



## TEN-HUT.

The Americans are coming. The Americans are coming.

by Tom Robinson

**I**n 1945, skeptical college leaders cringed at the notion of World War II vets on GI Bill descending on their elite campuses. A half century later, three million servicemen and women arrived home from Afghanistan and Iraq looking for a college education. Military students can be a real asset. They are good students. Their experiences enrich the experience of other students. They tend to be more loyal alumni.

And they come largely prepaid with veterans' benefits. But don't presume the GI Bill is a path to graduation. The path must be paved with support services. Attracting vet students—and more importantly keeping them—will require some extra training. Know why they are different than other recruits, what their special needs are and what programs you will have to put in place.

TC

## THE TRANSITION FROM "WE" TO "I"

The obvious difference demographically is age. Many service folks went into the service right out of high school. After two or three tours in the Middle East, they are now 25 or 27 years-old chronologically. Yet they are younger than many adult students who re-entered the education space as adults.

They are typically considerably more mature psychologically. They often have stared death in the face, making those "critical thinking skills" really critical. They have commanded dozens, or even hundreds, of other people. They have learned skills and implemented them in real-world conditions. They have traveled world-wide, getting immersed in alien cultures. They may have had the opportunity between engagements to take online courses and earn credit. They have often passed the exam at the school of hard knocks.

A less obvious difference is the culture from which they are emerging when matriculating stateside at your college. They may, surprisingly, be more scared of algebra than they were of roadside bombs. They are emerging from a culture of "we" to a culture of "I." In the service, so many decisions were made for them at the command of their superior officer or battle tactics or DoD regs. Now they are faced with making decisions as an individual. What do I want to achieve personally? Do I stay connected to the military? What courses should I take? Where do I live? How does my decision affect my spouse and children?

## THE MILITARY-FRIENDLY COLLEGE

Randy Plunkett is the community and government outreach director at Military.com, a division of Monster.com, which helps servicemen and women navigate higher education and career planning. "The real focus should be on active military transitioning to civilian life," he says. That's because active military have a support system of education-specific advisors and mentors. Reservists and guardsmen have a similar, albeit somewhat less active, support system. Most service people have taken distance learning courses or attended classes offered by one of the 4-6 colleges provided on base.

Two million service members and their families became eligible for newly expanded benefits under the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 on August 1, 2009. Some \$78 billion in GI Bill federal assistance will likely be paid out over 10 years. More than a quarter of those veterans have already signed up for the benefit, which pays tuition up to the highest public undergraduate rate in a state, along with a monthly housing allowance

and a \$1,000 stipend for books. There are other financial assistance programs. They include the Veterans Education Assistance Program (VEAP), which is a 2 for 1 match of payroll deduction, and The Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) program that provides up to \$4,000 (over 2 years) of financial assistance for military spouses. When tuition and fees exceed the GI Bill limit, institutions can voluntarily participate in the Yellow Ribbon program; the institution chooses an aid amount to offer, and the VA matches.

If you were to Google "military-friendly colleges," you would find a plethora of pro-military sites ranging from blogs about scams to quasi-governmental organizations to the federal agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.

The Military Friendly Schools Guide and website filtered 7,000 college, universities and trade schools nationwide down to a list of list of approximately 1,000 schools (about 15 percent) that, in their judgment, offer "the best education, value and welcome."

Other military-friendly counselors, in the style of the *U. S. News and World Report* or *Princeton Review*, suggest that there is a top echelon of military friendly schools. The VeteransBenefitsGIBill.com lists its Top 25 as:

1. Brandman University
2. Keiser University e-Campus
3. Colorado State University Global Campus
4. Jones International University
5. Robert Morris University
6. University of Illinois at Chicago
7. Hawaii Pacific University
8. California College of San Diego
9. Keiser University
10. Stevens-Henager College
11. Excelsior College
12. Walden University
13. American Intercontinental University Online
14. Thomas Edison State College
15. Central Michigan University
16. Duquesne University
17. University of the Rockies
18. New England Institute of Technology
19. TUI University
20. Colorado Technical University
21. University of Maryland
22. Central Texas College
23. Grantham University
24. Kansas State University
25. University of Maryland University College

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## DEVELOPING A MILITARY-FRIENDLY CULTURE

The tipping point for military-friendly status is credit transfer. The American Council on Education (ACE) created a system to help service people get credit for classwork and training they received while active duty and for colleges and universities to be comfortable accepting such credits as legitimate. It is not perfect; there have been 50,000 disputes examined. But veterans are able to get a jump on requirements that other adults with life experience and on-the-job training cannot.

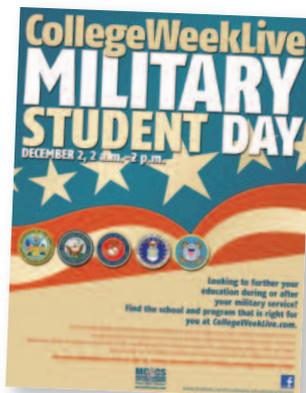
Brian Hawthorne, a two-time Iraq vet and student at George Washington University in the Nation's Capital, is on the board of the Student Veterans of America. The SVA is an organization of student vets that advocates for vet-friendly policies on campus and mediates vet-related disputes. The SVA also creates dialog between administration and vet students and vet students and their civilian counterparts to reduce the stigma that military students often face.

"There are a lot of free things colleges can do to manage the service population and some others that, while they may cost hard dollars, are justified based on the size of the military student population," he asserts.

**Create a Veterans Task Force** with representatives from every department that has contact with students, including a high-level post such as the dean of students or provost to assure that recommendations are heard where decisions are made. Be sure to include student vets, perhaps the president of the school's SVA chapter. There is a saying among veteran students—"nothing about us, without us."

**Examine Vet Policies** to ensure that student life, registration, credit transfer and housing are geared for the adult learner. For example, do not assign a 27-year-old vet who has been out of the country in a combat zone to room with an 18-year-old away from home the first time, just because they are both "freshmen." A graduate student would be more appropriate. This requires that data on age and service experience be captured at enrollment time. You cannot plan properly without knowing how many military students you have; they don't always self-identify.

**Give registration priority.** Allow GI Bill recipients to register for courses before the general student body, as is done with NCAA athletes and ROTC



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students. The Department of Veteran's Affairs will not pay unless the courses are part of a degree program, so missing out on required courses or taking them out of order will be problematic.

**Assign Dedicated Staff.** Not only should this person be certified to handle for VA benefits, but should also perform other tasks: community outreach, working with faculty on behalf of military students and organizing Veterans' Day events. For a school with a small service population, this might be a part-time position. At George Washington University, where Hawthorne attends, there are two full-time staff and two graduate students who, because of their experiences from application to graduation, can help talk real issues with current undergraduates.

**Create a Vet Lounge.** About 10-15 of the schools with the largest population of military students have developed "lounges" or "clubs" that cater to veterans' needs. This is the same concept that other affinity groups have adopted: Hillel, Gay Alliance, African-American, International Students, and so on. It is a place where peers relax between classes, meet with advisors or find a quiet place to study. It is also a "safe space" and a powerful statement confirming claims that vets are welcome. Notable ones include the University of Arizona and American University. In 2009, San Diego State University opened the first student veterans residence in the U.S. The new Veterans House is a part of SDSU's Troops to College initiative. "This is a

unique opportunity for student veterans and the other students living on campus to get to know each other on a level that isn't afforded in the normal academic environment," boasts Dr. James Kitchen, vice president for student affairs.

## VET SUPPORT WORKS

Studies by the Lumina Foundation and others provide evidence that veteran students who received the support services did in fact graduate at higher rates than those vets who did not receive such services.

A program at Cleveland State University was started in 2007 by

## MINIMAL CRITERIA FOR MILITARY-FRIENDLINESS

- School is VA Approved
- Accepts College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- Part of SOC Degree Network System
- Part of the DANTES external
- Gives credit for CLEP and/or DSST exams
- Accepts the ACE recommendations for awarding credit for CLEP and/or DSST
- Gives ACE credit for military training and experience

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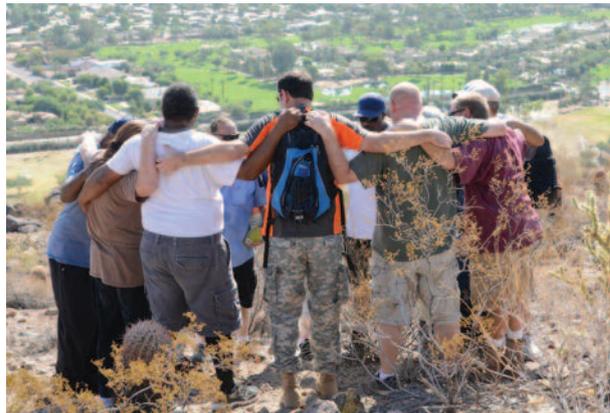
chemistry professor John Schupp to form some freshman-level classes with all veterans. Schupp's idea is to keep the military men and women together as a unit so they can support and motivate each other. In sophomore year, they begin to take classes with the general population. The University of Arizona and Ohio State adopted his program, and schools in at least a dozen states are working on programs modeled on CSU's.

CollegeWeekLive Military Student Day is an interactive video event where military personnel and veterans can meet with college representatives online. The event held just this past December connected 1,500 attendees on bases from Camp Pendleton to Okinawa in 36 countries with representatives from 80 veteran friendly colleges. In addition to colleges and universities, organizations like the Pat Tillman Foundation find it difficult to reach military personnel abroad. PTF leveraged this channel for supporting its mission. "Our live video presentation at CollegeWeekLive Military Student Day made three Tillman Military Scholars currently attending the University of Arizona available to share their experience with a wider audience than ever before," said the foundation's Hunter Riley.

The Veterans' Boot Camp is a private-public partnership between the East Valley Veteran's Education Center (a program under the Maricopa Community College district—funded by a grant sponsored by Senator Harry Mitchell), and Chandler University.

The program includes 40-hours of intense training that helps veterans secure civilian employment. Many veterans are struggling with the very basics that are required for success in the private sector, including computer skills, social networking, financial management and corporate etiquette. The Boot Camp team recently met with Labor Secretary Hilda Solis.

Many combat veterans return suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These vets may need counseling or medical care to stay healthy enough to meet the rigors of a college education. It is incumbent on colleges to reduce the stigma of these medical conditions and likewise the exaggerated perception that all vets are suffering with a disability. The Wounded



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Warriors program in Jacksonville, Florida helps severely wounded vets transition back to civilian society. While tens of thousands have been helped, it is a relatively small percentage of veterans. In most cases, it is the veterans themselves that help each other with mentoring, note-taking and moral support.

The Pentagon has developed new rules to ensure that service members are treated fairly when they use government money to attend college. Those rules were set to go into effect January 1, 2012, but many of the nation's best-known schools, including the

University of California system, say they cannot accept those requirements. The dispute puts at risk millions of dollars in federal assistance. NPR reports that military service groups have been outraged at the idea that students could not use their tuition assistance dollars at hundreds of recognized colleges. They've written to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, asking him to put these new rules on hold. They've been joined by 52 senators from both parties.

With the support of college administrators, faculty and campus veterans organization—and Congress—we will leave no soldier behind. **TC**

**» In the next issue, we will feature tribal students.**

### **OTHER MILITARY SUPPORT SERVICES**

- [Staff career placement advisor](#)
- [MyCAA spouse program](#)
- [Identification of military dependents on campus](#)
- [Child care facilities on campus](#)
- [Campus/social networking events for veterans](#)
- [Veteran clubs or associations on campus](#)
- [Student Veterans of America chapter on campus](#)
- [Virtual veteran clubs or associations](#)
- [Veteran specific page on website](#)
- [Spouse clubs/associations on campus](#)
- [Military spouse specific page on website](#)