

VETERANS PROGRAM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING



GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE MILITARY SERVICE INITIATIVE
VETERAN HIGHER EDUCATION TASK FORCE



GEORGE W. BUSH
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About the George W. Bush Institute

Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the George W. Bush Institute is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization with the mission of developing leaders, advancing policy, and taking action to solve today's most pressing challenges. Through three Impact Centers – Domestic Excellence, Global Leadership, and an Engagement Agenda – the Bush Institute delivers measurable results that save and improve lives. To learn more, visit www.BushCenter.org.

About the Military Service Initiative:

The Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative helps post-9/11 veterans and their families make successful transitions to civilian life with a focus on optimizing health and well-being and leveraging meaningful education and employment opportunities.

The George W. Bush Institute – Veteran Higher Education Task Force combines the experience and expertise of veterans' organizations and institutions of higher learning at the highest levels, providing invaluable insight and analysis to help post-9/11 veterans make successful transitions to civilian life by leveraging meaningful education and employment opportunities. We are grateful for members' leadership, enthusiasm and commitment to veterans and military students within higher education.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leaders and administrators at institutions of higher learning have an opportunity to demonstrate that student veterans are social assets to the higher education community and beyond. Accordingly, the Veteran Higher Education Task Force developed six key policy recommendations to hone institutional policies that best serve and support student veterans and the military-affiliated community.

Recommendation 1. Provide flexible coursework and pathways to degree completion

Institutional decision makers should encourage the continuation of modified coursework and paths to degree completion for student veterans, even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Recommendation 2. Ensure virtual and hybrid coursework is high quality, equitable, and accessible to veterans

Institutions of higher learning should continue to offer and invest in high-quality virtual or hybrid coursework that is both equitable and accessible. This is especially true for two-year institutions, which typically have higher attrition rates.

Recommendation 3. Fund veteran support programs

Schools should maintain their military support offices and student veteran programming, even in the face of budget cuts.

Recommendation 4. Educate staff and explore ways to ensure veterans receive academic credit for military experience

Institutions of higher learning should make sure that their staffs are familiar with federal and state guidelines on military credit transfers and that the schools publicize and comply with these policies.

Recommendation 5. Equip staff with the cultural competency to design programs for student veterans that provide a real return on investment

Institutions of higher learning should invest the time and financial resources necessary to train faculty and staff to understand the diversity of the student veteran population and how to work with student veterans effectively.

Recommendation 6. Measure and assess outcomes to ensure quality programming

Institutions should collect data and measure and evaluate veteran transfer students, graduation rates, and follow-on employment rates.

INTRODUCTION

Student veterans represent a dynamic cross-section of nontraditional, adult learners. They have a passionate belief in the uplifting power of education as a proven pathway into civilian life and post-service well-being and prosperity. They are relatively successful in comparison with their nonveteran student peers, yet student veterans remain one of the most unseen populations on college campuses today, left struggling to achieve their high academic and, later, professional potential because of an unnecessary combination of institutional barriers. These are often reinforced by outdated mindsets and education administrators unfamiliar with the military service-connected population.

Student veterans face a unique educational challenge: The same characteristics that signal their potential for academic success often create the obstacles to achieving it. Student veterans are typically older, married, have families and financial obligations, and often either serve as a caregiver or are being treated for a personal disability.

Leaders and administrators at institutions of higher learning have an opportunity to act now to demonstrate that student veterans are social assets to the higher education community and beyond. They can do this by reevaluating institutional policies that create barriers for student veterans and helping pave pathways to success. This will benefit not only student veterans and the underrepresented communities to which many belong but also strengthen and profit the Nation's colleges and universities as well as the U.S. workforce.

Accordingly, the Veteran Higher Education Task Force convened a collaborative body of leaders from various educational sectors to develop six key policy recommendations for institutions of higher learning. They are designed to guide executives at each institution in creating or enhancing policy to provide services to better support the lives of student veterans and the military-affiliated community.

Recommendation 1. Provide flexible coursework and pathways to degree completion

Student veterans' ability to complete their degrees within their planned timeframe has been challenged by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While their nonveteran peers are also affected by the pandemic, delays in degree completion inevitably have outsized repercussions for student veterans and their families. This is due in part to the nontraditional demographics of most of the student veteran population, but also to the rigid legal parameters constraining the disbursement of GI Bill® benefits, including when, where, and how student veterans can utilize them.¹

Many students are postponing coursework until they can go back to traditional classrooms after the pandemic, and student veterans are no exception. According to a recent study, veterans' social media posts were 28 times more likely to mention deferring classes in the summer and fall of 2020 than they were a year earlier.² At the same time, the veterans mentioned staying in school four times more often than they brought up deferring classes. Also, 58% of student veterans who responded to surveys by Student Veterans of America reported that the COVID-19 pandemic would delay their progress toward earning a degree or certificate.³

In their response to the pandemic, many institutions of higher learning have already recognized the importance of having greater adaptability for degree completion. College and university presidents highlighted flexibility and

1 GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by VA is available at the official U.S. government Web site at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.

2 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs & Accenture. (2020, November). GI Bill sentiment analysis COVID-19's impact on GI Bill conversations. https://benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/FGIB/GIBill_Sentiment_Analysis_2020Infographic.pdf

3 Student Veterans of America. (2020). SVA COVID-19 April/June surveys. [Unpublished report].

preparedness for change as a top lesson learned at the end of the fall 2020 semester, including being flexible in semester pacing and length.⁴ Institutional decision makers should encourage the continuation of modified coursework and paths to degree completion for student veterans, even after the pandemic is over.

One reason flexibility is critical is because of the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of students, especially student veterans. About 72% of college and university presidents surveyed in February 2020 indicated that the mental health of students was a pressing concern because of the pandemic, compared with 68% surveyed in November, according to the American Council on Education.⁵

While it is important to keep in mind that not all student veterans experience mental health challenges because of their military service, it is equally critical to understand that student veterans do have higher incidences of preexisting health conditions as well as, frequently, the added strain of caregiving and family responsibilities. Pandemic-related concerns that apply to all students are therefore amplified for the student veteran community. Flexible degree completion timelines can go a long way toward helping mitigate these mental health concerns by removing the pressure on student veterans to complete their coursework on a prepandemic timeline.

Recommendation 2. Ensure virtual and hybrid coursework is high quality, equitable, and accessible to veterans

More than two-thirds of post-9/11 student veterans are first-generation college students in addition to being nontraditional students.⁶ So they are embarking on their higher education journeys without the benefit of familiarity with institutions of higher learning. Because they are transitioning from the military, they also lack a college counselor's advice in navigating the application process. This means they must do everything on their own, including identifying prospective institutions, applying decision models, weighing workforce opportunities tied to degree completion requirements, selecting schools, and anticipating semester course loads. Student veterans also have higher incidences of physical and/or mental disability than more traditional students.⁷ So even in a non-COVID-19 world, some student veterans may require consideration and accommodation. The pandemic has simply heightened the need for IHLs to understand and address these challenges.⁸

The task force recommends that IHLs continue to offer and invest in high-quality virtual or hybrid coursework that is both equitable and accessible for student veterans. Nearly all IHLs shifted to some level of virtual programming in the weeks immediately following the COVID lockdowns in March 2020. Since then, colleges and universities have created virtual and hybrid classes employing a variety of strategies and technologies, combining interactive instructional activities with flexibility on how and when students can meet in person.⁹

Any expectation for student veterans to attend in-person education during the pandemic added complexity and stress to an already difficult situation. Policies such as social distancing and mask mandates created new challenges for students, making in-person education less desirable. Student veterans may have experienced heightened anxieties about being on campus because of the risk of exposure to COVID-19 as well as the possible need to manage new in-person protocols within the context of a disability.¹⁰

4 Taylor, M., Sanchez, C., Turke, J. M., Chessman, H. M., & Ramos, A. M. (2021). College and university presidents respond to COVID-19: 2021 spring term survey. American Council on Education & TIAA Institute. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Presidents-Respond-COVID19-Spring2021.pdf>.

5 Ibid.

6 U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2020, June 11). Learn about student veterans. <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student-veteran/learn-about-student-veterans.asp>

7 Ochinko, W., & Payea, K. (2020). Impact of disability on first-time student veterans' persistence and attainment (Issue Brief No. 14). Veterans Education Success. <https://vetsedsuccess.org/impact-of-disability-on-first-time-student-veterans-persistence-and-attainment/>

8 Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions, and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>

9 Turk, J., Soler, M.C., Chessman, H., & Gonzalez, A. (2020, December 10). College and university presidents respond to Covid-19: 2020 fall term survey, part II. American Council on Education (ACE). <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2020-Fall-Term-Part-Two.aspx>

10 Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions, and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>

Finally, there is a specific need for two-year IHLs to study the feasibility of continuing to offer either virtual or hybrid coursework and investing in it. Two-year IHLs typically have higher attrition rates than four-year institutions, a fact that many first-generation student veterans are unaware of when choosing to attend them and are dismayed to discover later.¹¹ No matter the type of institution, student veterans still have a need to access high quality, equitable coursework.

Recommendation 3. Fund veteran support programs

The task force recognizes that the pandemic likely affected finances, and institutions of higher learning will have to make many difficult decisions regarding program cuts. IHLs across the board have seen a sizeable decrease in enrollment in the wake of the pandemic,¹² and declining tax revenues have caused states to curtail higher education funding, a key source of revenue for many public colleges and universities. A 2020 survey of college and university military support offices showed that around a third had had budget cuts – if their offices hadn't been eliminated altogether.¹³ But the recommendation – in the strongest possible terms – is that all IHLs continue to invest in student veterans, who comprise one of the populations of greatest need, by maintaining both the schools' military support offices and student veteran programming.

Continued investment in student veterans remains critical at this moment, when high quality, robust, virtual and hybrid programming is needed across the board. It will pay dividends for the IHLs as well as society as a whole long after the pandemic resolves. One reason why is that student veterans represent the same key, underrepresented, underserved populations of potential students that IHLs seek to bring into their institutions and to support in their success. Equally important is the empirically demonstrated fact that student veterans are resilient and academically outperform their traditional student peers.¹⁴ They help IHLs develop social and economic capital. But because student veterans are more likely than their traditional student counterparts to have additional family and financial responsibilities, and because the COVID-19 pandemic created increased financial distress from furloughs, layoffs, and unemployment, student veterans are more dependent than ever on the continuity of student veteran-supporting programs and services to equip them to successfully complete their higher education goals.

Student veterans have been deeply concerned about COVID-19's impact on their educational benefits.¹⁵ If these worries cause them to abandon their academic pursuits, the result may be higher incidences of homelessness and food insecurity by military-connected individuals and families. Ancillary factors like finances are often at the core of the academic struggle, whether for student veterans or traditional nonveteran students. Providing comprehensive support to student veterans that covers financial and housing concerns will help them excel academically. It will also provide a return on investment for the places where these veterans study through increases in veteran graduation rates and career successes by the institutions' alumni.

Recommendation 4. Educate staff and explore ways to ensure veterans receive academic credit for military experience

Service members begin extensive military training and education the moment they enter their respective branches of service. Currently, there are two different types of military transcripts that record this training. The

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- 11 Hill, C. B., Kurzweil, M., Pisacreta, E. D., & Schwartz, E. (2019, January 10). , "Enrolling More Veterans at High-Graduation-Rate Colleges and Universities. " (Ithaca S+R, <https://s.ithaca.org/publications/enrolling-more-veterans-at-high-graduation-rate-colleges-and-universities/>)
 - 12 Turk, J., Soler, M.C., Chessman, H., & Gonzalez, A. (2020, December 10). College and university presidents respond to Covid-19: 2020 fall term survey, part II. American Council on Education (ACE). <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2020-Fall-Term-Part-Two.aspx>
 - 13 Lang, W. (2021, February). Completing the mission III: Assessing the impact of the COVID pandemic on student veterans and campus support services. Operation College Promise. <https://www.tamus.edu/veterans/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/02/COVID-Report-January-FINAL-Feb-1600.pdf>
 - 14 Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families & Student Veterans of America. (2019). Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education. https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf
 - 15 Lang, W. (2021, February). Completing the mission III: Assessing the impact of the COVID pandemic on student veterans and campus support services. Operation College Promise. <https://www.tamus.edu/veterans/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/02/COVID-Report-January-FINAL-Feb-1600.pdf>

first is the Joint Services Transcript, which represents training from the Army, the Navy, the Coast Guard, and the Marine Corps. The second is issued by the Community College of the Air Force, a degree-granting institution that serves Air Force and Space Force enlisted personnel.¹⁶

Turning military training into academic course credits at nonmilitary institutions of higher learning is difficult because the academic community in general is woefully uninformed both about military personnel and the true academic rigor required by most military training. In other words, the educators need more education. The American Council on Education currently provides extensive training for colleges and universities in how to grant credit for prior military training during the organization's annual Council of College and Military Educators (CCME) symposium and through various webinars. The task force recommends that IHLs invest in this type of education for relevant staff.

Furthermore, many IHLs are unaware that U.S. Code Title 38 (on laws and regulations concerning veterans and veterans' benefits) mandates that IHLs grant credit for prior military training. This is tricky for many institutions: If they overapply unneeded credit, for instance, they can unintentionally harm student veterans by rendering them ineligible for full financial aid. To prevent this – and to support both nonmilitary IHLs and all student veterans – the task force emphasizes that it is imperative that the Department of Veterans Affairs maintain an updated School Certifying Official (SCO) Handbook to provide guidance to the military transcript process and that the IHLs familiarize themselves with the SCO Handbook.

Understanding the uniqueness and pervasiveness of the military transcript and addressing both with an appropriate institutional policy and set of procedures is essential for higher education leaders on their respective campuses. Student veterans rely on IHLs' clearly communicated credit transfer policies not just to determine where they will enroll, but also to facilitate their degree completion plans in compliance with the requirements of federal GI Bill benefits. IHLs should therefore make sure that their military credit transfer policies are published in their annual course catalogs or bulletins and ensure that those policies have been approved by State Approving Agencies (SAAs).

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) has developed *A Guide to Best Practices: Awarding Transfer and Prior Learning Credit*. It includes fair and flexible guidelines for awarding credit for military experience.¹⁷ In addition to making sure their academic personnel and faculty have access to the best practices guide, IHLs should ensure that they also provide training for their personnel using the resources listed above to gain a better understanding and perspective on military transcripts.

Recommendation 5. Equip staff with the cultural competency to design programs for student veterans that provide a real return on investment

Student veterans earn higher average GPAs, have greater persistence and degree completion rates, and maintain lower loan default rates than their nonveteran peers.^{18 19 20} And yet they remain underrepresented in higher education, left struggling to achieve their potential because of unnecessary institutional barriers. They are typically older, married, with families and financial obligations, and often either serve as a caregiver or are being treated for a personal disability. New student veterans rarely have the benefit of academic counseling and often

16 Community College of the Air Force. (2019, April 19). Community college of the Air Force accreditation. Air University. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Barnes/CCAF/Display/Article/803238/community-college-of-the-air-force-accreditation>

17 American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. (2017, October). A Guide to Best Practices: Awarding Transfer and Prior Learning Credit. https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/signature-initiative-docs/trending-topic-docs/transfer/guide-to-best-practices.pdf?sfvrsn=4820bb55_6

18 Bryan, C. J., Bryan, A. O., Hinkson, K., Jr, Bichrest, M., & Ahern, D. A. (2014). Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and grade point average among student servicemembers and veterans. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 51(7), 1035–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1682/JRRD.2014.01.0012>

19 Hill, J., Smith, N., Wilson, D., & Wine, J. (2016). 2012/14 Beginning postsecondary students longitudinal study (BPS:12/14): Data file documentation (NCES 2016-062). U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016062.pdf>

20 Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans & Military Families and Student Veterans of America. (2019). Student veterans: A valuable asset to higher education. https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Student-Vets_Valuable-AssetFINAL-11.6.19.pdf

have to face overpromulgated, distorted stereotypes of who they are as modern veterans, even while navigating their own professional, personal, and psychological transitions from military service member back to civilian.

When IHLs make the appropriate tools and resources available to support the unique circumstances of military-connected students, student veterans do just as well as their civilian counterparts – or better. A handful of institutions have developed and deployed several specific support systems to meet the needs of these uniquely positioned adult learners. Many more IHLs, however, continue to struggle with how best to ensure student veterans a successful academic experience. IHLs should not have to reinvent the wheel in designing high-quality programs to meet these needs. Many resources already exist.

The task force recommends that IHLs invest the time and financial resources necessary to train faculty and staff to understand the diversity of the student veteran population and how to work with student veterans effectively. For professional staff and faculty, Kognito, the health simulation company, provides *Veterans on Campus for Faculty and Staff*, an online training program for institutions that incorporates simulated exercises.²¹ Green Zone training, modeled on the Safe Zone program, helps schools train volunteers in how to help student veterans as they navigate the collegiate system.²² The most well-known resource providing student veterans with peer support, however, is undoubtedly the Student Veterans of America organization, which has more than 1,500 chapters on campuses nationwide and aims to empower student veterans in leadership, resources, and networking opportunities.²³ Additionally, the University of Michigan's Peer Advisors for Veteran Education²⁴ and many other professional organizations, such as the National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, host veteran conferences that highlight best practices, support centers, and success stories.

As the ranks of interested and enrolled student veterans grow, IHLs should better situate themselves both to serve student veterans and to maximize their return on investment in student veterans by leveraging adequate, institutional supporting programs.

Recommendation 6. Measure and assess outcomes to ensure quality programming

Not enough is currently known about what constitutes common traits across the highest-quality programs for student veterans. Which programs, when adequately employed, ensure the best return on investment for student veterans themselves and the institutions at which they are enrolled? A lack of commonality of measurement used to evaluate programs makes it difficult to make this determination. To combat this, there must be standard metrics for educational programs.

U.S. Code Title 38, which deals with veterans' benefits, outlines basic requirements for educational programs to qualify for GI Bill funds. The Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, a sweeping new veterans' law, partially addresses the lack of commonality. However, much more work needs to be done both at the IHL level and at the state and federal policymaking level to ensure that the educational programs themselves are constructed to include the ability to earn certifications and licenses that lead to employment.²⁵

21 Albright G., & Shockley, K. (2018). Veterans on campus for faculty & staff: A longitudinal study with 10,560 faculty and staff members at 20 institutions of higher education. Kognito, https://go.kognito.com/rs/143-HCJ-270/images/HiEd_veterans_on_campus_study.pdf

22 Nichols-Casebolt, A. (2012). In practice: The green zone: A program to support military students on campus. *About Campus*, 17: 26-29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21070>

23 Student Veterans of America. (2021). About SVA. <https://studentveterans.org/about/>

24 Peer Advisors for Veteran Education. (2021, March 19). Our Program. <https://m-span.org/pave/our-program/>

25 Swift, R., Elzey, K., Cardenas-Navia, I., Hansen, R., Uranus, J., Martin, S., Jyotshi, S., Garmise, S., & Rodriguez, A. (2020). Embedding certifications into bachelor's degrees: Certification-degree pathways project. Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, UPCEA, WorkCred. <https://www.aplu.org/library/aligning-and-embedding-industry-certifications-with-bachelors-degrees/file>

The National Association of State Approving Agencies and EdCounsel, along with a national advisory board, have recently developed a new risk-based oversight model for programs at GI Bill institutions. The model uses meaningful metrics to ensure outcomes proven to align with veteran success across all sectors of education and training. This model, now required by P.L. 116-315, ensures that state approving agencies routinely visit high-risk institutions and provide measurement and evaluation programs, along with the necessary guidance to improve program delivery and outcome.²⁶

IHLs can provide valuable support toward ensuring a commonality of measurement nationwide by implementing this new risk-based oversight model. In addition, the task force encourages IHLs to build institutional policies surrounding the measurement and evaluation of veteran transfer students, graduation rates, and follow-on employment rates. Measurement over time is vital to best understand the quality and success of educational programs, but it is currently lacking for the post-9/11 cohort of student veterans. Only through this type of data collection will an actual pattern emerge that will determine the most effective return on investment.

²⁶ Arnold, N., Woodall, M.J., Wescott, J., Morales, J., Fretwell, J., Stein, B., Little, B. (2020). Brief: A new model for GI Bill quality assurance: An overview of the risk-based review system. National Governors Association, EdCounsel. https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/3_NASAA_Brief_with_appendices_Final.pdf.

CONCLUSION

With proper and continuing support, the challenges faced by student veterans and their family members can be mitigated and their full potential achieved. Institutions of higher learning have a key role to play in helping this community of hardworking students become successful both in the classroom and – ultimately – in the civilian workforce.

Since much of the student veteran population is made up of older, nontraditional students, often from underrepresented communities and with health and caregiving responsibilities, a key way institutions of higher learning can support veterans is through flexible coursework and accommodating pathways toward degree completion. But any hybrid coursework must be high quality, equitable, and accessible for student veterans. Schools can further assist these students by continuing to fund veteran support programs which have come under the chopping block before and during the pandemic. Institutions of higher learning should also explore ways to provide academic credit for military training already received and to educate their staffs about military culture to better support these adult learners. Finally, they should measure the outcomes of their veteran programs.

How veterans are supported by institutions of higher learning can greatly affect veterans' road to educational and professional success. It can also pay dividends for the institutions in the years to come as these students become accomplished and potentially prosperous alumni. Furthermore, investing in student veterans is the right thing to do in developing the future leadership of our Nation.

The George W. Bush Institute would like to express its gratitude to the members of the 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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