults has morphed into a rule that encourages profiteering from GI Bill recipients simply due to its exclusion under the act. For-profit proponents would argue this evolution as necessary since four of the five for-profit schools receiving the most Post 9/11 GI Bill funding in the first year have loan repayment rates of only 31% to 34%. Veterans’ benefits offer guaranteed payment of at least a portion of the tuition charged while side-stepping a federal regulation. On the contrary, since 92% of veterans attending for-profit colleges take out federal student loans while attending, the recruitment of veterans does not fully circumvent the 90/10 rule and instead leaves veteran students in debt and possibly without a degree. In comparison, only 32% of veterans at public
four-year universities and 35% at private non-profits had to borrow from federal programs (NCES, 2009). For-profit institutions heavily recruit veterans by concentrated marketing campaigns, setting up campuses near military bases, and employing numerous recruiters and academic advisers who often mislead or provide false information. Kaplan University alone has a military recruiting team comprised of 300 admission advisers, financial aid counselors, and academic advisers (Harkin, 2010). This strong recruitment of veterans and military personnel is troubling when veterans are trying to re-enter academia and could first encounter a school that does not prepare students for graduation or integration into the job market, in addition to costing much more than a four-year university and oftentimes preventing transfer credit to a public university.

Alarmed with these tactics by some for-profit schools, Congress has called for stricter oversight of for-profit universities. The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee has led the way. Starting in 2010, the HELP Committee has published three reports regarding university profiteering of GI Bill recipients and has exposed the numerous shortcomings that some schools suffer.

Proposed solutions have ranged from changing VA and Department of Defense qualifications for schools receiving GI Bill funds to increasing regulation of for-profit schools. In the spring of 2012, two bills targeting the latter were introduced in the Senate. Senate Bill 2179, the Military and Veterans Educational Reform of 2012 proposed by Senator Jim Webb, would require for-profit schools and other universities receiving GI Bill funds to meet the same educational standards for institutions currently required for Title IV federal programs, such as Pell Grants (LIS, 2012). The second piece of legislation, Senate Bill 2032, proposed by Senator Richard Durbin, would take a similar course of action by closing the 90/10 exemption for GI Bill funds. Additionally S. 2032, the Protecting Our Students and Taxpayers (POST) Act, would place limitations on what a for-profit school can treat as revenue (LIS, 2012).

Senate Bill 2179 has been referred to the Senate Veteran Affairs Committee, and Senate Bill 2032 has been referred to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, where they both await further review (LIS, 2012). While the future of both of these bills seems uncertain due to strong resistance in both the House of Representatives and the Senate by supporters of for-profit universities, it is important to note that recognition of the concerns surrounding GI Bill profiteering by some for-profit institutions is the first step to resolving this issue.

Deciphering between the recruitment from schools that offer beneficial programs, such as SERV, and those that heavily enroll veterans to cushion their bottom line can be difficult, both for returning veterans and lawmakers. Yet this could potentially be the difference between academic success of a veteran and heavy debt coupled with a possible sub-par educational experience.

CONCLUSION

Veteran students are facing educational challenges unique to their generation. These difficulties stem first from participating in a two-front war undertaken by an all-volunteer force while the rest of the country is effectively isolated from the hardships of war. The military ignorance of civilians often leads to misunderstanding what veterans returning to classrooms have endured. The continued occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, despite lowering numbers of troops stationed, will continue to strengthen this rift between the public and those who have participated in the service.

This gap between the public and the military is a relatively new phenomenon. Veterans returning home from the battlefields of World War II were greeted by a public who bought war bonds, gathered metal scraps for the war effort, and worked in factories producing goods for the military. The Korean War had much of the same war fervor as its predecessor due to its close proximity in time and the re-institution of the draft. For the Vietnam War, conscription returned to bolster the military’s ranks and the public was undoubtedly invested in the military.

The current engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have not facilitated such a strong connection between the military and the public. This can be attributed to the length of the war, the lack of effective media coverage, and that a relatively small proportion of the population were involved. This disconnect has seeped its way into our colleges and universities nationwide in the form of students asking callous questions regarding deployments, professors lecturing in political hyperbole regarding military intervention, and the lack of effective outreach towards veterans.

Couple this environment with the passage of an unprecedented GI bill that offers generous living and book stipends in addition to covered tuition at most universities and one would think that these trends might balance each other out. However, the challenges of navigating a school’s bureaucracy in addition to the VA bureaucracy to receive these benefits continue to remain daunting. Delays in processing claims and subsequent delivery of payments still plague the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, further complicating a veteran’s transition from military service to college life.

Veterans offer an invaluable point of view in a classroom and bring a wealth of experiences to campuses nationwide. While changing demographics have shifted the distribution of veteran students, the advantages they bring to a school have remained constant since the inaugural class of GI Bill recipients signaled an opening of post-secondary education to the masses. The GI Bill in its various forms has produced countless lawyers, doctors, teachers, senators, and representatives who have fused traditional education with military values.

Colleges should be eager to recruit these men and women to bolster the diversity of their student body. Some colleges, like those with programs like SERV, are enthusiastic to enroll veteran students and provide them with the services they so desperately need, while other institutions are apathetic to the venture. Many do not have a sizable veteran population to justify large-scale programs, however several of these schools do not offer anything approaching adequate counseling to veterans (Strickley, 2009).

As long as conflicts continue overseas and require soldiers to serve multiple tours while returning home to a minefield of bureaucracy, public ignorance, and personal isolation while trying to obtain a college degree, the graduation rate of veteran students will not rise significantly. Until campuses nationwide initiate effective programs to effectively address the issues facing transitioning veterans, the VA comprehensively addresses malfunctions in their payment delivery system, and most importantly the public is better educated on the incalculable sacrifices veterans have made, student veterans will always face an uphill battle to achieve academic success.

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