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GI Bills

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VETERANS, GI BILLS, AND DIVERSITY

Since World War II, veterans and U.S. higher education have shared a dynamic and complex history. From the latter half of the 20th century through today, veterans and military personnel have comprised a small but critical undergraduate student population in U.S. colleges and universities. This phenomenon is fueled in part by their need to transition from military to civilian life and by the incentives of GI educational benefits. Veterans and military personnel constitute a demographically diverse undergraduate student group, demonstrate unique patterns of educational benefits use, and exhibit behavioral and attitudinal characteristics that are distinct from their civilian peers on campus. Beginning with the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights, the federal government has provided a wide range of benefits to veterans, including education assistance, home loans, vocational training, and business loans. To ensure that veterans continued to benefit from the GI Bill, the U.S. Congress updated the GI Bill over time, including in 1984 with the Montgomery GI Bill and in 2008 with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This entry summarizes the demographics for veterans enrolled in undergraduate education, reviews the educational benefits available to veterans under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and identifies some issues confronting today's veterans with respect to their college experience.

Undergraduate Student Enrollment of Veterans

In 2007-2008, the National Center for Education Statics reported that veterans made up 3.1% of the overall U.S. undergraduate population in 2007–08. In addition, military service members on

both active and reserve duty represented another 0.7% and 0.4% of all undergraduate students respectively, bringing the total of percentage of military undergraduate students to 4.2% during those years. Demographically, veterans comprise a diverse undergraduate student population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the veteran and military undergraduates in 2007–08, were 3.2% Asian, 12.8% Hispanic, 18.0% Black, and 60.1% White. The vast majority of veterans and military undergraduate students (73.1%) reported their gender as male, and nearly 85% were 24 years of age or older.

With respect to college choice, veterans tend to prefer the cost, efficiency, and proximity of public two-year colleges. In fact, twice as many (43.3% vs. 21.4%) veterans and military service members enrolled in public two-year colleges compared to public four-year universities in 2007–08. Military undergraduates were more likely to enroll in an associate's degree program than a bachelor's degree program, and their enrollment showed a nearly equal distribution between full-time, full-year programs and part-time, full-year programs. Beyond the public sector, the next two highest enrolled institutions for veterans and military service members included private not-for-profit four-year and private two- and four-year, for-profit institutions. Generally speaking, veterans tend to value these institutions for their faster degree completion.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill and Educational Benefits for Veterans

The 2007–2008 National Center for Education Statics report showed that 37.7% of all veterans and military service members received GI educational benefits, which they used for multiple reasons. The 2001 National Survey of Veterans reveals that the majority of veterans from the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras (65.5%) reported using their educational benefits for college or university study, while nearly 40% reported using them for business, technical, or vocational

training. Nearly 14% used them for apprenticeship or on-the-job training.

On August 1, 2009, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act—commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill—ushered in dramatic changes to educational benefits for veterans. Since World War II, veterans have been eligible for educational benefits through the GI Bill. Compared to previous versions of the GI Bill, where the benefit amount had been fixed and adjusted annually based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the Post-9/11 GI Bill paid for veterans' educational expenses at a level equal to the in-state undergraduate tuition and fees of the highest priced public four-year university in the state. Further, the Post-9/11 GI Bill expanded benefits for specific items like housing and books.

College Experiences Among Veteran Undergraduates

The transition from the military to college has been tenuous for veterans. Clearly, veterans and military personnel prefer two-year to four-year public institutions, and recent research by Altschuler reveals that veterans are often encouraged to matriculate into community colleges and other sub-baccalaureate institutions. In fact, veterans report that they have been influenced by a military culture that emphasizes—through an accumulation of college credits rather than program completion—building a practical skill set with application in the workforce.

Research by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell indicates that when veterans arrive on campus, they report a sense of not belonging and feeling out of place. For this reason, veterans tend to isolate themselves from their civilian peers. In the classroom, veterans perceive that some instructors do not understand their experiences and, in some cases are antagonistic to their status as veterans, particularly combat veterans. Still, with respect to academic achievement, many veterans report that their military training prepared them well for work as a college student.

Diversity Issues Related to Veterans in College

With a lower proportion of veterans and military personnel enrolled in public four-year colleges and universities, the underrepresentation of veterans in baccalaureate-granting institutions—who form a highly diverse group of students—is an area that requires more attention. An issue of increasing importance is the unique experience of female veterans. Women make up a growing proportion of military personnel, and according to Baechtold and De Sawal, report events like military sexual trauma, which can lead to unreported conditions of posttraumatic stress syndrome, at rates far greater than male veterans. On college campuses, female veterans negotiate an environment different from the male-dominant military in which they have been socialized, and face transition issues that are distinct from their male veteran and female civilian peers.

Finally, previous research by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans has demonstrated that male veterans tend to be overrepresented among the homeless and that interventions can be effective in reducing risk factors—including mental illness—among homeless veterans. These interventions have important implications for services to support the mental and physical well-being of student veterans to reduce the risk factors of homelessness and enhance the educational experience.

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See also Financial Aid and Access to Higher Education; Higher Education, Access to; College Choice; Community College Diversity Issues.

FURTHER READINGS

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