

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Ecosystems of Support for Student Veterans



College Promise and Educational Testing Service (ETS) partnered to lead five design teams - Promise experts from the research, practitioner, and finance communities - to coauthor reports under the theme, "Ecosystems of Support for Five College Promise Populations." Beth Morgan of Columbia University, Sandra Kurtinitis of Community College of Baltimore County, Barbara Illowsky of De Anza College, and Rosye Cloud of College Promise led the Student Veteran team, whose report has been excerpted for this brief.

Each year, approximately 200,000 service members transition out of the military and into their communities, a majority opting to take advantage of the VA education benefits and to attend college [1]. In 2018, there were 893,725 students receiving VA education benefits — a decrease of 17% from 2014 [2]. Like civilian adult students, student veterans are usually 25 years or older when they start college and may be the head of the household, married with dependents, and/or working full-time. They are also more likely to attend community college or a for-profit institution than a nonprofit, 4-year institution.

Although they share similar obstacles as civilian adult students, student veterans have the added burden of transitioning back into civilian society, a task for which workshops and courses may not adequately prepare them. Another issue is access and affordability: not all veterans are eligible for GI benefits (due to their time served and/or discharge details) and thus must pay for their education themselves. Even those who are eligible can only utilize GI Bill and VA benefits 10 months out of the year. And once those benefits run out, over half of these student veterans are unable to finish their degrees [3]. Sadly, less than half of veterans take advantage of the GI Bill, recently reauthorized and extended to enable more time for veterans to complete a college degree or certificate.

Once inside an institution, student veterans may have difficulty finding counselors trained to align their educational plans with VA benefits requirements and career centers to translate military experience into resumes and job interview responses. In

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DATA PROFILE FOR STUDENT VETERANS

Population: In 2018, 893,725 veterans received education benefits, including the GI Bill, making up 4% of the postsecondary student population across the country.

School Schedules: To balance schoolwork with work and family responsibilities, over 60% of student veterans take classes online, at night or on weekends, with 90% taking alternative coursework online

Enrollment: 54% of student veterans are in associate degree or certificate programs, and 44% are in bachelor's degree programs. A majority of student veterans are enrolled in community colleges (38%) and for-profit institutions (23%), with only 19% attending public 4-year colleges and 10% in private 4-year institutions.

Demographics: The average veteran is 25 years old when starting a degree and is likely to be a head of household (44% of student veterans are married, 52% have dependents), and 42% of student veterans work full time while in school.

Postsecondary Completion: Of student veterans utilizing the GI Bill benefits between 2002 and 2013, 48% completed their degree.

In addition, student veterans must contend with physical and mental illnesses they acquired during active duty service.

Promise programs can assist by making veterans eligible for their programs and including them in program design. Doing so would expand the number of veterans who could access higher education by providing financial aid to those ineligible for the GI Bill and allow those eligible for the GI Bill to utilize college promise funds beforehand, thus preventing their aid from running out before they can complete their program. However, the respective institutions student veterans attend must step in to help as well. Institutions can establish veteran resource centers to serve as one-stop shops for veteran-related resources and form partnerships with Veteran Affairs and community-based health care providers and emergency services to provide more tailored services for this population. They can also provide support services for housing, child care, transportation, and health care, as well as establish peer support programs and mentorships. This brief examines the current academic and social needs of student veterans in higher education and makes recommendations of reforms that colleges and universities can implement to build an ecosystem of support for student veterans on campus.

College Promise Framework for Supporting Student Veterans

Student veterans across the country face numerous barriers and challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education. Many of these barriers and challenges are similar to the barriers faced by many of today's college students despite, and in some cases because of, the benefits student veterans are provided to assist with access to higher education. While many of these barriers are a result of the lack of institutional support for student veterans within colleges and

Student Insight: Samantha Estes

Samantha Estes dreamed of becoming a doctor as a child, but her family could not afford it. Thus, she enlisted in the US Army to get hands-on experience as a medic. When she began the process to access her GI Bill benefits, she received only 60% of the GI Bill financial award. It was only after she had switched from active duty to reserves upon becoming pregnant to retain custody of her child that she learned her decision would impact her educational benefits in the future.

Undeterred, Estes tried to obtain a college loan and work in cosmetology to support her family. However, as the GI Bill took effect during her time in cosmetology school, it expired too early. Because she had to take three jobs to pay for her education, Estes was ultimately able to design and participate in the on-campus veterans' program at Xavier University.

She stressed the important role teachers, community volunteers, and accommodations played in helping her graduate: "I went to my teachers, introduced myself, and asked: 'What can I do to negotiate the guidelines?' Nine out of 10, the Xavier professors would work with me." She also stated that institutions should review what individual students need, rather than using a "one size fits all" approach, as well as eliminate policies that take away resources and offer child care.

As a successful graduate of Xavier, Estes maintains her childhood dream of becoming a doctor, currently works as an emergency medical technician, and plans to attend medical school in the near future.

universities themselves, many are also related to the unique challenges the student veteran population faces in society when balancing a return to civilian life with academic and personal responsibilities. The four key categories of challenges facing student veterans are: 1) access and affordability, 2) transition, 3) academic advising and career counseling, and 4) unmet health care needs.

To overcome the numerous challenges facing student veterans, 2- and 4-year institutions are uniquely situated to make college more accessible and affordable for student veterans, to assist with resources for the additional costs associated with attendance, to support veterans through the transition to civilian life and higher education, and to help students succeed academically throughout their academic careers.

Student Supports for Veteran Promise Students

Include Veterans in College Promise Program Design: To ensure that a Promise program is available to student veterans, institutional leaders need to pay close attention to eligibility requirements. As student veterans are often older than their peers at school and are highly likely to be married, have children, or work full- or part-time to support their households, communities and schools should ensure that Promise scholarships are made available to students regardless of their age, graduation year, or the number of credits they are able to enroll in per semester.

Provide Support Services to Lessen Additional Costs of College Attendance: Student veterans benefit from targeted assistance when it comes to providing housing, childcare, transportation, and health care. As nontraditional students who are more likely to seek housing that can fit a family, student veterans often feel that a traditional dormitory environment does not fit their needs [4]. However, campus-provided housing (with certain accommodations) could be more beneficial for student veterans. Institutions can work with student veterans to apply GI Bill housing benefits and provide a community-based living situation to support student veterans and their families through their transition and academic career.

Build Partnerships to Streamline Mental Health and Health Care Services on Campus for Student Veterans: Institutional steps toward reshaping on-campus health care and mental health care are an important student service to better serve student veterans. Overall, 2- and 4-year colleges should seek opportunities to formalize partnerships between the campus, the VA, and community-based health care providers and emergency services to ensure that student veterans have easily accessible health care and mental health services. An on-campus health care presence - including mental health counseling - helps to lower the barriers that many student veterans cite as a challenge to utilizing VA health care, including wait times, difficulty scheduling appointments around their classes, and geographic distance to the VA [5].

Establish a Campus Veteran Resource Center: The establishment of a VRC provides a one-stop-shop for resources to help student veterans excel in all areas of higher education and to find support to overcome barriers impacting student veterans in financial aid, registration, admissions, advising, counseling, family support, housing, and jobs. As much as possible, VRCs should be physical spaces located on campus to provide student veterans with a space to congregate with students who share similar experiences and faculty/staff who understand their backgrounds. VRCs are essential for providing student veterans with spaces and dedicated faculty to assist them with transition and academic issues, including obtaining benefits and financial aid, receiving advice and guidance on academic and career paths, and accessing mental health services or other community resources for student veterans [6]. One of the key benefits of a VRC on campus is the consolidation of resources around student veteran benefits and academic/transition needs among knowledgeable and dedicated staff and faculty.

Provide Peer Support Programs for Student Veterans: The implementation of peer support programs can provide a network of other student veterans who can assist with the transition to higher education. By connecting student veterans to a community of other veterans who have navigated similar experiences at the institution, student veteran peer programs “harness strengths inherent to the military ethos, including camaraderie, the buddy system, structure, and a sense of belonging” [7].

Increase Capacity to Support Academic and Career Advising for Student Veterans: Academic and career counselors need to understand how to translate military experience to college courses and credits and how to help organize coursework to help student veterans efficiently use their benefits within the 36-month window for the GI Bill. While institutions may be unable to hire additional academic advisors specifically dedicated for student veterans, steps can be taken at an institutional level to train existing college staff to understand the nuances of education plans for student veterans and their benefits.

Train Administrators and Staff to Mitigate Integration Gaps between Government Services for Student Veterans: Special attention must be given to ensuring that administrators and staff are able to help students facilitate navigating their government benefits. Tuition assistance programs are managed by the individual service branches, and there is often little coordination of the transfer of credits between institutions that use tuition assistance and those that use the GI Bill. This division of responsibility for programs assisting service members and veterans is also considerably complicated for campus faculty and staff when it comes to academic advising and the coordination of a student’s educational plan.

This policy brief is part of a five-part series by College Promise and ETS on "Depicting the Ecosystems of Support and Financial Sustainability for Five College Promise Populations."

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Read the full report:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ets2.12299>

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Promise Program Implementation and Maintenance

When it comes to the implementation and continued maintenance of programs and services to support student veterans' academic success, it is important to:

- Establish administrative leadership and support for student veterans on campus;
- Audit campus and community services and student needs;
- Build partnerships among federal benefit providers, campus resources and community organizations to streamline services for student veterans; and
- Develop metrics to track utilization and results to improve services continuously.

Financial Implications

The funding model and design of each Promise program is largely dependent on the amount of funding available, the number of students the program intends to serve, and the number of semesters covered. The vast majority of Promise programs award funding after a student has exhausted available financial aid from the federal government, the state, or the college/university—a last-dollar funding model. The ideal form of Promise funding, particularly for student veterans, would be a first-dollar model, which awards students the full amount of tuition and fees, without consideration of other funds or grants that the student is eligible to receive. In this way, student veterans would still be able to apply for and utilize Pell Grants or other forms of federal student aid to assist with the additional costs associated with college attendance, including housing, childcare, textbooks, or food. At the same time, this would allow student veterans to delay using their GI Bill funding until they transfer to a 4-year college or university, making it possible for many student veterans to afford to continue their education or to save these benefits for their dependents.

If funding is not available to provide Promise scholarships on a first-dollar basis, a last-dollar plus model would still award scholarships to eligible students after any financial aid they receive from the federal, state, or institutional level, but would offer additional financial assistance, such as a stipend for course materials or transportation. In this way, institutions could assist student veterans with the ever-increasing costs of college attendance and make college more attainable without the unmanageable financial burden.

Conclusion

As they reintegrate into civilian life and enter institutions of higher education, student veterans face numerous barriers and challenges to their academic success, while also bringing significant assets, characteristics, and traits that can bolster their potential academic success and contribute a critical voice to the academic community. Colleges and universities must understand where to apply institutional resources to enhance and accelerate student veterans' potential for academic, social, and career success.

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

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However, additional research is needed to address the difficulties veterans face in making the decision to transition out of the military and into higher education, particularly when it comes to the navigation of benefits, educational options, and finding a right-fit, high-quality institution. Additionally, deeper research could be done to improve career advising and training in higher education to support student veterans in pursuing meaningful and gainful careers after they graduate. Institutions of higher education must take a step back to think about the entire ecosystem of support necessary to support student veterans as they move from the military, make the decision to pursue a quality higher education, and eventually enter the workforce.

Although many colleges and universities may lack the support networks and services necessary to help student veterans overcome barriers, they are well-suited to create such services through community partnerships, endowments, a focus on well trained and knowledgeable veteran support faculty on campuses, and intentional attempts to lower the financial burden of college attendance. College Promise aims to achieve some of the aforementioned goals by lowering or eliminating tuition and fees at institutions of higher education and advocating for systems of support that raise the potential for academic and personal success. Promise programs are a 21st century solution for amending a 17th century system of higher education that is not well suited toward the needs of many of today's Americans and especially its veterans. Our country's veterans deserve the opportunity to pursue the American dream without taking on immense financial debt and personal hardship, and Promise programs are the way forward.

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