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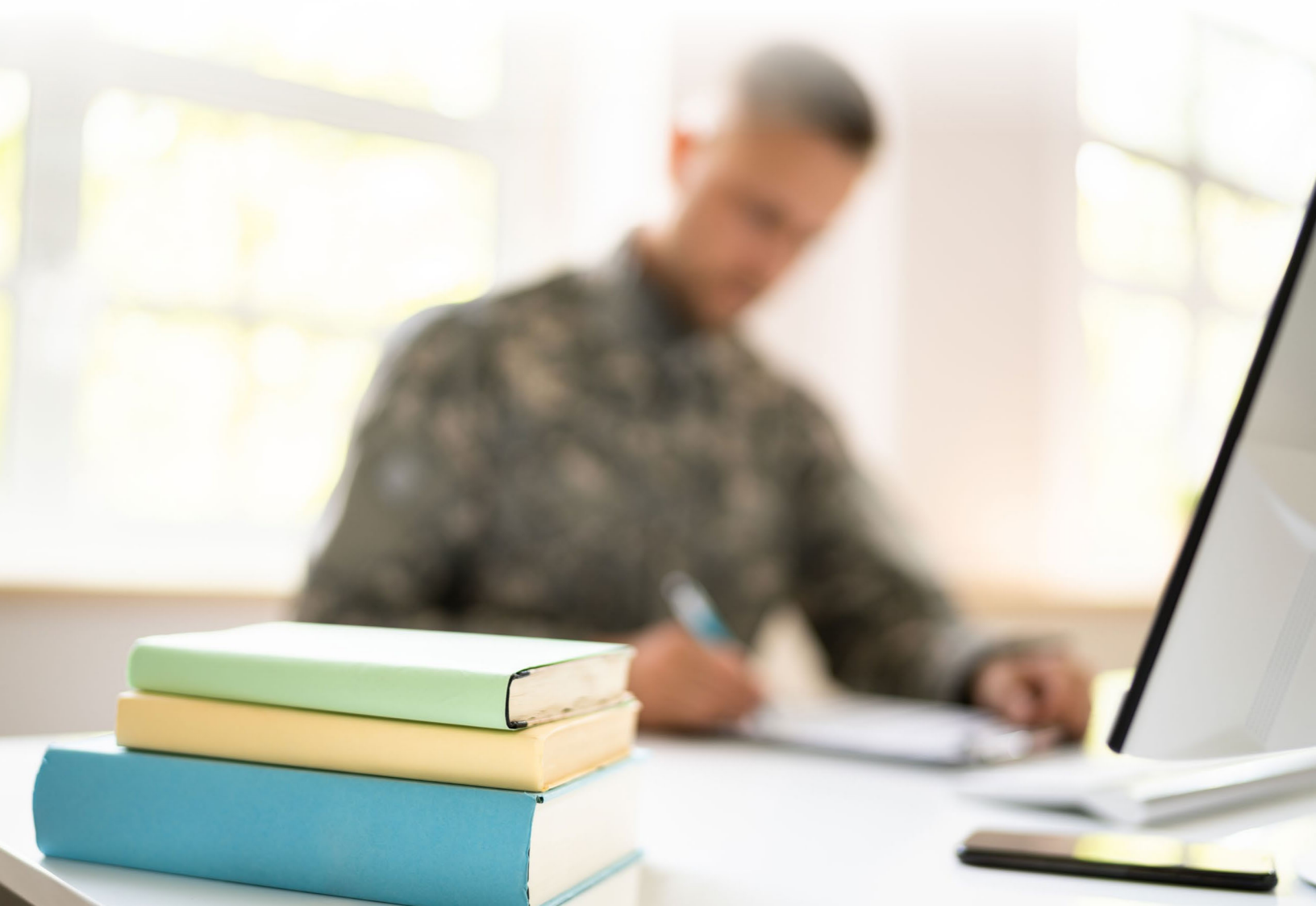
ENROLLING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT VETERANS

The Right Thing for Higher Education

George W. Bush Institute - Veterans and Military Families
Stand-To Veteran Higher Education Task Force



November 2022



About the George W. Bush Institute

The George W. Bush Institute is a solution-oriented nonpartisan policy organization focused on ensuring opportunity for all, strengthening democracy, and advancing free societies. Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the Bush Institute is rooted in compassionate conservative values and committed to creating positive, meaningful, and lasting change at home and abroad. We utilize our unique platform and convening power to advance solutions to national and global issues of the day. Learn more at www.bushcenter.org.

Veterans and Military Families

The Bush Institute's Veterans and Military Families program helps veterans and their families make successful transitions through leadership programming and research-driven policy recommendations. We focus on informing the veteran community of employment, education, and health and well-being opportunities so that transitions are simpler and more accessible.

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We dedicate this study to Dr. James W. Wright, a United States Marine Corps veteran, and the only Marine to serve as President of an Ivy League college. During his tenure at Dartmouth College, Dr. Wright was an early advocate for the Post-9/11 GI Bill and a trailblazer in increasing student veteran access to private institutions through the "Yellow Ribbon Program," a program he helped design. Dr. Wright was a treasured mentor, a gentleman of the highest caliber, and a quiet hero to so many. With great appreciation, we acknowledge his commitment to this project and honor his legacy. In his words, "We have work to do, you and I, and it is time to begin."



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As colleges and universities navigate funding challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, veterans' advocates on campus and beyond must amplify the message that supporting student veterans is both the right thing to do and in the best interest of the institution. The George W. Bush Institute's Stand-To Veteran Higher Education Task Force convened a working group to illustrate the value of attracting, enrolling, and supporting veterans and issued recommendations for institutions of higher learning:

- Develop techniques to recruit and retain student veterans to complement the institutions' equity, diversity, and equal opportunity efforts.
- Actively knock down admissions and financial aid barriers preventing student veterans and their spouses from enrolling. Doing so will generate consistent and stable funding for the institution.
- Collect and maintain comprehensive data on student veterans and their progress.
- Pursue targeted approaches to support student veterans from application to graduation.
- Create successful veteran alumni who will give back to their institutions of higher learning through programming and capital campaigns.

Veterans provide myriad and often overlooked benefits to colleges and universities. But this too often collides with financial stresses jeopardizing many college and university programs, including those that support our veterans. The historic ebb and flow of veterans also contributes to this reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened many services demonstrated to optimize student veterans' success. At the same time, it's had direct and potentially long-lasting effects on student veterans' finances, employment, mental health, and education benefits, according to a 2021 study by Operation College Promise and Texas A&M University. But the Post-9/11 GI Bill® – now known as the Forever GI Bill – has the potential to transform the lives of student veterans as well as better the institutions of higher learning where they study.

Student veterans typically thrive on campuses with appropriate support and contribute to strong student performance as well as a rich intellectual atmosphere. With this support, these students typically progress toward degrees more efficiently than their traditional counterparts.

“Military veterans are valued members of university communities. They bring with them a wealth of experience, knowledge of the world, and a deep commitment to teamwork and leadership. It’s incumbent upon us, as leaders in higher education, to provide the support systems our veterans need to pursue their studies, complete their degrees, and thrive inside and outside the classroom – particularly during these uncertain times caused by the pandemic. It’s an honor to support veterans, and their children.”

- Ali A. Houshmand
President, Rowan University

Develop techniques to recruit and retain student veterans to complement the institutions' equity, diversity, and equal opportunity efforts.

Recruiting, enrolling, and supporting student veterans in higher education can help colleges and universities meet their equity and diversity objectives. These students also complement the campus community with inherent leadership skills and a desire to keep serving – qualities that are assets to the campus and the broader community.

Student veterans bring a unique perspective that enhances the college or university environment. Veterans have had a wide range of experiences and come from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Many also represent traditionally underserved student populations. As a group, veterans have a high degree of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

Veterans are generally classified as a minority student population, thereby enhancing and expanding campus conversations about diversity and inclusion. Most are first-generation learners (62%), now accessing the Forever GI bill as both a transitional tool and an avenue to pursue a degree that may have been previously unattainable. Educational benefits and finances are typically among the top five reasons people provide for joining the military. These factors lay the groundwork for a generation of new learners who will incrementally increase their lifelong education and overall financial stability.

“I always loved having veterans in my class. I knew they were going to bring something special to the table in terms of maturity, focus, and life experience.”

- Dr. Daniel Myers
Former Provost of American University

Actively knock down admissions and financial aid barriers preventing student veterans and their spouses from enrolling. Doing so will generate consistent and stable funding for the institution.

Enrolling more student veterans can provide a stable and substantial income stream for colleges and universities facing enormous budget challenges triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, state funding cuts, reduced enrollment, and new safety and health expenditures. Almost 200,000 servicemembers transition each year, and many of them – along with those who have already transitioned – will seek postsecondary education.

Institutions of higher learning benefit financially from enrolling this population as veterans have access to many federal financial programs. The Forever GI Bill, for one, covers about 98% of educational costs at public institutions of higher learning and about 70% of the costs at private schools. The Monthly Housing Allowance supplements the cost of on-campus housing and meals without need-based aid. About 39% of veterans are also eligible for Pell Grants.

“Whether in combat or at peacetime, nobody gets more authority and responsibility at an early age than young Americans in the uniformed services. Giving them the opportunity to hone their formidable skills in higher education isn’t charity. It is, instead, employing leverage to enable these patriots to make even greater contributions to society.”

- Retired U.S. Army Colonel Jack Jacobs
Medal of Honor recipient, Operation
College Promise Board

While the Post-9/11 and Forever GI Bills cover tuition and fees, many veterans still struggle financially due to other obligations such as housing, child care, and other expenditures not covered by their monthly housing allowance. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only exacerbated these considerations.

Many independent schools supplement the GI Bill with the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Yellow Ribbon program, which helps pay for out-of-state, private school, foreign school, or graduate school tuition that the GI Bill doesn’t cover. Institutions can also take advantage of a recently expanded work-study program, which gives students the opportunity to earn additional income and meaningful employment while also providing institutions with capable workers supported entirely by federal dollars.

Collect and maintain comprehensive data on student veterans and their progress.

Institutions will maximize student veterans’ impact on their campuses by establishing and maintaining a comprehensive methodology for tracking their academic progress. Traditional methods, including tracking GPAs and retention and graduation rates, are an excellent place to start. Much of this data is gathered already for governing bodies providing institutional guidance, data, and standards. In states that utilize a performance-based funding model, specific performance measurements determine a portion of state funding. As a result, a school’s ability to meet particular criteria can substantially affect their budgets. These academic measurements are often also crucial to marketing to prospective students and faculty members.

Schools should frequently survey their student veterans to assess trends that may vary over time or among classes of students. Engaging current students through surveys and including them in campus convenings should be a priority in determining priority support services.

This will help make services and programs inclusive of all veterans' needs and reflective of their diverse backgrounds, including racial/ethnic, gender and sexual orientation, and other factors. Developing a program without this interaction and input is counterproductive and may direct limited funds to areas that are not as effective.

Pursue targeted approaches to support student veterans from application to graduation.

Establishing a supportive environment that maximizes student veterans' chances of success doesn't need to be expensive or complex. Many of the services relevant to this population, (e.g., child care or housing), mirror or resemble those existing for other nontraditional students. Surveys of student veterans have revealed several common factors pivotal to success: an established point of contact, dedicated space or an office, and appropriate consideration of credit transfer.

A campuswide task force is an excellent platform to synthesize student and interdepartmental support and input. Also helpful is faculty and staff training to enhance awareness of military culture, community resources, changing needs, and holistic approaches to create a blueprint for serving student veterans. For example, [Operation College Promise](#) provides a unique professional development training program designed specifically for the higher education community.

To streamline the transition from service to school, institutions of higher learning must invest in more efficiently transferring and awarding military credit. The pandemic has significantly impacted working adults, including the military-connected community, according to the American Council on Education's national task force on transfer credit. So optimizing the path to academia from military service is more important than it was before.

Schools should utilize the American Council on Education's modernized and streamlined [ACE Military Guide](#) – the only tool for validating military courses and occupations evaluated for academic credit recommendations. The military's training, education, and experience could and should be assessed for credit, which is applied directly to the degree program rather than as elective credit. Doing so can be valuable in recruiting students seeking to maximize benefits for themselves or their dependents.

Additionally, as we move toward a skills-based economy with more students beginning their higher education lifecycle at a local or regional community college, schools should consider a more streamlined process for transitioning servicemembers while establishing connections to in-demand and regionally in-demand employment that can lead to increased economic mobility.

Create successful veteran alumni who will give back to their institutions of higher learning through programming and capital campaigns.

An institution's commitment to its student veteran enrollment, retention, graduation, and career placement rates can attract prospective donors. Alumni who served in the military might especially appreciate such targeted giving, since support of student veterans resonates more strongly for some donors than other giving opportunities. This may include many older alumni, who may have been compelled to serve because of the draft.

“Today’s servicemembers are the best educated of Americans to serve in any war, better educated than their age group as a whole. The Armed Forces today expect at least a high school education. Unfortunately, a high school education is insufficient in this modern economy. Institutions that recruit and support student veterans strengthen and enrich their own campus, and they provide graduates who will contribute to the future of our Nation. Support for student veterans is not a gratuity but is an investment in the future of the republic.”

*– Dr. James E. Wright
President Emeritus of Dartmouth College, U.S.
Marine Corps veteran*

Most veterans bring highly desirable qualities to their colleges and universities, including elevated leadership skills, heightened levels of maturity and discipline, and, in many cases, international experiences. Accordingly, schools that invest in robust veteran-support programs realize solid returns in their veteran-centered fundraising efforts.

In addition to providing direct aid to student veterans, fundraising can highlight veteran-recognition programs. Schools can also generate returns from veteran alumni by developing veteran student organizations and veteran-focused research, raising awareness of the military experience, and supporting programs that integrate veterans into the general student population and allow alumni to mentor younger veterans.

Fundraising that emphasizes student veterans' needs can also keep them from having to take out student loans that degrade their post-graduation quality of life. More importantly, scholarships, emergency funds, endowments, and other donor-financed programs can alleviate monetary stresses that might impede veterans from earning their degrees. Often, academic struggles are caused by ancillary factors outside the classroom.

Beyond drawing alumni dollars, a sizable and well-supported group of student veterans can also generate enormous amounts of political capital because they provide a unique and historical resonance for lawmakers. Evidence of a college or university's strong support of veterans can be used effectively to support a university's efforts to educate elected officials about the campus' programming for underserved and minority students.

While such efforts are most often associated with veteran-specific causes, including those advocated by Student Veterans of America and the American Legion, some institutions are effectively promoting their high veteran success rates toward gaining financial backing for broader student-support initiatives.

Student veterans are also generating political capital at the campus level. Student-government bodies at several colleges and universities have established veteran student unions to give them a voice in campus governance. And, at some schools, fraternities have waived their application fees for veterans after discovering that houses with veterans as members had fewer disciplinary issues.

“America’s promise to those who volunteer for military service is the chance to earn a college degree. Nearly half the time, though, veterans who pursue higher education fall short – a regrettable national average. However, colleges and universities that have implemented programs to support their veteran and military students, such as Florida State University, have seen substantially higher percentages of them succeed. This often-underserved group of nontraditional students deserves services tailored to their unique challenges. And by providing them, our colleges and universities also help America keep its promises.”

*- Dr. Richard McCollough
President, Florida State University*

CONCLUSION

Student veterans are an often-undervalued asset to campus communities. Their experiences and commitment to postsecondary education will contribute to institutions in improving student outcomes, long-term stable funding, political capital, and fundraising. Maximizing their enrollment, creating comprehensive tracking data, and providing appropriate support services is a win-win for institutions and student veterans alike.

The George W. Bush Institute would like to express its gratitude to the members of the Stand-To Veteran Higher Education Task Force listed on the following pages. Their combined experience and expertise provided invaluable insight and analysis in preparing these recommendations. Their leadership, enthusiasm, and commitment to veterans and military students within higher education have been crucial to our efforts.

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