

I AM A POST-9/11 STUDENT VETERAN

As I walk across campus with my backpack full of books, people see me as a student like all the rest. That is good because I want to fit in—I want to belong. At the same time, I know that I am also something else.

I am someone who walks across this campus also carrying a set of experiences and perspectives informed by my decision to serve in the nation's defense during a time of war. I am someone who joined the ranks of the more than 3.9 million Americans who volunteered for military service since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.¹ I am also someone who made the decision to go back to school after separating from military service. **I am a Post-9/11 Student Veteran.**

So far, more than 2.9 million veterans of the post-9/11 generation have entered higher education after service, and we are a diverse group.² Most of us are between the ages of 25 to 34 (43%), and we come from a host of different backgrounds and cultures.³ The great majority of us served in the enlisted ranks of the military (82%), and I was most likely a member of the U.S. Army (47%).⁴ Others like me served in the Navy (18%), the Air Force (21%), or in the Marine Corps (12%).⁵ Another two percent served in the U.S. Coast Guard, and many of us are civilian-soldiers—members of the National Guard or the Reserves (45%).⁶

I served the nation during a time of war, and because of that, I likely deployed overseas. More than 2.7 million of us deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11, and many of us deployed multiple times.⁷ On average, I probably spent one out of every three years of my military life away from the United States.⁸

You may wonder why I would volunteer for military service? Like many of my fellow veterans, first, I joined to serve my country (88%).⁹ However, I also wanted to see the world (65%) and acquire skills that would set me up for a good civilian job after the military (57%).¹⁰

Importantly, I am someone who strongly believes that education is key to my future success (92%).¹¹ For that reason, I almost certainly completed high school or an equivalent (99%) before entering service, and like many of my peers, I started taking college courses while still on active duty (30%).¹² I was very aware that the Post-9/11 GI Bill would fully fund a college degree at any public institution in America [and at many private schools] after my service. For that reason, one of my strongest motivations for pursuing military service was the opportunity to advance my education (75%).¹³ In fact, of the more than 3.9 million who

Student veterans arrive on campus with their tuition bill paid by the federal government. The Post-9/11 GI Bill funds 100 percent of tuition and fees for eligible veterans, and provides annual book stipends as well as a monthly housing allowance. In fact, as of May 2017, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has paid \$75 billion in tuition, fees, and stipends to America's colleges and universities in support of student veterans. As a result, more than half of student veterans do not have to seek financial aid or other sources of support—beyond the GI Bill—to fund their college education.³⁸

separated from service since 9/11, more than 1-million of us go back to school using the Post-9/11 GI Bill.¹⁴

That said, while the GI Bill has created a pathway to college for an entire generation of veterans, we remain a small minority on the nation's college campuses—veterans make up only three-to-four percent of college students in the United States.¹⁵ For many of us, the transition from military service to a college campus can sometimes be difficult—but probably not for the reasons you might expect.

To begin, it's important to understand that there are many stereotypes about veterans like me. One such belief is that I opted for military service after high school because I did not have the academic skills to succeed in college.¹⁶ Nothing could be further from the truth. I excel academically and, on average, outperform my non-military peers. Research demonstrates that, on average, my student veteran classmates and I maintain higher GPAs than traditional civilian students do.¹⁷ Additionally, once we start in college, we are more likely to persist and graduate at higher rates as compared to non-veteran students.¹⁸ So to be clear, the most significant challenges I face as a student veteran are not related to my ability to succeed in the classroom. Instead, my challenges are typically social, cultural, and often practical. Let me explain.

Student veterans are strong in the classroom. As a group, they have consistently achieved higher academic performance (GPA) as compared to traditional students (3.34 vs. 2.94), and complete college at rates comparable with the national average, and higher than other adult learners (53.6% vs. 39.2%).³⁹

To begin, it is true that sometimes I'm faced with a feeling of not fitting in and being 'connected' to my campus community. Remember that only a small minority of Americans (<2%) have served in uniform since 9/11.¹⁹ Consequently, when I arrive on a college campus I often do not find many people, *like me*, with the same experiences. As a result, I sometimes struggle to connect with and relate to my classmates and my professors. In fact, researchers have demonstrated that student veterans perceive that college professors (63%), administrators (63%), and non-veteran students (70%) have little to no understanding of the rare challenges veterans face when making the transition from military service to a college campus.²⁰ Other studies of faculty member's perceptions of veterans as students seem to validate this divide.²¹ Even further, research highlights that one of *the most significant barriers* to the pursuit of a college degree, after service, is the perception among transitioning military members that they would not be welcome, supported, or valued in an academic setting.²² This lack of awareness not only affects the experience of those veterans already on a college campus, but unfortunately, also sabotages the college aspirations of many transitioning military members and impacts where we apply and enroll, and what we choose to study. When I get together with other student veterans, we talk about this issue a lot—we find it ironic, given that these are the very people we went to war for while in uniform.

It's also true that the majority of us are first-generation college students (62%),²³ and we don't have existing networks to turn to for advice, and don't know what resources we should use, or

can trust fully. Even when we have insights into good resources (the Department of Education College Scorecards, the GI Bill Comparison Tool), their use is not transparent to us. Consequently, we may be influenced more by *advertising* than advising.

Along with the uncertainty and apprehension associated feelings of belonging and fit, there are other factors that differentiate me from my non-veteran peers.

For example, when I arrive on campus, I will likely be older than my fellow students, and have a more global range of personal and professional life experiences. I'm also more likely to be married than my non-veteran peers (47% vs. 37%).²⁴ If I'm enrolled in graduate school, I may even have a child (58%).²⁵ There is also a 12 percent chance that I'm married to another service member, which comes with its own set of challenges for me and my family.²⁶ Dual-military marriages and multiple deployments—and now the post-service challenges related to disability, employment, and other transition-related issues—have put a significant strain on my family. While I understand this reality, navigating the challenges associated with balancing school and family life can have significant implications for our academic experience. For the nearly 20 percent of us with children who are single parents, this challenge is even greater, as we alone must shoulder the responsibilities of school and raising a child.

Additionally, for some of us navigating the transition from military to civilian life and school, we also face the day-to-day struggles associated with a variety of physical and mental health-related challenges connected to our service. These challenges may be the result of contact with an improvised explosive device (IED) while deployed, a signature weapon of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which may result in a traumatic brain injury (TBI). TBI is a consequence of the increasing use of IEDs in these wars. My service also places me at a high risk for hearing loss (27%), ringing of the ears (32%), or both.²⁷ If I served in combat, I likely had an emotionally traumatic or distressing experience (52%), and served with someone who was badly injured (60%) or killed (47%).²⁸ While campuses are often well-equipped to provide programs and services to people with disabilities, most often they are inexperienced [or what the sociologists would call 'not culturally competent'] related to the unique nature of wellness concerns that stem from military service during a time of war. While the accommodations for a person with a TBI may be similar to those with other cognitive impairments, veterans often feel a self-stigma related to identifying oneself as "disabled." As a consequence, often we don't seek the health and wellness services we need, even if they are otherwise available and accessible. Further, most colleges don't understand the resources I have available to me through the Department of Veterans Affairs, or how they can coordinate with them, or even how they can encourage me to enroll in VA health care in lieu of student health insurance.

Similar parallels exist in student counseling services, and even in medical health care. This is important because along with the physical scars of war, I may also suffer from invisible wounds. Many veterans of my generation may have been diagnosed with depressive disorder (38%), or post-traumatic stress disorder (30%).²⁹ Tragically, there is a likelihood that many of my veteran peers responded "yes" when screened for military sexual trauma at the VA (25%).³⁰ My peers and I may even struggle with suicidal thoughts. However, here we are not as unique on campus

as you might think. In fact, a great many of our non-veteran student peers are struggling in similar ways. In fact, many studies have suggested that today's college students are showing up on college campuses with mental health challenges at historically high rates, due in part to issues such as achievement-focused parenting and the intense competition for social and academic success. In this regard, my military experience confers to me a unique advantage—I am resilient. That is, where my non-veteran student peers struggle with a lack of resilience related to stress,³¹ my military service experience taught me skills and strategies to be resilient in the face of setbacks and stress.³²

In fact, the truth is that even in the face of some of these service-related challenges, I come to campus with a broad range of military-learned skills, abilities, and experiences that help me succeed in an academic environment. For example, my military service likely included many cross-cultural experiences and opportunities for advanced technical training. Research also demonstrates that my service cultivated advanced maturity, more appreciative attitudes, and an increased work ethic.³³ I am comfortable operating in diverse work settings, embracing uncertainty and change, and problem solving. I am also confident and entrepreneurial, and my military experience taught me how to work with other people (65%), gave me self-confidence (61%), and helped me get ahead in life and grow as a person (71%).³⁴ Because of this, I bounce back from personal, professional, and organizational setbacks more quickly and completely than those who have not served in the military—all traits that translate well to a making me a contributing member of my campus community.³⁵

Student veterans arrive on campus with global experiences, broad diversity, and a commitment to service. In classrooms, on athletic fields, and in student organizations, student veterans are proving resilient, resourceful, entrepreneurial, and adept at team building. Further, they are mature beyond their years, honest, and fiercely loyal to the institution. They are well positioned to exercise dynamic leadership abilities that have been tested and proven under some of the most stressful conditions imaginable. In short, student veterans make the academic experience better for all.

In addition, like generations before us, my veteran peers and I are taking on roles of increasing leadership in society. Whether it be volunteering as little league coaches, helping in disaster relief efforts, joining fitness-related support groups, serving on a local school board, or running for Congress, we continue to find ways to leverage our military service for the good of society. At school, we take leadership and service roles in student government, in student organizations and clubs, in fraternities and sororities, in honor societies, in fundraisers, in service-learning opportunities, and in other formal and informal campus settings. For many of us, we joined the military to lend meaning to our lives. So, as we navigate the ambiguity of the future, leadership through service serves as our anchor, helping us maintain that identity through our post-service transition and thereafter.³⁶

Put simply, while pursuing a college degree may come with some challenges, it is nothing that my student veteran peers or I cannot handle. In fact, history makes a strong argument for why

this nation's colleges and universities should do more to open their doors to men and women like me.

Student veteran skills and talents are in demand from the nation's employers. More than half of student veterans pursue degrees in business, STEM, and health sciences.⁴⁰ Veterans with a bachelor's degree earn about \$84,255 on average per year, which is about \$17,000 more than their non-veteran counterparts.⁴¹

Consider that today, many historians would argue that the original GI Bill—the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944—is among the most important legislative acts in the history of this country, because after World War II it empowered more than eight million veterans to pursue higher education upon leaving military service. Among that group were three Presidents of the United States, three Supreme Court

justices, 14 Nobel Prize winners, 24 Pulitzer Prize winners, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 450,000 engineers, and countless other members of what has been famously described as the "Greatest Generation."³⁷

If the recipients of the original GI Bill are any indication, just imagine what my generation of veterans could accomplish if this nation's colleges and universities acted boldly and broadly to empower us as students and citizens.

I am a Post-9/11 Student Veteran, and from where I sit, meaningful investments in the educational success of people like me—those who have shouldered the burden of this nation's current and longest wars—is not only the right thing to do for our veterans, but also for our academic institutions, and for the future of our nation.

Endnotes

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