

From Combat to Classroom— Understanding the Unique Educational Needs of Military and Veteran Students

At the age of 17, Michael Vera joined the Marines to learn self-discipline and responsibility. He was serving as an administrative support specialist at the Pentagon on the morning of the September 11th terrorist attacks and was given the leadership award for his life-saving heroism.

Vera retired as a sergeant from the military and went to work for the State Department when he decided he wanted to pursue a career in engineering. Vera, now married and in his late twenties, enrolled at DeVry University's Arlington, Virginia campus as an electronic engineering major.

Michael Vera is not unlike many other military and veteran students who differ from the traditional college freshman in several ways:

- **Age.** The military or veteran student is typically older than the 18-year-old college freshman.
- **Life Experience.** Students who have served in the military, or are still serving, have faced profound life experiences that provide new perspectives and affect the way they view their life's goals.
- **Life Balance.** Because of their age and experience, military and veteran students are often struggling to balance work, family, and education.
- **Career Orientation.** Military and veteran students' maturity and experience lead them to a preference for a degree program that will launch their career, as opposed to a traditional degree-oriented curriculum.





History Repeats Itself—

New GI Bill Gets Back to Basics

On June 22, 1944, one of the most critical pieces of legislation of the twentieth century was signed into law, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, otherwise known as the GI Bill. Prior to this date, military had no help in readjusting to society, financing education, or finding postwar work. The GI Bill allowed servicemen and women to receive unemployment compensation, loans for buying homes and starting businesses, as well as educational funding after returning home from the war. Nearly 51 percent of World War II veterans used these benefits, with approximately eight million of the 16 million veterans attending school. Of these eight million, 2.2 million attended traditional four-year colleges and universities, while the overwhelming majority, 5.8 million used it for vocational and career colleges, as well as apprenticeships.

Since then, many assistance and benefit acts have been passed to increase funding for military and veterans, extending benefits to include those who served in times of war and peace. However, these newer bills have not adhered to the intent of the original GI Bill that provided equal benefits among all servicemen and women.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 has returned the GI Bill to its original intent, revolutionizing the benefits

Armed Services, Selected Reserves, and National Guard members receive by ensuring equal benefits to all, as long as they have fulfilled Active Duty service since September 11, 2001. "Veterans say it is the first update that upholds the spirit of the original 1944 act."¹

Benefits may be applied toward graduate and undergraduate training, vocational and technical training, tutorial assistance, licensing and certificate tests, on-the-job training, apprenticeship training, flight training, correspondence courses, preparatory courses, and national exams.

Enrollment in colleges and universities nationwide will increase as military and veterans seek higher education with the greatly improved educational funding. Educational benefits of the 2008 GI Bill include a percentage payment of tuition fees not exceeding full in-state tuition for public schools, a monthly housing allowance, a yearly books and supplies stipend, and may include a relocation payment for those moving from rural areas. The latest GI Bill has gone the farthest in integrating education, professionalism, and family—the three phases of life critical to the serviceman and woman's success in the pursuit of higher education.

¹Loschert, Kristen. "A GI Bill for the 21st Century." The Link (2008). CCA: Career College Association. 8 Jan. 2009

Many military and veteran students opt for "career colleges" that focus on real-world applications, flexible delivery methods, and empathy for the military experience and its effects on the learning process.

HOW EDUCATION PROVIDERS HELP MILITARY AND VETERAN STUDENTS SUCCEED

While many colleges and universities offer convenient and flexible online courses, not all cater to the needs, or work well with, military and veteran students. Educational institutions search for answers on how to become military friendly; however, creating an environment conducive to military and veteran learning may be more difficult than it sounds, particularly in a traditional four-year college setting. The truly military-friendly educational institution will address the comprehensive set of unique needs presented by the military and veteran student:

Diversified Base of Students

It's not hard to imagine that a military or veteran student entering college at an older age and with profound life experiences often feels isolated in a traditional setting, where the majority of the student body is comprised of 18–22 year-olds with limited life experience. A diversified student base, including students of varying ages and backgrounds will help military and veteran students adapt and reintegrate into higher education and civilian life. An educational environment with an ethnically, economically, and socially diverse student body allows military and veteran students to feel more comfortable and will help ensure follow-through and completion of their educational goals.

Degree Program and Certificate Options

"Military and veteran students adopt a pragmatic approach to their education," said Randy Plunkett, National Director of Military Affairs for DeVry University. "They want to be trained quickly, challenged academically, and acquire skills that will ensure immediate employment. A career college will attract military and veteran students due the college's ability to relate to their real-world goals." Specifically, a career college will typically offer:

- Smaller classroom sizes, providing more one-on-one time with a professor, similar to military experiences of working in small units.
- Real-world application learning with multiple degree and certificate program options. Degree and certificate programs give military and veterans credibility within the workforce by preparing them for in-demand professions and teaching them the necessary skills to succeed throughout their military career and beyond.

Flexibility for Life Balance

Sergeant Sherry Sullivan, a National Guard member, began earning her degree from DeVry University at the Columbus, Ohio campus in the fall of 2001. In 2004, Sullivan was placed on Active Duty status. In 2005, Sullivan began taking courses through DeVry University's online delivery and was able to continue her education without losing any credits. "I loved the online curriculum, discussion threads, and convenience," said Sullivan, as it offered her a way to communicate with other students around the U.S., and not lose any ground in her educational pursuits due to her military career.

Military students need flexibility in the event of a transfer or a call to Active Duty, just as veteran students with families and jobs require convenient locations and a variety of course offerings for degree completion.

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Networking Opportunities

The goal of higher education targeted to the military market should be to provide military and veteran students with the same level of excellence with which they have proudly served our nation. Support programs should be a part of the mix to enable these students to transition into the educational world and become immersed in the institution to help ensure their success.



Life balance is important to military and veteran students.

Many options exist for educational institutions to set up a support infrastructure for military and veteran students:

- **Veterans clubs.** DeVry University is establishing veterans clubs in 23 of its major metropolitan areas, to help veterans acclimate, not only to school but also to society and perhaps to their jobs. These clubs will also provide an opportunity for community engagement by serving as a liaison between military and veteran students and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- **Online clubs.** Another support program gaining popularity to help military and veteran students with varied interests and needs are online clubs. These clubs are particularly useful when military students are transferred and need to reestablish connections within their educational environment.
- **Staff support.** Faculty and staff can serve as channels of information and outreach coordinators for military and veteran students, and can prove to be particularly effective when the faculty members have military experience. Services provided by the educational staff should include:
 - GI Bill benefits explanation.
 - Scholarship and grant availability information and updates.

- Counsel for the military and veteran student as needed. Faculty and staff can play a key role in helping military and veteran students transition into the student and civilian life, as well as provide counsel if the military student is called back to Active Duty.
- **Published newsletters and articles.** Written communication helps military and veteran students understand the importance of education and the benefits they receive.

Extended Support for Families

Extending counseling and networking support provided for the servicemen and women to their families will further distinguish an educational institution's commitment to the military and veteran student. Support groups for spouses and children will help the families cope, and provide peace of mind for the military and veteran student so they can focus on their education.

Education providers with these family support programs will stand out as visionaries who understand the complexities of military and veteran students and what it takes to help them succeed in their educational pursuits.

Financial Aid/Tuition Assistance

While the procedure for securing financial aid varies by military units, all servicemen and women are entitled to some monetary benefits for higher education. Military personnel may be eligible to use the GI Bill through the “top-up” program that pays for tuition expenses beyond what the branch of service covers annually. Additional policies are outlined in the GI Bill, although full entitlements of tuition expenses per fiscal year are dependent on the institution attended.

Military and veterans can also qualify for different loan repayment programs, tuition assistance grants, and scholarships. For example:

- Active duty (and certain guard and reserve) personnel are offered a program that pays 100 percent of eligible tuition costs for college courses taken during off-duty hours, with an annual cap of \$4500.
- Most colleges and universities waive the application fee for eligible service members.
- Some colleges and universities offer military rates, grants, and/or scholarships for those who qualify.

DeVry University offers Veteran Appreciation Grants to give back part of the tuition assistance veterans lose when they leave the military, as well as the AMVETS Scholarships to 30 veterans and their families annually. More information on DeVry specific programs is available from our Admission Department or Financial Aid Department.*

Up-to-date information and technology are imperative to the military and veteran student ...

Financial Support for Families

As the husband of an Air Force member and a full-time dad, Michael Greehoe did not have the time or funds for higher education. With DeVry University’s military tuition pricing program for spouses, he was able to earn his bachelor’s degree in Technology Management (BSTM) with a Criminal Justice specialty in 2007 and is currently pursuing

a master’s degree in Network and Communications Management from DeVry University’s Keller Graduate School of Management.

The educational institution can supplement government-funded financial support for families. Federal scholarships and grants within military units, such as the Army Spouse Education Assistance Program or the Coast Guard Mutual Assistance Supplemental Education Grant, provide financial support for spouses and children of military and veterans seeking higher education. Some education institutions provide extra support, reducing costs of enrollment to facilitate higher learning among military and veteran families. DeVry University waives application fees and has special tuition rates for spouses of Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve members.

College Credit for Military Service

Receiving credit for knowledge gained while in the service gives military and veteran students a heightened sense of accomplishment when they learn that these experiences count towards helping them succeed in their educational pursuits. Unfortunately, not all colleges and universities are created equal when offering credit consideration for life experiences and military training. Educational institutions, including DeVry, consider military transcripts for credit towards degree programs. DeVry University offers military and veteran students the ability to transfer up to 92 credits of approved coursework including American Council on Education (ACE) approved military transcripts, into a bachelor’s degree program. Students at DeVry may also transfer College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and DSST examinations for credit based on individual requirements, as well as take

proficiency tests to elect out of a selection of required courses.

Current Technology

Keeping up with current information and technology is imperative to the military and veteran student because they have been trained on the most up-to-date technology during their service.

In addition to updated technology, an institution’s staff should also be current in the latest certification levels and recent industry developments. Faculty who are immersed in today’s workforce will have the advantage over traditional full-time professors in helping students to succeed in a dynamic environment.

ENSURING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR THE MILITARY AND VETERAN STUDENT

Military and veteran students often differ from the traditional college student in almost every way: they are older, have more life experience, are more career-oriented, and have additional and unique needs for peer and family support. Fortunately, there are military-friendly education and training providers that are poised to meet the needs of this specialized group of learners—identifying these schools will help to ensure military and veteran success in school and beyond.

Resources exist to help military, veterans, and human resource departments identify educational institutions with a military presence. One such organization is the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Consortium, whose mission is to aid servicemen and women in their pursuit of a college education, in part by identifying military-friendly institutions. More information is available on the SOC website: www.soc.aascu.org.

*www.devry.edu/admissions/military-tuition-rates.jsp



About the Author

Dr. Randy Plunkett is the National Director of Military Affairs at DeVry University. Throughout his 20-plus years in the Air Force, Dr. Plunkett used Tuition Assistance, the Vietnam Era GI Bill, and scholarships in his quest to obtain college and graduate education. Prior to retiring from the Air Force in 2004 as a Senior Master Sergeant (E-8), he earned a Doctorate of Education in Educational Innovation and Leadership from Wilmington University in Newark, Delaware.

Dr. Plunkett’s research interest is military voluntary education history, and he is currently writing a book on the history of the U.S. Armed Forces Institute (USAFI).