Center for American Progress

Easing the Transition from Combat to Classroom

Preserving America's Investment in Higher Education for Military Veterans Through Institutional Assessment

Kimberly Griffin and Claire Gilbert   April 2012

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Introduction and summary

"The school that I actually went to knew nothing about [the] military and their concerns. … they didn't have a certifying official or anything like that. … to have somebody there to help you with your veterans benefits is huge."

— *Student veteran enrolled at a community college*

This quote speaks to just a few of the concerns of recent military veterans—women and men who have completed their service and been honorably discharged from the military—who are enrolling in college and universities in ever-increasing numbers. According to news reports, more than 400,000 veterans enrolled in institutions of higher education for the 2012 spring semester.

The U.S. government has traditionally shown its commitment to veterans through investment in higher education. The financial support veterans received for college through the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act,[1] widely known as the G.I. Bill, was a transformational piece of legislation that made college accessible for more than 2 million veterans in the 10 years following the end of World War II.[2] The first G.I. Bill is credited with increasing the number of college students threefold during the 1940s and 1950s.[3] As a result the country gained an additional 450,000 engineers, 360,000 teachers, 180,000 health professionals, and 150,000 scientists,[4] not to mention how transforming soldiers into civically engaged citizens contributed in large ways to the leadership of the nation.[5]

Amendments to the Veterans' Readjustment Act in 1952, 1966, 1977, and 1984 placed new restrictions on educational funding that offered lower levels of tuition support and in the last iteration required veterans to contribute $100 a month for 12 months to gain access to their benefits. That all changed with the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill—the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008—the most significant increase in educational funding for veterans in several decades. Under the new G.I. Bill, honorably discharged military servicewomen and men are entitled to tuition and fees equivalent to the most expensive rate of in-state tuition at a public

college or university in their state, a monthly housing allowance, and a yearly book stipend. The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, according to a Veterans Affairs performance and accountability report,[6] funded education and training for 555,000 veterans or their dependents in 2011 alone, investing more than $7.7 billion in education benefits that fiscal year.

This latest G.I. Bill has the potential to have as significant an impact on higher education, the U.S. workforce, and national competitiveness as its 1944 predecessor. But despite these glowing prospects and the fact that veterans are enrolling in college in record numbers thanks to the increased financial support the bill offers, the challenges and barriers being encountered by veterans at many institutions make it more likely that ex-G.I.s will leave college with debts instead of degrees. According to recent reports, news articles, and statements from government officials, returning veterans often face myriad challenges when it comes to higher education, including reacquainting themselves with academic work, navigating complex campus administrative systems, finding support services to meet their needs, encountering negative reactions from the campus community based on their participation in military conflicts, and having difficulty connecting with classmates and faculty. Many institutions are ill prepared to deal with these challenges and are often confused about where to begin determining what services student veterans need and how to provide them.

As the nation strives to reach President Barack Obama's goal of becoming the world's leader in terms of college completion by 2020, the needs and concerns of a growing veteran population must be addressed. Developing strategies that increase the likelihood of veterans completing their studies and earning their degrees will certainly contribute positively to this goal and simultaneously promote national competitiveness as well as appropriately compensating veterans for their service. As part of this effort to develop workable strategies, this report presents the Environmental Evaluation for Veterans Index, or EEVI, which will provide higher education institutions and policymakers with the tools needed to assess campus environments for veterans.

The EEVI is an assessment tool based on a comprehensive review of published research and recommendations related to working with the student veteran population, as well as the findings of a new multi-institutional study. The index allows institutions to clearly and consistently measure whether they have the services, policies, and sources of support necessary to assist returning veterans transition into higher education.

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill funded education and training for 555,000 veterans or their dependents in 2011 alone, investing more than $7.7 billion in education benefits that fiscal year.

The EEVI creates opportunities for institutions, students, and policymakers to make sense of campus environments and their contributions to the success of student veterans. While this instrument shares some similarities with the "Veteran Friendly Toolkit" developed by the American Council of Education, or ACE, the EEVI offers an important and unique approach. The index allows an institution to assess its environment by identifying the areas in which a campus is lacking in meeting the needs of veterans before turning to the ACE "Veteran Friendly Toolkit," which offers detailed guidance on how to develop various "veteran-friendly" programs and policies.

This report demonstrates how the EEVI can be easily used to assess the quality of an institution's environment as it relates to student veterans based on three dimensions:

- **Personnel and services**—the existence of offices, services, and professionals that can meet and understand unique issues and concerns of student veterans

- **Institutional structures**—the existence of campus policies and procedures related to administering student veterans' information, benefits, and services

- **Social and cultural support**—the extent of student veteran representation in the student body, veteran-specific groups and services, and quality relationships between student veterans, their peers, and faculty

The use of this instrument has powerful implications for institutions, students, and policymakers. We encourage institutions to use the EEVI for self-assessment, which can identify structural limitations that create barriers to the transition of veterans from combat to the classroom and that hinder the goal of improving student veteran outcomes. Further, institutions can use the EEVI to assess their progress in promoting more beneficial learning environments for student veterans, as well as providing a means to benchmark that progress against other institutions.

Just as the EEVI provides critical information for institutions, it also provides important consumer feedback for student veterans who are seeking learning environments that will optimize their chances of academic success, career development, and degree completion. The EEVI offers previously unavailable information and a way for student veterans to quickly compare and contrast programs, services, and support structures offered by different campuses. We strongly encourage institutions to publicize their responses to items on the EEVI, along with their

overall scores, in institution materials, websites, and other resources that offer college information as a way of enabling student veterans to choose institutions that are most able to meet their needs.

Further, the information the EEVI provides is also beneficial for federal and funding organizations. It provides policymakers with the information they need to determine the availability and quality of services and programs at a given institution. In addition, the index offers a concrete benchmark to compare institutions and can be used as a measure to hold institutions accountable. At the same time the EEVI can be used to encourage the implementation of various strategies and the provision of resources that have been found to be successful in meeting the needs of veterans and fostering their academic attainment.

Supporting veterans in higher education: what we don't know

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has been the largest increase in educational benefits for veterans since the 1940s. The new legislation provides honorably discharged veterans or those discharged due to a service-related disability with tuition and fees of up to $17,500, a stipend for books and supplies, and a monthly housing allowance.

These changes have translated to significant growth in the veteran population enrolled in institutions of higher education. In 2000 the number of student veterans taking advantage of their education benefits was around 400,000.[7] A decade later in 2010, and one year after the implementation of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, that number had more than doubled. It is anticipated that the number of veterans on college campuses will continue to increase with the impending military drawdowns in the Middle East and other regions.

While these increased enrollment numbers are encouraging, recent reports, news articles, and statements from government officials point out that veterans are now more likely to leave college with significant debts instead of degrees. Several reports describe in detail the challenges veterans face as they transition from combat to the classroom, noting a lack of support services to meet their unique needs, little guidance in navigating campus resources, and limited and sometimes contentious relations with classmates and faculty.[8] Combined with a lack of research about experiences to improve institutional practices, these barriers put student veterans at risk and increase the likelihood of them dropping out of college. Clearly, we must have a much better understanding of the services necessary to support veterans and be able to specifically identify the institutions that are taking steps to implement policies and practices to make their campuses veteran friendly.

In general, for a campus to be defined as veteran friendly it must be an institution "where programs and people [are] in place to assist with the transitions between college and the military."[9] The need for institutions to facilitate veterans' transitions has been a particular problem at for-profit institutions. During the 2009-10 school year, approximately 23 percent of Post-9/11 G.I. Bill recipients attended

A policy that promotes access

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is a new educational assistance program (effective August 1, 2009), which provides financial support for education and housing to individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate service on or after September 11, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days.

for-profit institutions.[10] Many of these for-profit institutions have been chided for their aggressive recruitment tactics, which encourage enrollment in programs with little thought or attention given to creating environments that promote ongoing student achievement and success. This lack of attention to promoting positive student outcomes is borne out by the fact that many of these institutions report dropout rates that exceed 50 percent.[11]

This is especially troubling with respect to online, for-profit schools, which some psychologists believe impede a veteran's reintegration into society due to the social isolation that may come from studying online.[12] In 2010, 5 of the top 10 schools enrolling the most students funded by the G.I. bill were primarily for-profit, online schools.[13] Understandably, there is a growing level of concern about the graduation rates of these schools and lawmakers, scholars, and veterans have questions about the actual benefit being derived from the use of G.I. Bill funding to pay for tuition, fees, instructional materials, and other costs associated with these schools.

There are also concerns about whether and how institutions that claim to be "veteran friendly" are assessed. Websites and media outlets like G.I. Jobs, VeteransBenefitsGIBill.com, and the Military Times EDGE have posted lists of institutions that they have deemed "military friendly" or "veteran friendly," yet the criteria by which institutions are awarded this label are unclear. While many of these lists include both not-for-profit and for-profit institutions, some are actually being used as recruitment tools by for-profit institutions seeking to attract veterans and their G.I. Bill funding, rather than being an objective evaluation and ranking tool based on resources or services offered by institutions to encourage veteran student success.[14] As a result there is a pressing need for a clear, consistent, widely available, and unbiased method to evaluate institutions to determine if they are indeed veteran friendly. As noted earlier the American Council on Education's recently released "Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions"[15] is a step in the right direction providing schools with resources that explain how to improve a wide array of services for veterans. The toolkit, however, does not help institutions determine where they are in that process and it does not adequately inform institutions where they might want to focus efforts in order to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for student veterans in a targeted and intentional manner.

This report addresses these needs by presenting a new tool that institutions can use to determine whether they have veteran-support structures in place and can provide a welcoming environment that is likely to support student veterans' retention and academic success. First, we offer a comprehensive review of the recent

research literature and policy reports highlighting student veterans' needs. The findings of a recent study on veterans' needs and experiences across multiple institutions are also included in this review, offering new insights and adding to the existing literature. Next we outline how the literature and original research were used to develop a new assessment tool, the Environmental Evaluation for Veterans Index, which provides institutions with a way to assess their environments for veterans. The EEVI is outlined in detail along with guidance on how to make use of it as institutions aim to better understand their own environments and resources. Lastly, this report presents policy recommendations and implications, noting how the EEVI can be used to improve campus environments and impact larger efforts to improve educational outcomes for student veterans.

Developing an instrument to assess the institutional environment for veterans

The EEVI was developed based on an analysis of multiple sources of data, including:

- Existing literature on student veterans, which was analyzed to identify the challenges student veterans face as they transition to and strive to succeed in college. Our review of the literature also included studies, as well as theoretical and practice-oriented manuscripts, which document institutional strategies developed to support returning veterans.

- Institutions identified as "military friendly" or "veteran friendly," identified through an internet search with a focus on websites offering resources for student veterans, such as G.I. Jobs, USAMilitaryBenefits.com, MilitaryFriendlyOnlineColleges.net, and Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges were reviewed. The lists included both for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. The criteria considered in determining whether a college was creating a comfortable and inclusive environment for veterans were noted and included in our analysis.

- Original data collected by a research team at the Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education, including Donald Heller, Robert Hendrickson, Kimberly Griffin, Theodore Timmerman, and Claire Gilbert. The research project was funded by the National Science Foundation. The researchers interviewed administrators, student-affairs professionals, and currently enrolled student veterans across seven institutions—three research universities, two community colleges, one liberal arts institution, and one comprehensive master's-degree-granting institution. Interview data were analyzed to identify emerging themes relating to the challenges veterans face across multiple institutional contexts, as well as sources of support and programming that appear to facilitate success. Any quotes or references to interviews appearing in this report are drawn from the Pennsylvania State University study.

Expanding on the above explanation, we relied on extant literature, posted lists of veteran- and military-friendly institutions, and original data collected from a study of student veterans in higher education. The data were analyzed and synthesized to identify emerging themes as they relate to the barriers facing student veterans and sources of support for those veterans. Three primary areas of concern emerged: personnel and services, institutional structures, and social and cultural factors. We look at each of these areas in turn, documenting the key issues facing student veterans as they transition into higher education and identifying the ways to overcome these barriers and in so doing facilitating successful outcomes for student veterans.

Personnel and services: People and the work they do matter

> *"It was really hard for me to come back to the program…One of my professors, I just went into his office and so unprofessionally started crying in his office…the next day [he] wrote me this long email and I read it every day because I thought there was no way that I could do this. I thought all these kids are so young and smart and I am so behind. It was really hard but one of my professors was awesome about it."*
>
> *— Student veteran attending a public university*

As this quote by a veteran suggests, faculty, staff, and other employees have a strong impact on the experience of student veterans. Multiple authors assert that the likelihood of success for student veterans is improved by having faculty and staff who are aware of and sensitive to their needs, or who cater services specifically to this group.[16] Certain offices deal with and/or impact student veterans more than others such as financial aid, counseling, disability services, academic advising, and career services.[17] Ensuring that these support offices are not only present but are staffed by people who understand the challenges and strengths of student veterans is critical to promoting their success.

Individual staff members, however, are not enough to support these students. There is still a vital need for coordination among these services.[18] Intrainstitutional collaboration is one way to improve campuses for student veterans through initiatives such as institutionwide committees, student groups, trainings for faculty and staff, mentoring programs, and technical standards for coursework that recognize and take into account the needs of veterans.[19] The coordination of services can be facilitated by having an institutional point person

who is responsible for assisting student veterans or by having a taskforce or other committee on campus charged with monitoring the student veteran experience.

Further, it is important for institutions to improve faculty, staff, and overall campus knowledge of student veterans and their needs by offering trainings focused on this group.[20] One community college participating in the National Science Foundation study, for example, brings representatives from the local veterans' center to campus to train faculty and staff on how to recognize and deal with the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and other issues that veterans experience. The importance of having knowledgeable professionals in key offices seeking to improve or cater services to veterans is important to include in any assessment of the quality of the campus environment for student veterans.

Likewise, having offices on campus dedicated to serving and supporting student veterans are also important contributors to student veterans' positive experiences.[21] As students and staff noted repeatedly in interviews, a veterans affairs office can make a huge difference in facilitating the benefits-receipt process, advocating for other student-veteran needs on campus, and giving student veterans a place to meet one another. Some staff members working in veterans offices even serve as unofficial mentors and become the point people for student veterans trying to navigate the return to college. As one staff member in a veterans office at a public university said as he explained his role in helping students with more than just benefits certification, "We have a strong referral network here. … there is a given that there is going to be a readjustment. … we try to just make sure that the students or veterans that are sitting there that we know what that [readjustment] is and what they are going through."

Another veterans office staff member at a community college explained that these offices can work to improve the overall campus experience for student veterans by advocating for institutional policies that improve their treatment, saying, "We'd try and change regulations, or create new policies to assist and help the veterans."

Institutional structures: Flexible policies and procedures make a difference

Interviews with student veterans and campus staff indicate that having clear and accessible institutional policies and procedures is extremely important for reducing frustration as well as promoting a successful transition to the institution. It is also important to clearly communicate these policies to student veterans. While

it is clear that straightforward institutional structures are rarely present, three specific areas were repeatedly addressed in the NSF study and previous research as the most important: credit transfer, deployment, and the receipt of benefits.

- **Credit transfer**—Student veterans want credit for military training and service. Few schools are familiar with how to evaluate transcripts, most are unwilling to offer more than physical education credit, and many have no clear policies and procedures in place for doing transcript evaluations.[22]

- **Deployment**—Schools frequently lack a clear process for student veterans who are departing from or returning to campus even though issues related to deployment is very important to the student veteran.[23]

- **Receipt of benefits**—The G.I. Bill benefits process is a complicated bureaucratic procedure often fraught with delays. The timely receipt of G.I. Bill benefits is understandably very important to student veterans.[24] Study participants also spoke of the importance of interim financial support and timely allocation of funds.

This picture is complicated by the fact that many veterans are reluctant to have their military service known. During interviews a number of veterans spoke of this reluctance and of the desire to blend in on campus. Not wanting to call attention to their military service and the fact that they are often much older and more experienced than other undergraduates was a common refrain among student veterans. This reluctance makes having institutional data systems in place that are capable of tracking and reporting on student veterans important.[25] Given the transition difficulties veterans are known to face when moving from the military to a college campus makes having better data tracking on this group increasingly important. Consequently, the desire to have more information on student veterans and on their academic performance and campus experience was frequently cited as a priority by institution staff and administrators.

In addition to having clear policies in place, it is important for institutions to understand the need for flexibility in the learning options offered to student veterans. Research suggests the importance of having diverse types of course options, including on-base education, weekend courses, online courses, veteran-only courses and evening classes.[26] As one veteran attending a community college shared, "One of the big things that I liked is that they offer classes on the military base here in the Navy, which is nice because most of us veterans are older than these kids going to school here. … that puts me in a classroom with people a little more my own age." The

> In addition to having clear policies in place, it is important for institutions to understand the need for flexibility in the learning options offered to student veterans.

availability of flexible course options, particularly those options that allow student veterans to complete core or required coursework in the most conducive settings is important to capture when assessing veteran friendliness.

Social and cultural factors: Helping veterans engage on campus

"If you are a sergeant you don't hang out with [a] brand new private. You hang out with the other sergeants and the guys immediately above you. And it is kind of the same thing here."

— Student veteran attending a public university

This third category relates to the way in which campuses do (or do not) tailor services specifically to veterans and other factors that influence the culture and climate on campus for this student group. A major factor within this category is assisting veterans successfully transition to campus.[27] In many cases student veterans have not attended school in several years and simply put, the college environment differs significantly from the structures and norms of the military. For this reason veteran-specific orientation sessions may make these transitions easier, mitigating feelings of frustration that arise from student veterans experiencing a disconnect between academic and military culture.[28] Our research shows that student veterans often feel like there is a lack of accountability at universities, and as a result have difficulty figuring out where to take complaints or concerns due to an unclear chain of command.[29] Student veterans say they become frustrated when they do not know who to hold accountable or who to speak to when they experience an issue. One suggestion to address this concern is to focus on deliberate interaction between the campus and student veterans such as panel discussions or brown bag opportunities.[30] Encouraging thoughtful engagement through substantive discussions with faculty, the provision of ongoing feedback or mentoring opportunities are also important for this student group.[31]

Indeed, opportunities for interaction with and receiving support from other student veterans are priorities for this group.[32]

"It was really nice to be able to talk to other veterans that maybe know what it is like to also be a student veteran. Because while I did find that going to college generally as far as the coursework seemed easier, the social life seemed more difficult because you don't have anyone to talk to or hang out with. … you

don't have anything in common with people who are 18, 19, 20, 21 years old
who pretty much haven't been anywhere or done anything. So the social aspect
seemed more difficult than the academic aspect."

— Student veteran attending comprehensive master's-degree-granting institution

The presence of a student veteran organization, or SVO, is one way to foster student veteran engagement with other veterans and the institution.[33] A number of students interviewed who attend schools that did not have an SVO said that they would welcome the opportunity to engage with other veterans. Yet other students said that engaging on campus in student groups was not a priority, given their responsibilities outside of school. Student veterans at schools that did have SVOs were usually familiar with the presence of the organization—some held positions in the organizations, and several noted that being a part of the SVO and the social interaction it provided was very important to the quality of their experience at the institution. In addition, some form of an on-campus military presence such as the Reserve Officers' Training Corps can also be important in promoting a more welcoming and supportive environment for veterans by making them feel they don't need to hide their veteran status.[34]

EEVI: The Environmental Evaluation for Veterans Index

The findings highlighted in this paper were aggregated, reviewed, and carefully analyzed to identify general thematic areas that institutions should address in creating better campus environments for veterans and include specific institutional policies, programs, and resources that are critical to their retention and academic achievement. The themes were then translated into measurable items, such as if the institution has a veterans affairs office, a veterans mentoring program, or awards credit for military experience. These measures then can be used to assess the environments individual institutions have created for student veterans and have that information included in the Environmental Evaluation for Veterans Index, or EEVI.

The EEVI acknowledges the fact that veterans face unique challenges when transitioning out of the military, entering school, and persisting to earn a degree. Their challenges are unlike the issues encountered by traditional college-age students. Student veterans' experiences in the military, their transition from a highly structured environment to a nonstructured environment, and their status as returning students who often lack preparation or practice in using academic skills can present difficulties that need additional forms of institutional support.[35] The specific needs of student veterans can be evaluated based on whether institutions have implemented solutions and structures within the three categories of the EEVI: personnel and services, institutional structures, and social and cultural factors. Each overarching category contains a range of subcategories and specific items used to evaluate a school's ability to assist student veterans:

- **Personnel and services**—includes 24 measures that capture the extent to which an institution has the resources in place to meet the needs of student veterans, collaborations with offices on and off campus that serve veterans, and staff knowledgeable about the unique experiences of student veterans.

- **Institutional structures**—includes 34 measures that assess the extent to which the institution has developed campus policies and procedures related to administering veterans' information, benefits, and services. Particular attention is given

to financial aid and G.I. Bill processing, redeployment policies, transfer-credit evaluation, and flexible course-enrollment options.

- **Social and cultural support**— includes 15 measures that aim to assess institutional attitudes, values, and behaviors in regards to student veterans. These measures account for the availability of veteran-specific support structures and the quality of interactions between veterans, faculty, and fellow students.

The EEVI has several strengths that make it an instrument that can and should be widely implemented to assess the environments institutions are creating for student veterans:

- The EEVI is a common benchmark that is easy for students, the federal government, granting agencies, and the military to understand.

- The EEVI is flexible and can be applied to any type of institution, allowing comparisons across multiple dimensions with easy identification of institutional strengths and weaknesses.

- The EEVI offers another way to assess the environment offered by for-profit institutions, addressing the concerns of the government and students by providing specific guidance on ways for-profits can improve their services for returning veterans.

TABLE 1
The Environment Evaluation for Veterans Index

Personnel and services	
Veteran's center	
Institution has a veteran's office	☐
There is an institutional point person for dealing with student veterans	☐
Collaboration	
Institution works with the Department of Veterans Affairs	☐
Institution works with the state	☐
Institution works with healthcare providers	☐
Institution works with other schools	☐
Institution works with local employers and/or career networks	☐
Trainings for faculty on student veterans issues and concerns are available	☐
Workshops and programs for the student affairs professionals on common veterans issues and concerns available	☐
Community partnerships for professional opportunities (internships, co-ops, etc.) are available	☐
Trainings for staff and student affairs professionals on how to improve services for students are available	☐
There is a forum or committee of professionals from across campus to discuss student veterans issues and concerns*	☐
Staff knowledgeable about student veterans needs and concerns are available in:	
Career services	☐
Tutoring and academic support	☐
Disability services	☐
Counseling and psychological services	☐
Financial aid office	☐
Registrar's office	☐
Transfer credit evaluation	☐
Benefits certification	☐

Health services	☐
Campus recreation	☐
Admissions	☐

Social and cultural support

Institution has veteran's student organization	☐
There is an orientation or transition assistance program for student veterans	☐
There is a physical space for student veterans to meet and congregate	☐
The institution conducts assessments of culture and climate for student veterans	☐
School solicits veteran feedback on how to improve services	☐
There are programs, groups, and activities which promote interaction between veterans and students who are civilians	☐
Existence of a veterans mentoring program	☐
There are structured opportunities for networking with members of the campus community	☐
Institution offers structured opportunities for leadership development	☐
There are re-orientation programs and services for veterans deployed returning from duty	☐
There are programs and initiatives in place to support student veterans who have families	☐
There are institutional events that celebrate student veterans	☐
There are veteran-specific institutional websites, news letters, and/or publications	☐
There is a student veteran list serv	☐
Institution provides opportunities for interfacing with ROTC or other military affiliated programs	☐
Institution offers a veterans support group	☐

Institutional structures

Institutional credentials

Institution is accredited (by reputable accrediting body)	☐
Institution has Servicemembers Opportunity College (SOC) status	☐

Financial aid

Institution automatically credits qualifying student veteran accounts with GI Bill benefits regardless of payment from VA	☐

Institution has provisions in place to help students who experience a delay in benefits receipt from the VA ☐

If tuition is more than GI Benefits, the institution: ☐

Is a Yellow Ribbon participant ☐

Has veteran-specific scholarships available ☐

Has veteran-specific institutional aid/grants available (books, equipment, funding, etc.) ☐

Systems

Institution has a way to identify veterans in their student data warehouse ☐

Institution tracks and reports on veteran students as a specific category in institutional research ☐

Students can indicate veteran status on application for admissions ☐

There are multiple pathways and opportunities for veterans to identify their status on institutional forms ☐

There are specific admissions materials for veterans and marketing to military communities ☐

Institution has a recruiting and marketing plan specific to student veterans or the military ☐

There are institutional policies that preference or otherwise acknowledge veterans in admissions and registration (e.g. admitted as adult or transfer students, priority registration) ☐

Flex options

Courses are offered on military bases ☐

Courses are offered online ☐

Courses are offered in the evenings or on weekends ☐

Core courses in major are offered through flexible options (e.g. online, evenings and weekends, on military bases) ☐

Institution offers multiple orientation options (e.g. resources online, different sessions) ☐

Institution offers refresher courses (e.g. on study skills, the way college works) ☐

Institution offers remedial coursework and/or has developed a partnership with another school for the provision of remedial coursework ☐

Student services and administrative offices have evening and/or weekend hours ☐

Materials for accessing institutional resources (e.g. disability services, tutoring) are available in multiple formats (e.g. online, in brochure, over the phone) ☐

Institution has a clear and flexible policy for students being deployed and returning (e.g. faculty work with the students, students can remotely complete some courses) ☐

Institution has a clear and flexible policy for tuition refunds when students are deployed (e.g. some or all tuition can be refunded to the student, depending on whether the student chooses to remotely complete coursework)	☐
Institution will expunge course records for students being deployed mid-semester	☐

Credits

Institution has a policy for the evaluation of military transcripts	☐
Institution considers American Council on Education credit guidelines in awarding credit for experience and/or training	☐
Credits are awarded for military experience	☐
Credits are awarded for military training	☐
Institution has a policy in place for the evaluation of DANTES/CLEPS credits	☐
Student veteran military transcripts are regularly awarded more than elective credit	☐
Institution clearly communicates transfer credit and military transcript evaluation process to prospective students	☐

Using the EEVI

The EEVI matrix is straightforward and easy to use. For each item in the three categories, the question is answered with either a "Yes" or a "No" based on the presence or absence of items at a specific institution. Once all items within a category are answered, the number of "Yes" responses are counted and divided by the total number of possible "Yes" responses for the category to generate a percentage of veteran friendliness for the category. Within the social and cultural support category, for example, eight "Yes" answers would lead to an overall veteran friendliness rating of 50 percent.

FIGURE 2

Assessing campus social and cultural support structures using the EEVI

Social and cultural support	
Institution has a veteran's student organization	Yes
There is an orientation or transition assistance program for student veterans	Yes
There is a physical space for student veterans to meet and congregate	Yes
The institution conducts assessments of culture and climate for student veterans	Yes
There are programs, groups, and activities which promote interaction between veterans and student who are civilians	No
Existence of a veterans mentoring program	No
There are structured opportunities for networking with members of the campus community	No
Institution offers structured opportunities for leadership development	No
There are re-orientation programs and services for vets deployed returning from duty	No
There are programs and initiatives in place to support student veterans who have families	No
There are institutional events that celebrate student veterans	Yes
There are veteran-specific institutional websites, news letters, and/or publications	No
Institution provides opportunities for interfacing with ROTC or other military affiliated programs	No
Institution offers a veterans support group	Yes
Count of veteran friendly	8
Percentage veteran friendly	50%

Note: Not Applicable (N/A) is a response option for three items on the matrix. These three items relate to financial accommodations for veterans that are only relevant in instances where a school's tuition is greater than the financial support provided by the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.

Once all the items on the spreadsheet are answered, the responses to the individual dimensions of the index can be used to calculate an overall percentage. There are several potential ways to calculate an overall institutional rating. For instance, in addition to offering their scores across the three dimensions, these scores can be averaged. A rating of 70 percent in personnel and services, 40 percent in institutional structures, and 50 percent in social and cultural support would result in an average veteran-friendliness rating of approximately 53 percent. Another alternative would be weighting dimensions in the matrix, having them count in more substantial ways to an overall rating than others. This may be a particularly effective strategy for nonresidential campuses, community colleges, and for-profit institutions, which may see offering substantial opportunities for social and cultural support outside of their mission and, as such, weigh it less heavily than the other dimensions in their self-assessment.

The EEVI can be used by institutions, students, and policymakers to promote better educational outcomes for student veterans. Institutions should use the EEVI as they assess and benchmark their progress in improving their campus environments for returning veterans. The EEVI allows institutions to identify where they are doing well, as well as pinpoint areas for improvement. It allows them to set concrete goals, develop strategic plans to meet those goals, and determine levels of progress made. Additionally, the consistency and clarity of this instrument allows for straightforward comparison and benchmarking with peer institutions.

We also recommend that institutions make their responses to the EEVI, as well as their scores on all three dimensions, widely available to veterans as a way to understand the services and support offered at the institution. Placing responses to EEVI items and subcategory scores prominently on institutional websites, including them in outreach materials, and reporting them to college guides will provide students with a useful resource by which they can understand the policies, services, and programs each institution offers to meet the needs of veterans.

Finally, although the EEVI is grounded primarily in institutional assessment, we suggest the EEVI can be useful to the Department of Education, Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and other federal agencies and granting organizations seeking to invest funding in veterans education. The EEVI can inform these organizations of the policies and practices institutions have put in place to foster student veteran success. Institutions can be asked to report their EEVI scores when they apply for funding, addressing areas of weakness and indicating plans for improvement.

Conclusion

EEVI's potential for policy and practice

National agencies have consistently identified student veteran success as a critical policy issue at both the state and federal levels. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities specifically identified veterans' education as one of the top 10 policy issues facing states in 2012 and beyond.[36] Scholars have repeatedly called attention to the transitional issues veterans face as they leave the military and enter institutions of higher education. Confusing bureaucratic processes, administrators who lack information about the population and veterans' benefits, contentious interactions with peers and faculty, and a lack of social support and academic services can put these students at increased risk for academic difficulty and dropping out.

The EEVI offers a new and consistent way to evaluate systems, policies, and support structures that have been identified in our work and the research of others as critical to facilitating a successful transition from combat to the classroom. The items included on the EEVI have been repeatedly noted by researchers and policymakers as important to promoting the success of veterans transitioning into college classrooms and increasing their likelihood of obtaining a degree. While the EEVI does not allow an institution to assess student outcomes directly, it provides them with a tool to determine their ability to meet the needs of student veterans. Likewise, the EEVI provides policymakers and student veterans with a metric to understand what policies and support structures are most likely to encourage college success and completion. Future research to establish specific empirical links between the EEVI items and student veteran outcomes using larger national datasets would contribute greatly to this discourse moving forward.

Policy recommendations

With little information out there about the ability of colleges to serve the needs of returning veterans, the EEVI could prove to be an important tool. Institutions can use the EEVI to evaluate their own capacity to serve veterans, policymakers can use it to assess the quality of the programs that receive federal funding to serve veterans, and student veterans can use it to make more informed decisions on how and where to use their G.I. benefits.

To make the most of the EEVI and improve the quality of the educational services offered to veterans, we make the following recommendations:

- **Colleges and universities should use the EEVI to evaluate their capacity to serve veterans.** Federal investigations are revealing that many colleges are not meeting the needs of the student veteran population. Colleges and universities should use the EEVI as a self-evaluation tool to gauge their capacity to meet the needs of veterans. The results of this evaluation can be used in conjunction with the ACE "Veteran-Friendly Toolkit" to identify the steps a college must take to begin serving veterans efficiently and begin to make changes where needed.

- **Agencies that collect and publicize college information should document and disseminate institutions' EEVI item responses.** Student veterans would benefit greatly from easy access to information about the specific campus resources and policies that target and support returning veterans. Scores and item responses to the EEVI can be included on websites like the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's College Navigator, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement for Teaching's Institution Lookup, and Mycollegeguide.com, as well as popular college guides like *The Fiske Guide to Colleges* and *The College Handbook*. Further, college rankings published by organizations like *US News & World Report* and The Princeton Review could also include EEVI data in their assessments of institutions, generating lists of schools best prepared to serve veterans.

- **Proposed legislation to reform military and veteran education should incorporate the EEVI.** Sens. Jim Webb (D-VA) and Patty Murray (D-WA) both recently introduced legislation that would ensure better oversight of programs that receive federal military education benefits as well as better information for prospective students. These proposed bills should include provisions requiring colleges and universities, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Education

Department to make EEVI results available. In this way, student veterans would be able to quickly assess whether a university offers the services and supports they need in order to be successful.

- **Congress should require the Departments of Education and Veterans Affairs to collect and publicize data on the academic and employment outcomes that veterans achieve disaggregated by institution attended.** As discussed earlier in this report, the EEVI would be greatly strengthened if it could be correlated to data on the academic and employment outcomes that student veterans achieve. In addition, access to such outcome-based data would help policymakers distinguish between schools that are failing to serve veterans well because they do not cater to their needs and schools that simply do not serve any students well—including veterans. Congress should direct the Department of Education to begin collecting data from colleges on veterans' outcomes through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

As the veteran population pursuing higher education continues to grow, it is critical to promote efforts that allow institutions to create the best environments possible, ones that effectively encourage and promote veterans' success in higher education. The spirit of the G.I. Bill in all its iterations has always been one that simultaneously rewards veterans for their service and facilitates their successful transition into civilian life.[37] If we refuse to address the barriers veterans face in achieving success and academic attainment, we will fail to fulfill this commitment to America's servicemen and women.

Further, this growing student veteran population has far-reaching economic implications for the nation. Between 2009 and 2011 the Department of Veterans Affairs dispersed more than $4 billion in G.I. Bill-funded tuition and fees.[38] For-profit institutions alone received $640 million in tuition and fees from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and an additional $200 million from the Department of Defense to support students in the active military.[39] The failure of such a significant investment to yield positive educational outcomes for veterans is a waste of increasingly limited federal resources. The EEVI is an assessment strategy, which has the potential to mitigate some of these negative outcomes and promote positive ones through the evaluation and subsequent improvement of institutional environments that are supportive and meet the needs of student veterans.

If we refuse to address the barriers veterans face in achieving success and academic attainment, we will fail to fulfill this commitment to America's servicemen and women.

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