

Providing Seamless Administrative Support to Servicemembers, Veterans, and
their Dependents by Government Agencies and Higher Education Institutions:
Opportunities for Collaborative Approaches

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Background

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (aka the Post-9/11 GI Bill) created the most complex version of the GI Bill in history. Since its inception in 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has paid out over \$24.4 billion dollars for over 870,000 military/veteran students and family members to enroll in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, December 13, 2012, p. 1).¹ According to an analyst in education policy for the Congressional Research Service (CRS), not only did the FY 2011 participation in the Post-9/11 GI Bill exceed all other GI Bill program yearly participation numbers since 1984, but the average FY 2011 Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit per participant was \$13,871 compared to \$7,483 for the Montgomery GI Bill, the next-most-popular GI Bill program (Dortch, September 21, 2012, p. 23).

The popularity and cost of the Post-9/11 GI Bill has generated considerable interest in how effectively the program serves its participants. Interested parties include student veterans, the White House, members of Congress, higher education institutions and associations, federal agencies dealing with military and education issues, and the general public. Said effectiveness is currently defined in terms of only graduation and employment rather than more traditionally wide-ranging definitions of postsecondary education that include civic engagement and other, less easily quantified, forms of intellectual and interpersonal growth resulting from a college education.²

¹ **Note:** Active duty servicemembers who qualify for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits may also use the Post-9/11 GI Bill to augment their active-duty Tuition Assistance (TA) funding if their tuition/fee costs are more than their TA benefit. See http://gibill.va.gov/resources/education_resources/programs/tuition_assistance_top_up.html for details. In addition, eligible veterans may transfer Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to dependents or spouses.

² E.g., *Education Pays*, a periodic publication of The College Board, which provides statistics on the societal benefits of a college education as well as financial benefits. See <http://trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays> for details.

Such interest is not new. Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill's inception, there have been assessments of its implementation by student veteran and higher education stakeholders (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010; Stripling, 2010; McBain, 2009). In addition, the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) has done multiple studies of the Post-9/11 GI Bill Program at the request of members of Congress (GAO, 2011a; 2011b). This level of scrutiny has taken place because higher education institutions operate very differently from the VA and/or DoD. Thus assessments of the ongoing joint work of higher education and VA on the Post-9/11 GI Bill are necessary. While delays in the Post-9/11 GI Bill's initial implementation were inevitable because VA had only 18 months to create the systems and operations necessary to get Post-9/11 GI Bill monies to veterans and institutions, as the program matures, there is room for collaborative improvement.

This paper was commissioned to raise key issues regarding “providing seamless administrative support to servicemembers and their dependents by government agencies and academic offices.” It should be noted that academic offices are not the only offices of a college or university with which servicemembers, veterans, and their dependents interact, particularly when dealing with tuition and fee bills being paid in whole or in part by a federal agency. Thus this paper presents a more holistic view of the higher education enterprise. Particular nuts-and-bolts administrative and academic issues inevitably differ by type of campus and by office and thus cannot be discussed exhaustively here.³ Rather, this paper raises larger areas of challenge and opportunity that can be collectively capitalized upon to better assist servicemembers, veterans, and their dependents in attaining their higher educational goals.

³ For recent data on the types of programs and services higher education institutions provide for military/veteran students and their families and the challenges that institutions face in serving them, see McBain, L., Kim, Y. M., Cook, B. J., & Snead, K. M. (2012), *From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members* (<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/From-Soldier-to-Student-II.aspx>). Readers are also encouraged to seek information from higher education associations representing specific parts of higher education operations (e.g., AACRAO, NACUBO, NASFAA, and NAVPA).

Issues for Discussion

Cross-Cultural Communication Between Veteran-Serving Agencies, Academe, and Industry: Command and Control vs. “Organized Anarchy”

A core challenge in administering the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been the different cultures of the government agencies responsible for administering military-related educational benefits and the academic institutions responsible for educating servicemembers and veterans. Adding to the cross-cultural challenges are the differences not only between these two cultures, but of the many subcultures represented by other higher education-related and government-related stakeholders. Industry stakeholders represent still another culture. Last, but definitely not least, are the multiple cultures of student veterans themselves and the issue of cross-cultural communications between these students and the institutions/agencies attempting to serve them.

The core challenge/opportunity here is that of command and control culture versus “organized anarchy” (Cohen & March [1989] in Manning [2013]). In general, the DoD and VA are examples of command and control culture, defined as a clearly delineated single chain of command with a known person in charge, a doctrine defining interaction patterns, and information flowing down the chain of command (Alberts, 2009, p. 2). Industry often follows a similar pattern, but is not as highly regulated as the military.

Higher education, on the other hand, can be described as organized anarchy, defined as having three principles: problematic goals (i.e., teaching, research, and service as primary goals but with conflicting internal and external stakeholder goals); unclear technology (defined as pedagogical technology of meeting diverse student learning needs); fluid participation (i.e., community members’ involvement varying in time from students’ limited time to unpredictable presidential turnover to faculty shifting participation over time) (Manning, 2013, pp. 14-16).

Discussing all academic subcultures is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important for veteran-serving agencies to be aware of them because these subcultures—even when dealing with STEM majors—inform institutions’ operational relations with veteran-serving agencies. (Employers who interact with institutions are a little more familiar, in general, with academic culture.) For instance, moving from a faculty position to an administrative position has been characterized as “like going to another planet” because:

One might say that a university consists of two closely articulated organizations. One is the academic organization that conducts teaching, research, and service; it is composed of people who were socialized in culturally diverse disciplines with values that are often in conflict. It highly values creativity. The second is an administrative organization that deals with physical, financial, and human resources and takes (or should take) its main directions from the academic side of the institution (Foster, 2006, p. 49).

To a veteran-serving agency used to dealing with a single, clear chain of command, this description of two organizations within one entity (the university) may be bewildering, not to mention the description of a role shift as being like a new world; dealing with both faculty and administrators may be even more so. Steele, Salcedo, and Coley’s work with focus groups of student veterans notes that they face similar challenges in adjusting to the different organization and demands of academic life (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010, p. 4).

Higher education stakeholders, on the other hand, should be aware of the multiple subcultures inherent in veteran-serving agencies and in student veterans themselves, stemming from military culture’s position as a distinct subculture in American society. A crucial point is

made by Hall from a social work treatment perspective, stating “unless we understand their language, their structure, why they join, their commitment to the mission, and the role of honor and sacrifice in military service, we will not be able to adequately intervene and offer care to these families” (Hall, 2011, p. 17).⁴

In addition, painful rifts dating back to the Vietnam War are part of the cultural substrate underlying present-day military/higher education interactions. Understanding this history is key to creating seamless services for student veterans. However, one challenge/opportunity this paper suggests is to continue moving beyond these rifts and capitalizing on the current climate. As Copeland and Sutherland title their white paper on matching support for veterans to specific veteran needs, quoting Admiral Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there is currently a “Sea of Goodwill” toward veterans (Copeland & Sutherland, n.d., p. 1).⁵

Yet, as Downs and Murtazashvili comment, “...the very content of this research [on military/civil society divides] does point to an unsettling divide and alienation between the military and society, of which the university community is a prime, more extreme example” (Downs & Murtazashvili, 2012, n.p.). On a more practical level, as noted by Rumann and Hamrick, “contemporary administrators and faculty members are less likely than earlier generations to have personally experienced military or wartime service” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 25). Thus gaps in understanding the military by higher education personnel may be functional (i.e., stemming from not having served or knowing anyone who has served), ideological, or both. However, gaps in understanding work both ways given the growing

⁴ See also, focusing on military children (aka “brats”), Wertsch, M. E. (1991). *Military Brats: Legacies of a Childhood Inside the Fortress*.

⁵ For a recent article on how Ivy League and other highly selective institutions are reaching out to student veterans, see Sander (2013), retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/At-Elite-Colleges-a-Push-to/136459/>. For a more critical stance on student veteran enrollment at Ivy League universities, see Sloane (2012), retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/11/12/backward-not-forward-veterans-elite-colleges-essay>.

isolation of the military from the rest of American society during and after Vietnam (Downs & Murtazashvili, 2012, n.p.)

The challenge/opportunity presented here is for both sides to work toward better understanding each other's multiple cultures in order to serve the student veterans who are their collective responsibility. Student veterans are still students. As such, in addition to belonging to the military/veteran community, they also rightfully belong to the academic community. Thus it is the joint responsibility of higher education and veteran-serving agencies to serve them to the best of their collective ability.

Data Collection and Data Sharing: What Data, Collected by Whom, Verified How, and Shared with Whom?

Higher education collects and reports a great deal of aggregated data on students and institutions—whether via mandatory reporting to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), state-level data systems in the case of some public institutions, on external Web sites such as the U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator, in publications such as *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings, or on individual institutional Web sites, to name only a few common entities. While aggregated data is accessible to the public and to researchers, student-level data ("unit-record data" in higher education parlance) is protected by federal privacy laws. Given both expected cuts to military forces that will create more potentially eligible veterans and the cost of the Post-9/11 GI Bill program since its inception, various stakeholders have called for retention and graduation rate data disaggregated by Post-9/11 GI Bill recipient status (though *not* by individual) to examine the

program's effectiveness in serving veterans and their families and help institutions better assist student veterans in earning their degrees.

However, this data has not historically been collected on student veterans—not even, as pointed out by the VA itself, on World War II GI Bill recipients (Sander, 2012, n.p). In fact, graduation rate data reporting by institutions via IPEDS has been, until 2012, restricted to only first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who have attended a single institution. This is pertinent because federal statistics on military and veteran undergraduates from 2007-08 compiled and analyzed as a baseline prior to the effective date of the Post-9/11 GI Bill showed that only 23.4 percent of “military undergraduates,” a term used to include veterans and active-duty military alike, attended school full-time for a full academic year (Radford, Wun, & Weko, 2009, Table 3a).

Thus the demand for disaggregated student veteran graduation rate data presents a challenge for higher education institutions and veteran-serving agencies alike based on the current configuration of IPEDS and how graduation rate data has been historically calculated. In addition, the question of how to consistently differentiate a student veteran, an active-duty servicemember using Post-9/11 GI Bill funds to augment military Tuition Assistance monies, and a servicemember or veteran's family member receiving transferred Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits within such data is key.

As this paper is being written, the VA has announced a memorandum of agreement with the National Student Clearinghouse, facilitated by the Student Veterans of America (SVA), to provide the Clearinghouse data on up to 1,000,000 veterans who have received Montgomery GI Bill and Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for attendance at 2- and 4-year institutions. The Clearinghouse will then compare VA's data to its own to attempt to determine how many

veterans receiving benefits have graduated (Sander, January 5, 2013, n.p.). This new agreement—and its brokering by a student veteran advocacy organization—aptly illustrates the appetite for veteran-specific retention and graduation data and a creative, collaborative approach to obtain such data.

The White House Executive Order Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members (April 2012) also requires the collection of data on military and veteran students and their families using federal military/veteran educational benefits. However, it calls for a collaborative approach between DoD, VA, and ED to use agency data whenever possible rather than asking institutions to collect more data. These collaborative approaches, marked by mining and refining available data as well as working across federal agencies to minimize the burden on institutions, present a major opportunity upon which both veteran-serving agencies and higher education can capitalize.

Payment Processes: Complex, Conflicting Policies, No Simple Solutions

The payment process required to administer Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits is complex both on the front end (i.e., VA determination of eligibility) and on the back end (disbursement of payment to institutions and/or student veterans). Amendments to the original Post-9/11 GI Bill requiring that certain particular forms of student financial assistance be deducted from the student veteran's benefit eligibility to create a net cost for the program of education in question make the final benefit determination even more complex.⁶

As a result, one suggestion that has been floated in veterans education circles is to have VA revert to the process used in the Montgomery GI Bill: send the benefit check to the veteran

⁶ See http://gibill.va.gov/documents/factsheets/Changes_to_Post-911_GI_Bill_Fact_Sheet.pdf for a VA summary of changes. For actual legislative language, see <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ377/pdf/PLAW-111publ377.pdf>.

and have the veteran pay the institution with the proceeds. Given the amounts of money involved in the Post-9/11 GI Bill—where the VA is paying all or a large portion of a student veteran’s tuition/fees—this idea, while deceptively simple on the surface, has the potential to adversely affect student veterans. It is also contrary to the practice of the U.S. Department of Education concerning Title IV federal financial aid, which has institutions electronically certify Pell Grant and federal student loan eligibility and draw down funds directly into institutional accounts. (Some higher education stakeholders have repeatedly suggested an adaptation of the Title IV fund drawdown process to Post-9/11 GI Bill processing, but this has thus far not come to pass.)

The institutional role in Title IV certification allows financial aid administrators to use their professional expertise to resolve certain problems directly with the government. Moving VA certification officials at institutions further from the process of Post-9/11 benefit payment than they already are will mean more confusion for student veterans, institutions, and the VA alike. The other main reason this proposal would adversely affect student veterans is that standard billing practice at colleges and universities requires all bills owed by a student—regardless of civilian or veteran status—be settled by a predetermined date (generally the end of the add/drop period). Otherwise, the student is dropped from courses for nonpayment.

Institutions have attempted to be as flexible as possible with student veterans relying on Post-9/11 GI Bill funds since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, partly out of respect for the Herculean nature of VA’s efforts to construct systems to administer the new program (McBain, 2009). However, colleges and universities’ own administrative and fiscal requirements—particularly at state institutions that have state-mandated accounting rules—mean they cannot indefinitely carry unpaid student accounts. Institutions must balance being responsible fiscal stewards and treating all students equitably with the unique, well-known third-party payment

issues of veteran students. Thus, given ongoing VA delays in issuing Post-9/11 GI Bill payments to institutions since the program's 2009 inception, institutions having to wait for veterans to receive Post-9/11 GI Bill payments for a semester or quarter's tuition/fees and then forward the payments to them is untenable.

This is because, while no experienced higher education administrator expects a third-party payment program to work perfectly, these payment delays are far from minimal. As reported in *From Soldier to Student II*, "Payment delays [by VA] of more than 60 days were reported by 40 percent of public four-year and 29 percent of private not-for-profit four-year institutional respondents.... Payment delays of between 31 and 60 days were reported by 45 percent of public four-year, 52 percent of public two-year, and 44 percent of private not-for-profit four-year institutions" (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012, p. 42). In October 2012, only two months after *From Soldier to Student II* was released, VA had a backlog of almost 58,000 veterans still waiting for Fall 2012 benefits—close to half of whom were Post-9/11 GI Bill recipients. The VA cited more veterans applying for educational benefits as the main reason for delays (Shane III, October 25, 2012, n.p.).

Beyond these statistics, the human cost of delayed Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to student veterans is difficult to quantify. However, institutions can contact VA on behalf of multiple students in arrears as well as use any ties they have to other postsecondary stakeholders and local military/veteran associations, in addition to the wider local community, to try to assist student veterans. If Post-9/11 GI Bill payments are sent directly to student veterans, institutions will have much less ability to help them. Thus removing institutions from the Post-9/11 payment picture is not necessarily in the best interest of the student veterans those institutions serve.

Rather, a better way to capitalize on this combined challenge and opportunity is to—as painstaking and difficult as it is—continue to work on achieving better communication between higher education stakeholders and veteran-serving agencies. No communication or process will be perfectly seamless. The multiple and sometimes conflicting state, federal, and institutional regulations involved in administering the Post-9/11 GI Bill program are too great. In addition, the cultural issues referred to previously are too nuanced.

However, working groups composed of higher education community members and members of the military/veteran-serving community can continue to educate each other about where and how processes and regulations in their separate spheres contradict and/or overlap and how to handle differences by sector (e.g., public vs. private institutions). In particular, the military may be able to provide insights based on their experience with the ROTC program that may be applicable to payments under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This may sound unduly vague, but unfortunately there are no single solutions involved when working with mature higher education enterprises whose processes and legal restrictions were created and layered upon each other long before the legislative passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Conclusion

Tying it All Together to Benefit Servicemembers, Veterans, and Military Families: Could Military/Veteran Education Efforts Benefit from Thinking Like DARPA?

This paper has described several meta-issues underlying the administrative side of military/veterans education and suggested potential approaches to capitalize on opportunities they present. However, a limitation of this paper is that highly creative problem-solving approaches being introduced at higher education institutions, within student veteran

organizations, within third-party associations, and within veteran-serving agencies are not being cohesively collated/disseminated to the larger veterans education community. This is partly due to cultural issues and partly due to the lack of a single “home” for veterans education.

With this in mind, this paper suggests high-level decision makers consider the example of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) as a future model for advances in providing seamless administrative support to servicemembers, veterans, and their families by veteran-serving agencies and higher education institutions. DARPA was born “as part of a broad reaction to a single event” (Van Atta, n.d., p. 1). Obviously the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is not a threat such as was Sputnik. Moreover, not all of DARPA’s operational and research model is appropriate for veterans education benefits. However, Van Atta’s description of DARPA’s “operational and organizational characteristics including: relatively small size; a lean, non-bureaucratic structure; a focus on potentially change-state technologies; and a highly flexible and adaptive research program” (Van Atta, n.d., p. 2) is potentially useful.

This paper does not suggest setting up a DARPA-like structure for veterans education. The current fiscal climate renders such a suggestion financially irresponsible. However, it suggests that higher education and veteran-serving agencies not only pay attention to the meta-issues discussed herein, but consider the advantages of incorporating lessons learned from DARPA’s operational model into veterans education efforts. In addition, other models of creative thinking within command-and-control organizations (e.g., Appreciative Inquiry Summit, described in context of a U.S. Navy case study by Powley, Fry, Barrett, & Bright [2004], or the DoD Science, Mathematics, & Research for Transformation [SMART] Program) may be helpful. The DoD Office of VA Collaboration may also be able to assist not only the VA, but others involved in veterans education. Along these lines, NSF may wish to consider developing, in

collaboration with other agencies and institutions, mechanisms to support student veterans specifically pursuing STEM careers.

No matter what model or combination of models become the future of veterans education, one thing is clear: creative thinking and collaboration, grounded in ongoing communication and a clear mutual understanding of both military/veteran and higher education cultures and organizational models, are necessary to continue to administer the Post-9/11 GI Bill effectively. The challenges are great. However, so are the opportunities to serve those who have served and given so much to this country.

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