

College Is for Veterans, Too

DOUGLAS HERRMANN, DOUGLAS RAYBECK, and ROLAND WILSON. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Washington: Nov 21, 2008. Vol. 55, Iss. 13; pg. A.99

Last summer Congress passed the new GI Bill, and the president signed it into law. Americans can take great pride in such a program, one that helps veterans attend college after they return home. However, few are aware that many of those veterans will also encounter a variety of nonfinancial problems that require substantial adjustment as they make the transition from military to college life.

Since the last great wave of veterans attended college, following the Vietnam War, there have been many changes in college administrative procedures, educational requirements, and American culture. As a result, college officials and professors are often unprepared to help new veterans cope with problems concerning financial aid, transfer credits, educational programs, health care, and classroom dynamics. Colleges need to adopt new administrative and educational practices to help veterans obtain the college education they have earned.

While veterans, like all students, attend lectures, complete assignments, write term papers, and take exams, they face some special challenges. On some campuses, for instance, veterans will find that, in their first year, it can take a while -- typically about three months -- for the Veterans Administration to deliver their GI Bill funds. Colleges should not require veterans to pay for their tuition and fees until the GI Bill check arrives, but should instead provide veterans with financial support for the living expenses for themselves and their families, or identify charities that could provide such support. At the very least, colleges should find ways to help veterans obtain loans for the cost of living. For example, colleges could develop institutional loans, arrange for college cost-of-living loans with local banks, and possibly lobby for federal loans with low fixed-interest rates.

A common frustration for student veterans is the denial of academic credit for military training and experience that correspond to the content of their college courses. After World War II, the American Council on Education established a system to transfer military credits to college records, and decisions about what and how many credits ought to be granted have been left to the wisdom of academic-affairs offices. Unfortunately, staff members in those offices have often not been trained in how to award transfer credits and, as a result, mistakenly reject some requests. Proper training on awarding military credits fairly and efficiently should be encouraged so that veterans aren't wrongfully deprived of credits they have earned. Repeating course work forces them to take more courses than necessary and stay in college longer to complete their degrees (which, of course, means more loans).

Another problem for veterans is that many college programs fail to meet, or even acknowledge, their personal and academic needs. For example, orientation programs deal with the concerns of traditional students, but not those of many veterans -- most of whom are older and many of whom are married. Further, veterans often possess a specialty acquired in the military that they would like to build upon through additional course work in a specific subject, like electronic communication or law enforcement. Offering them the flexibility of online or evening courses might prove helpful. Internships and work-study programs that build on the veterans' experience and knowledge could also save them time, money, and potentially years of extra study.

Health services for both physical and mental illnesses are another area of concern for returning veterans. College health services are often unprepared to help veterans with emergency care for disabilities, illnesses, and disorders they acquired in the military. Some of those disabilities may not emerge until a veteran is in college; for example, many of today's veterans will eventually experience post-traumatic stress disorders, a condition that many college health services are not prepared to diagnose, treat, or refer for appropriate treatment. Campus health services should, in conjunction with VA medical centers, help provide veterans with the care they need.

Finally, a word about classroom and campus climate. Some professors make pejorative statements about the military during lectures, making veterans feel uncomfortable and setting them further apart from their classmates. Of course, most professors aren't trying to make veterans feel uncomfortable -- their objective is

usually to voice disagreement with government policy or to stir up discussion in class -- but they should be mindful of the negative effects on veterans, and lead more-balanced discussions of the military and its role in society. Further, students who vilify or harass veterans should be disciplined firmly, as they would for harassing any other student (veterans are occasionally singled out for verbal attacks on some campuses). To help veterans integrate and other students to get to know them, colleges could sponsor social gatherings, or veterans could speak to various campus organizations and student groups about what they learned in the military and their experiences abroad.

Offering meaningful assistance to returning veterans may be as simple as making the dean of students' office aware of veterans' concerns and promoting their integration with other students. And a major new effort announced this week by the American Council on Education -- which will, among other things, reward higher-education institutions that have model programs for veterans and develop a Web site that gives veterans information about educational benefits and opportunities -- should play an important role in helping service members attend and succeed in college.

There is a widespread lack of knowledge about the unique needs of veterans in higher education and the wider society, and too few veterans obtain a college degree. College administrators and professors must update programs and services to better accommodate and support the large number of veterans returning to campus. The vast majority of America's educators want as many veterans as possible to complete a college education, so let's take the necessary steps required to help them reach their well-deserved goal.

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