

VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STATE AND NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE MILITARY SERVICE INITIATIVE
VETERAN HIGHER EDUCATION TASK FORCE



GEORGE W. BUSH
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About the George W. Bush Institute

Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the George W. Bush Institute is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization with the mission of developing leaders, advancing policy, and taking action to solve today's most pressing challenges. Through three Impact Centers – Domestic Excellence, Global Leadership, and an Engagement Agenda – the Bush Institute delivers measurable results that save and improve lives. To learn more, visit www.BushCenter.org.

About the Military Service Initiative

The Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative helps post-9/11 veterans and their families make successful transitions to civilian life with a focus on optimizing health and well-being and leveraging meaningful education and employment opportunities.

The George W. Bush Institute–Veteran Higher Education Task Force combines the experience and expertise of veterans' organizations and institutions of higher learning at the highest levels, providing invaluable insight and analysis to help post-9/11 veterans make successful transitions to civilian life through leveraging meaningful education and employment opportunities. We are grateful to the task force members for their leadership, enthusiasm, and commitment to veterans and military students within higher education.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy barriers at the national and state levels are preventing many student veterans from achieving their academic and professional potential. Layers of rigid rules determine when, where, and how post-9/11 GI Bill® recipients – most student veterans – can utilize their service-connected education benefits. Policymakers should work to knock down these barriers. The Veteran Higher Education Task Force developed five national and state policy recommendations that would enhance the lives of student veterans – from admissions through graduation and the transition back to the workforce.

Recommendation 1: Ensure guidance on student veteran policy is current and accessible

The Department of Veterans Affairs should regularly and effectively update the School Certifying Official (SCO) Handbook to best communicate changes in guidance to institutions and ensure that they are complying with federal rules and regulations. State Approving Agencies should ensure all transcripts, including from the Community College of the Air Force, align with current published transfer credit policies and are included in catalogs and bulletins for institutions of higher learning.

Recommendation 2: Increase assessment and oversight to ensure quality programs

The new metrics and risk-based oversight model developed by the National Association of State Approving Agencies, EdCounsel, and the National Advisory Board should be adopted immediately to ensure that outcomes are aligned with veteran success at all approved GI Bill institutions.

Recommendation 3: Adopt a new approach to flexible learning models

Accredited colleges and universities should maintain hybrid-learning models after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, and any existing laws and regulations that prevent student veterans from studying virtually should be changed.

Recommendation 4: Enhance degree programs through a focus on credentialing, certification, and licensing

Through joint federal and state policies, encourage meaningful credentials, such as certifications and licenses, that are stacked into degree programs or that are offered in stand-alone programs to assist with successful transition to higher education and employment. Local, regional, and state workforce development needs should be addressed by mapping career pathways and setting up industry-sector partnerships.

Recommendation 5: Emphasize health and well-being

Policymakers should promote greater access to programs and resources that encourage and provide critical support services for student veterans.

INTRODUCTION

Student veterans serve as public-service ambassadors as they transition into civilian life. They are a testament to the power of education to achieve greater well-being and prosperity. While they are one of the most resilient and high-performing populations on higher education campuses and learning platforms today, they also tend to be underrepresented. Unnecessary policy barriers at the state and national level leave this community of nontraditional, adult learners struggling to fulfill their high academic and professional potential.

Student veterans themselves are often unfamiliar with the pathways to higher education, not to mention how to go from degree obtainment to successful employment. Student veterans have typically lacked college counselors to guide them through the college application and benefits process. They are overwhelmingly first-generation college students, so they lack academic advisement to help steer them through the process of weighing which degree programs and follow-on jobs will be right for them. Google searches and word of mouth are helpful but unreliable guides for student veterans. The high numbers of veterans who are stunting their own academic and employment potential by enrolling in low-graduation-rate institutions of higher learning (IHLs) prove the point. There is an inexcusable disconnect between how student veterans are recruited into higher education, their career paths, and their successful entrance into civilian employment.

Post-9/11 GI Bill® recipients – most student veterans – are subject to layers of rigid but obscure legal and bureaucratic rules that determine when, where, and how they can utilize their service-connected education benefits.¹ Policymakers at both the national and the state levels have an opportunity to reevaluate current policies that erect institutional barriers for student veterans and instead create pathways to success. Doing so will benefit not only student veterans and the underrepresented communities to which many belong, but also strengthen and profit the Nation's colleges and universities as well as the U.S. workforce. At the same time, it will signal to both the higher education community and industry leaders that student veterans are social assets.

Accordingly, the Veteran Higher Education Task Force convened a collaborative body of leaders from various educational sectors to develop five key state and national policy recommendations. They are designed to guide policymakers as they act to enhance the lives of student veterans, from the admissions experience through successful graduation and transition back into the workforce. Special consideration was given to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 1: Ensure guidance on student veteran policy is current and accessible

The Department of Veterans Affairs and other agencies that set the rules pertaining to student veterans should regularly review and check the accuracy of the guidance they provide for institutional entities. Regular, accurate, and effective communication from the department is essential for School Certifying Officials (SCOs) to ensure that their institutions are complying with federal rules and regulations while also being good stewards of taxpayer money. SCOs inform institutions of higher learning about federal regulations and help the institutions abide by them. This in turn helps student veterans successfully use their GI Bill benefits to complete their educations.

The VA ought regularly to update and maintain its online SCO Handbook, an online tool that helps institutions process military transcripts and prior learning experiences and determine appropriate academic credit earned. The handbook also serves as a reference with lists of hyperlinks that point to actual Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) language, grouped by topic.

¹ GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by VA is available at the official U.S. government Web site at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.

The handbook is currently out of date. It is not updated regularly, many of its hyperlinks are broken, and SCOs are not notified when changes occur. So, this vital resource for administrators and student veterans at institutions of higher learning is barely fulfilling its purpose. This is easily remedied.

The VA must task relevant staff with repairing broken hyperlinks and verifying that those which do work point to valid internal and external resources. Furthermore, to strengthen communication between VA and institutions of higher learning, the VA should automatically send notifications to SCOs when it makes updates – including about the subject updated – to facilitate compliance by the institutions with the most current federal rules and regulations.

On a related note, it can be very difficult for student veterans and academic administrators to navigate VA's online offerings. There is already a push within the VA to update its online presence. Incorporating 21st century best web practices to do things like easily locate military transcripts online would significantly facilitate student veterans' ability to meet any enrollment paperwork requirements.

At the state level, State Approving Agencies (SAAs) should review any currently published transfer credit policies, confirm that military transcripts – such as the Joint Services Transcript or Community College of the Air Force transcripts – are included in the relevant catalogs and bulletins published by institutions of higher learning. SAAs should also ensure institutional compliance with Title 38 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, which governs federal veterans' benefits.²

Recommendation 2: Increase assessment and oversight to ensure quality programs

Congress, VA, and federal agencies with jurisdiction over veterans' educational benefits should encourage institutions of higher learning to track measurable outcomes of student veterans' success, such as how many end up gainfully employed after graduation. These agencies have regulatory and oversight authority over how the benefits are paid, which gives them the ability to set these standards. The basic requirements to approve a veterans education program are currently outlined in U.S. Code Title 38, and the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 takes them further. But the task force is concerned that much still needs to be done on the issue of accreditation: Bad actors must be weeded out, and approved programs must also be able to demonstrate that they lead to meaningful employment. Therefore, the task force recommends expanding approval to include meaningful technical certifications and licenses.

To ensure that outcomes are aligned with veteran success at all approved GI Bill institutions – across all sectors and training – national and state policymakers should expedite implementation of the new metrics and risk-based oversight model now required by law. Developed by the National Association of State Approving Agencies and EdCounsel with input from the National Advisory Board, the model ensures that high-risk institutions will receive visits from SAAs on a routine basis. It also provides a yardstick by which programs can be properly evaluated and ensures that institutions will be provided the necessary guidance to improve program delivery and outcomes.³

Recommendation 3: Adopt a new approach to flexible learning models

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a specific set of challenges to student veterans that go beyond those experienced by their nonveteran peers. The way some laws are structured makes it difficult for students to obtain their educational benefits unless they are studying in person. In addition, pandemic-related concerns are amplified for the veteran community as a whole because of the greater likelihood

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2021, March 5). School certifying official handbook (Online). https://www.knowva.ebenefits.va.gov/system/templates/selfservice/va_ssnew/help/customer/locale/en-US/portal/55440000001018/content/554400000149088/School-Certifying-Official-Handbook-On-line

³ Arnold, N., Woodall, M.J., Wescott, J., Morales, J., Fretwell, J., Stein, B., & Little, B. (2020). Brief: A new model for GI Bill quality assurance: An overview of the risk-based review system. National Governors Association, EdCounsel. https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/3_NASAA_Brief_with_appendices_Final.pdf

of family and caregiver responsibilities and increased incidences of preexisting health conditions.

College and university presidents emphasized flexibility and preparedness for change as a primary takeaway at the close of the fall 2020 academic semester, as the pandemic raged on. They prioritized “maintaining flexibility in pacing the semester [and] shortening the number of weeks of the fall term.”⁴ Policymakers should enable and encourage this flexibility, and institutions of higher learning should plan to continue offering flexible coursework with paths toward degree completion for student veterans throughout and beyond the pandemic.⁵ So far, colleges and universities have found success with virtual and hybrid coursework when they have implemented various approaches emphasizing “the importance of increased communications and interactive instructional activities, the use of prerecorded lectures and breakout rooms to stimulate discussion, and flexibility regarding when and how many students meet in person.”⁶

Policymakers should encourage accredited colleges and universities, particularly those with high graduation rates, to maintain a hybrid learning model after the pandemic by raising awareness of its value and providing additional resources. Student veterans can require accommodation as they are typically nontraditional students, more mature, and have families and jobs. Studies have found that there may be additional barriers to learning during the pandemic for first-generation college students, many of whom are veterans.⁷ When compared with traditional students, they also have higher incidences of disability, both physical and mental.⁸ All of this means that student veterans have a greater need for flexible coursework than their traditional student peers and are more likely to benefit from high quality, equitable, and accessible coursework.

Colleges and universities should also be aware of the complexity veterans face when it comes to using their GI Bill housing allowance. GI Bill housing benefits are predicated on location as well as on in-person (versus online) attendance, so the schools’ necessary embrace of online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a loss of housing benefits, among other difficulties, for student veterans. Thankfully, Congress responded quickly to this situation. If the move toward innovative and flexible course offerings lasts, however, it will require a comprehensive review of how the GI Bill housing allowance is determined.

Recommendation 4. Enhance degree programs through a focus on credentialing, certification, and licensing

Veterans’ successful transition from the military into the world of civilian employment is the joint product of numerous federal and state programs. Federal and state policies must continue to evolve to ensure that these initiatives, and any newly developed programs, emphasize veteran employment and that they are aligned with each other to best serve veterans.

Higher education and workforce training programs must continuously adapt to employers’ needs if they are to remain relevant. An integral part of this process is for these programs to determine employers’ most sought-after credentials and then either to include that skill development in existing educational programs or to develop new programs to accommodate them. Federal and state policies must therefore encourage meaningful credentials, such as certifications and licenses, that are stacked into degree programs or that are offered in stand-alone programs. This is of paramount importance, since the historic purpose of the GI Bill is to help veterans receive

4 Turk, J., Soler, M.C., Chessman, H., & Gonzalez, A. (2020, December 10). College and university presidents respond to Covid-19: 2020 fall term survey, part II. American Council on Education (ACE). <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Senior-Leaders/College-and-University-Presidents-Respond-to-COVID-19-2020-Fall-Term-Part-Two.aspx>

5 Elias, J., Troop, D., & Wescott, D. (2020, October 1). Here’s our list of colleges’ reopening models. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Here-s-a-List-of-Colleges-248626>

6 Ibid.

7 Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions, and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>

8 Ochinko, W., & Payea, K. (2020). Impact of disability on first-time student veterans’ persistence and attainment (Issue Brief No. 14). *Veterans Education Success*. <https://vetsedsuccess.org/impact-of-disability-on-first-time-student-veterans-persistence-and-attainment/>

training and education that results in meaningful employment.

National and state policy leaders should encourage SAAs to approve credentialing programs that can lead to successful employment. Other programs, such as those authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, must also sharpen their focus on providing veterans with credentials of value to the workforce.

The Higher Education Act of 1965, the National Apprenticeship Act of 1937, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act should be reauthorized, and policies and programs that facilitate progressive education and training by military members and veterans should be promoted. Local, regional, and state workforce development needs can be addressed by mapping out career pathways, setting up industry-sector partnerships, and through other, similar methods. Language about tailoring pathways for student veterans should be included when these acts are reauthorized.

State and local workforce agencies and boards, specifically, should actively continue to seek input from veterans' educational organizations and other stakeholders. Veterans' education and training interests should be represented directly on state and local workforce development boards. State workforce development visions and plans, including those developed pursuant to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2018, should address directly how the state will prioritize veterans in its workforce development initiatives. State – and federal – workforce development laws and policies should also include veteran spouses as part of the special population prioritized for training and employment services.

However, even the most ideally shaped program bolstering veteran employment will fail without adequate funding. Federal and state policymakers must provide sufficient financial resources for the panoply of existing high-quality programs that aid veterans in their transition to civilian employment. Congress should see fit, therefore, to fund such programs along with the GI Bill and other programs administered by the VA. Job losses resulting from the pandemic have only furthered the need for this funding. Thus, any recovery and economic stimulus legislation enacted in response to the pandemic ought to include allocations to train and help veterans in their employment needs.

In addition to direct workforce training, these increased resources could help support specialized wraparound services such as veteran resource centers, tutoring for student veterans, and mentoring by faculty members and administrators who are themselves veterans. Veteran centers located at institutions of higher learning, for example, are currently funded by the Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success. This program could become a pilot and grow substantially through increased funding.

Recommendation 5. Emphasize health and well-being

National and state policy leaders need to focus their attention on the health and well-being of student veterans, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic's outsized impact on this population when compared with nonveteran student peers. Many student veterans care for family members or deal with their own preexisting health conditions, which can heighten feelings of anxiety and hopelessness triggered by the pandemic and the challenges posed by online versus in-person learning. The pandemic also limited student interactions with peers and instructors.⁹

⁹ Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions, and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>

Policymakers at every level should help to promote greater access to programs and resources encouraging – and outlets providing – a safe, healthy lifestyle. They can do this by urging state health departments, veteran service organizations providing high quality care, and institutions of higher learning to reach out to student veterans with information and activities. Most importantly, they can help student veterans forge human connections by targeting communications toward nontraditional students and their families.

CONCLUSION

In formulating these policy recommendations for national and state policymakers, the task force has been keenly aware of the need to emphasize two seemingly contradictory truths: First, student veterans represent one of the most resilient, high performing populations of students on higher education campuses and learning platforms today. Second, student veterans represent a uniquely at-risk category of higher education students due to both longstanding institutional issues and COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges. Layered on top of these is their identity as nontraditional students, most often from underrepresented communities.

We are forwarding these recommendations and ask that they be considered as part of the ongoing improvements required to best support this Nation's military-affiliated and veteran student population. Understanding the benefits and resources currently available – and, more importantly, how best to implement them – is critical to the continued well-being and success of the veteran community at large, especially student veterans.

All veterans, but especially student veterans, are social assets. They are the unacknowledged permanent representatives of public and military service. How the Nation treats them and talks about them directly influences how many young people are willing to engage in public service. These efforts, therefore, are not just about the 5.2 million post-9/11 veterans that have returned to our communities. They represent our own investment in the long-term success and future leadership of our country.

The George W. Bush Institute would like to express its gratitude to the members of the Veteran Higher Education Task Force listed on the following pages. Their combined experience and expertise provided invaluable insight and analysis in preparing these recommendations. Their leadership, enthusiasm, and commitment to veterans and military students within higher education have been crucial to our efforts.

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