



## The Role of Community Colleges in Offsetting Challenges Faced by Student Veterans in Higher Education

To increase postsecondary access among qualifying veterans, Congress enacted the Post 9/11 GI Bill on August 1, 2009, granting greater benefits to student veterans (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). These expanded benefits allow veterans to more adequately cover the cost of a college education by providing them with up to 36 months of educational benefits, including a monthly housing allowance, a stipend for books and supplies, a one-time rural benefit payment, an option to transfer benefits to family members, and a tuition assistance for qualifying student veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Additionally, through the Yellow Ribbon Program, the Post 9/11 GI Bill covers all resident tuition and fees for a public state institution or the national maximum per academic year for a private school (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). The federal government also matches the dollar contribution of every participating institution for all costs not covered by the GI Bill (Rumann et al., 2011).

Despite the provision of these generous benefits, many veterans do not take advantage of GI benefits to pay for college. Radford (2011) found only two-fifths of military undergraduates use the education benefits afforded them by the GI Bill. Nonetheless, based on data from 2007–08, military undergraduates are more likely to receive financial aid than any other undergraduate (Radford, 2011), but the type and amount of aid varies by type of higher education institution. Of all institution types, those attending for-profit colleges are most likely to receive financial aid and in the highest amounts, often in the form of student loans (Radford, 2008). Veterans attending other types of institutions (for example, public four-year and community colleges) are less likely to receive aid, however the aid they do receive is usually in the form of student grants (Radford, 2011). Almost half of all student veterans at public four-year colleges and universities receive veterans education benefits, in contrast only one one-third of military undergraduates receive benefits at other four-year institutions (Radford, 2011). However, veterans enroll in four-year colleges and universities at lower rates than for-profit colleges and community colleges (Sewall, 2010). For-profit and community colleges were the most popular postsecondary education choice of student veterans using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits in 2009 (Sewall, 2010).

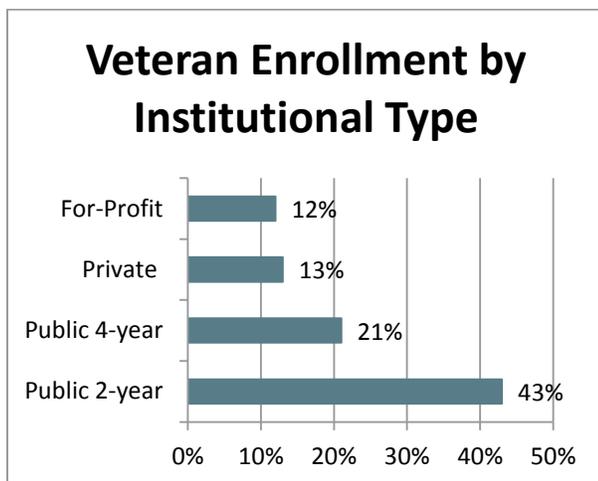


Figure 1

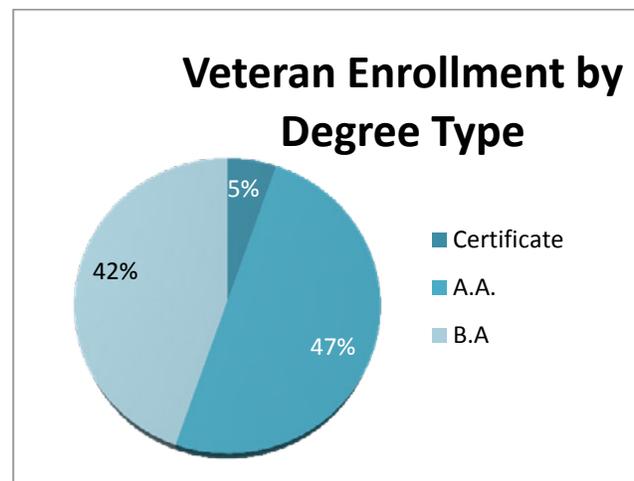


Figure 2

Figure 1 shows the percentage of enrollment of student veterans in public community colleges (43%) is over double that of public four-year colleges (21%). Another 13% of veterans attend private non-profit four-year institutions, along with 12% attending private for-profit institutions (Radford, 2011). Figure 2 highlights the type of degree student veterans typically pursue, with about 47% of all student veterans pursuing an associate's degree, 42% pursue a bachelor's degree, and only 5% of pursue a certificate (Radford, 2009, 2011).

The convenience of part-time, online, and other flexible learning options make community colleges an attractive route for student veterans. Of all student veterans who attend community college, 77% attend part-time, 33% have children, and 14% are single parents (Wheeler, 2012). Despite sharing similarities with other adult students, student veterans face unique challenges.

This brief discusses the unique challenges that student veterans face in higher education, and illustrates the services that community colleges offer to student veterans to accommodate their needs. It also presents many services implemented as a result of the Higher Education Service Act (P.A. 96-0133) in the state of Illinois. The brief concludes with recommendations for community colleges to better serve student veterans.

## Challenges Faced by Student Veterans

It is not uncommon for student veterans to have difficulty making the "combat-to-campus" transition. Difficulties in adjusting to the new college environment result in strained or terminated relationships, which sometimes lead veterans to consider re-enlisting in the military to regain a sense of camaraderie (DiRamio et al., 2008). Moreover, student veterans report that military educational benefits do not provide enough resources to attend college full time, adding stress for students who have to balance school and work (DiRamio et al., 2008). Many student veterans lack adequate academic preparation, specifically in math, and others have weak study habits. Student veterans also voice frustration about their inability to register for classes at overcrowded two-year and four-year institutions (Jacobs, 2012). Both Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) present serious risks to a veteran's health and their ability to succeed in college (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot, 2011). For many, seeking help is difficult; especially when college counselors are not trained to address the specific psychological issues that may arise due to the difficulties of their service (Elliot, 2011). Many colleges are unable to meet the needs of a high influx of student veterans because they are not able to maintain adequate staffing levels (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Inadequate counseling is not the only issue that student veterans face in terms of the quality of services provided to them. Student veterans voice dissatisfaction in navigating the institutional bureaucracy, stating that they are often sent from office to office when attempting to gather information regarding GI funding or other forms of services (Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012;). Additionally, student veterans struggle to cover the cost of full-time attendance. They may have to find a job to cover the remaining cost of tuition, or to sustain themselves while they wait for delayed benefit payments to be activated (Wheeler, 2012). Some resort to using high interest rate credit cards to cover tuition costs upfront (DiRamio et al., 2008). The lack of quality services and funding add to the personal stressors that many student veterans experience while pursuing college.

In addition to bureaucratic and financial issues, some student veterans face alienation on campus. Incidents with insensitive or disrespectful nonmilitary peers can add to student veteran's sense of isolation. Student veterans describe impatience with less mature civilian peers who do not take their work seriously, who disrespect their professors, who focus more on their social than academic lives, or who ask inappropriate questions about student veterans' combat experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot, 2011; Persky, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Some student veterans also perceive a lack of support from faculty, stating that anti-war comments made in class by faculty members cause them to feel unwelcome, which lead to ambivalent relationships with faculty (DiRamio et al., 2008; Persky, 2010).

In light of these issues, and as a result of the expanded benefits offered through the Post 9/11 GI Bill, many colleges and universities have increased efforts to enroll student veterans by expanding the number and quality of services provided to them (Rumann et al., 2011; Stovall, 2010). Community colleges have engaged in these activities as well, hoping to better serve their many student veterans.

## What Community Colleges Are Doing to Support Student Veterans

As a result of the Higher Education Service Act (P.A. 96–0133) in the state of Illinois, a number of community colleges across the state, including all seven of the City Colleges in Chicago, have created Veterans Services Centers on their campuses (City Colleges of Chicago, 2015; Illinois Community College Board, 2008). Typically, these Veterans Services Centers provide a wide range of services such as transition from military to college life, peer support, assistance with VA benefits, and one-on-one academic, career, health, and financial advising. They also provide student/instructor mediation, connection to external veterans services, referrals for basic needs, and connections to employment opportunities (City Colleges of Chicago, 2015). Black Hawk College and Lewis and Clark Community College have created space in their Veterans Resource Centers where student veterans can study, read, watch TV, and connect with fellow student veterans (Black Hawk College, 2014; Illinois Joining Forces, 2013). When this type of center is not available on campus, student veterans are able to locate various services offered on campus through a veteran-specific representative (Illinois Community College Board, 2008). By legislative mandate, Illinois community colleges must provide and publicize the presence of a campus coordinator or primary representative with veterans and active duty personnel responsibilities and expertise (Becker, 2015; Illinois Community College Board, 2008).

In an effort to build a sense of belonging and find academic support, many student veterans in Illinois connect with each other through Student Veterans Organization (SVO) or Student Veterans of America (SVA) groups established on individual community college campuses (Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Whikehart, 2010). When these groups are not present, other student veteran organizations attempt to fill the void in some Illinois community colleges. Black Hawk College for example, has a Military Student Veteran Club (MSVC) on campus (Black Hawk College, 2014). Elgin Community College provides social outlets and clubs for veterans to interact, such as Military Branches United (MBU) (Elgin, 2015). Elgin also became a charter member of S.A.L.U.T.E. (Veterans National Honor Society) in 2013. According to the Waubensee Community College site, another charter member of S.A.L.U.T.E., this organization “serves to connect student veterans on campus and to provide opportunities for camaraderie between individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences. The group also serves as a peer network, sponsoring monthly social gatherings.” In maintaining commitment to advocacy and peer support, Parkland College offers a Student Veteran Association at Parkland (SVAP) and Shawnee Community College offers a Veteran’s Club (Parkland, 2015; Shawnee, n.d.). Lewis and Clark Community College also offers a Veterans Club in addition to the Veterans Resource Center (Illinois Joining Forces, 2013).

Institutional provision of academic credit for military training has become a crucial issue for student veterans and one that Illinois’ public institutions are trying to tackle more intentionally. Many veterans are leaving the military with extensive military credit and/or training and for-profit colleges have heavily targeted these military beneficiaries. Despite government efforts to suppress unethical recruiting practices, they are still a prominent destination for many student veterans. One of the reasons may be for-profit colleges’ more advanced structures for awarding credit for military training (Becker, 2015a; Jacobs, 2012).

Translating military credit and training to civilian academic institutions is complex and requires articulation and established infrastructure, rather than case-by-case remedies. Although many Illinois community colleges routinely accept the longstanding American Council on Education (ACE) guidelines for evaluating

The state of Illinois recently passed the **Higher Education Veterans Service Act. (P.A. 96–0133)** The act requires all public colleges and universities to conduct a survey of the services and programs that are provided for veterans, active duty military personnel, and their families. This survey shall enumerate and fully describe the service or program that is available, the number of veterans or active duty personnel using the service or program, an estimated range for potential use within a 5-year and 10-year period, information on the location of the service or program, and how its administrators may be contacted. Each public college and university, along with the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Community College Board, and Department of Veterans Affairs shall make the survey available on their homepage (Illinois Community College Board, 2008).

military training, most student veterans receive either no credit or very few credits (six to eight credits on average) for their extensive training and experiences (Becker, 2015a; Jacobs, 2012). Consequently, Illinois, which has the tenth largest veteran population in the US, has joined the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC) Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit (MCMC) (Becker, 2015). The MCMC consists of thirteen states that translate veterans' military training and experience toward college credentials (Midwestern Higher Education Compact, 2015). The states do so by exchanging information and sharing best practices in the areas of articulation of credit, certification/licensure, communications and technology (Midwestern Higher Education Compact, 2015).

Additionally, the state of Illinois is heading Military Training Counts (MTC), which is a joint initiative founded by Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and MyCreditsTransfer (Becker, 2015b). This initiative ensures that student veterans receive appropriate academic credit (amount and type) for the education and skills earned in the military (Becker, 2015b). As a result of this initiative, several Illinois colleges (DuPage, Heartland, Kaskaskia, Lake County, Southwestern) have developed specific military articulation agreements, linking military training to higher education courses, certificate/vocational programs, and or associate degrees (Becker, 2015b). Additionally, through MyCreditsTransfer ([www.itransfer.org/mycreditstransfer](http://www.itransfer.org/mycreditstransfer)), student veterans are able to view and manage their military credits. This state-run website allows student veterans to use the online transfer advising tool, Transferology, to display institutional credit awarded for military training (Becker, 2015b).

Community colleges have also begun to offer specific courses and orientation programs that are designed for student veterans (Rumman et. al, 2012; Wheeler 2012). Citrus College in California, for example, designed a student veteran course that assists student veterans in the transition from military to civilian life (Rumann et al., 2011). Similarly, Danville Area Community College hosts student veteran orientations that offer information regarding employment, education, health, and support services (Rumann et al., 2011).

## Recommendations

Based on the information gathered for this brief about the challenges of student veterans in postsecondary education, the following recommendations are offered to higher education institutions, especially community colleges within the state of Illinois.

**Increase the visibility of Veterans Affairs offices and officials.** Student veterans usually seek assistance with admissions, financial aid, and other services, and whenever these services are located across campus in different locations, it may be hard for the veterans to locate and utilize them effectively. Identifying an entry "portal" for student veterans is a critical strategy for meeting veterans' specific needs. Additionally, increasing the visibility and accessibility of a highly trained veteran specialist allows student veterans to easily be connected to disparate services offered across a campus.

**Find creative ways for student veterans to interact.** A number of community colleges in Illinois offer organizations that enable veterans to interact with one another. Student veterans voice interest in student organizations, stating they facilitate the combat-to-campus transition and heighten their sense of belonging on campus. They help student veterans connect with one another to create camaraderie and enhance motivation to finish college.

**Provide "transition coaches."** A "transition coach" is someone who provides academic and emotional support to student veterans who are making the transition to civilian life, and these coaches can be instrumental in their success. Former military personnel tend to make the best coaches for student veterans.

**Offer specialized orientations or college success courses for student veterans.** Specialized orientations may be useful in identifying student veterans, specifically for campuses that do not have a designated Veterans Affairs office. Once student veterans self-identify, they can be connected to campus professionals who provide services, including financial aid and other support services. Offering specific veteran courses may also provide coping methods to assist student veterans in managing stressors they encounter during their transition to civilian life.

**Raise campus awareness of veterans' needs through campus wide forums and faculty/staff training.** Raising awareness and sensitivity is crucial for the well being of student veterans on campus. Offering campus wide forums for students, staff and faculty can assist student veterans. Many student veterans have a strong desire to be acknowledged and understood by faculty and staff, particularly when facing academic or health challenges. As such, providing faculty and staff with the proper training can better prepare faculty, staff, and counselors/advisors to adequately assist student veterans.

**Promote benefits of attending community college.** Currently, many student veterans who make use of Post 9/11 GI benefits attend for-profit colleges when in fact these students could be attending lower cost community colleges, while enjoying similar or greater benefits. To attract more student veterans, community colleges should emphasize veteran-specific financial and support services; acceptance of military credit; strong career pathways connected to community partners, job training, apprenticeships, or transfer; and comparatively low cost. Doing so ensures the success of veterans in civilian life and may also reduce the stress levels that student veterans experience in regards to the expense of paying for college.

**Increase military training credit articulation.** Articulation of military training by higher education institutions ensures that student veterans are granted appropriate academic credit for military learning experiences. As such, increasing military articulation agreements offered by community colleges may also increase enrollment and program completion among military student veterans.

## Needed Research

More research is needed on student veterans to fill current gaps in the literature. For example, there is a lack of information regarding student veterans' college retention, completion, and success rates across the varying types of higher education institutions. Many institutions collect limited data on student veterans' retention and completion rates, and even fewer disaggregate these data on retention and completion (NASPA, n.d.) further, by race, gender, income, and other characteristics that may relate to college success. Across the board, better tracking is needed of the student veteran population

Additionally, we know very little about how student veterans' experience community college and the services colleges provide. Community college administration and institutional researchers should embark on efforts to collect data—both quantitative and qualitative, from student focus groups—to track the experiences of student veterans and understand how their experiences impact their educational outcomes.

Looking more deeply at the student veteran experience, there is minimal research on the effects of gender among student veterans on their college experiences and outcomes. This lack of research is troubling because women veterans are the fastest growing demographic and a substantial number of them face significant challenges (Becker, 2015). Two crucial issues that females experience are financial strain as single mothers and sexual violence during service (DiRamio et al., 2008). As such, female student veterans are a subgroup of veterans that may benefit from special attention. More quantitative and qualitative research is needed to understand the breadth and depth of the unique challenges faced by female veterans.

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