

Veteran Students In College Classrooms & The G.I. Bills

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Military veterans present a unique class of college student that have had significant effect on the conduct of post secondary education in the United States. While there is a significant amount of literature on veteran students from World War II and a fair amount from those in the Viet Nam era, there has been little research and discussion on the modern day veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The historical and current literature can be used to identify certain significant trends relevant to college level educators and administrators.

Historical Literature

As the end of World War II began to appear visible, federal planners became concerned with a predicted surge of returning veterans. The World War I experience of waves of malcontent veterans in protest marches, food lines and unemployment convinced national leaders to be proactive in planning for this event. The compromise, though still controversial decision was to send a large percentage of these veterans to colleges and universities. The G.I. Bill of Rights provided returning veterans with enough tuition money to attend even the most expensive and elite schools in the country along with a living allowance that constituted up to 70% of their lost employment opportunity cost. As a result, college education became an achievable goal to a large new class of previously excluded individuals.

School officials predicted a significant negative effect on academic endeavors at the schools. Veterans would not have the motivation or capability to pursue their studies and generally bring down the education of their nonveteran classmates. The veterans increased age and marital status would not mesh well with an academic environment. Subsequent research found these

predictions to be completely inaccurate. The 2.2 million World War II veterans who used the G.I. Bill to attend college not only avoided being a detriment to the college classroom, they proved to be the most successful sociological group on campus. Ironically, married veterans proved to be the most successful subclass. Bound & Turner (2002) made a significant contribution to the literature on this subject by accumulating data from the census bureau and analyzing it to show that the G.I. Bill veterans were twice as likely as their nonveteran age cohorts to complete a four year degree program. Angrist (1993) showed that veterans were able to increase their schooling by an average of 1.4 years and subsequently increased their earnings by an average of 6%.

Clark (1998) looked beyond the direct results of the veteran students in the classroom and found that the success of veterans in the academic environment had profound effects on the student body make up of subsequent classes as well as the curriculum taught at universities. Married and/or mature veterans evidenced disdain for much of the meaningless college traditions and helped convert campus life from an elitist environment to more of that of the everyman. Veterans, who appeared in such numbers as to constitute upwards of 40% of the student body at some schools, demanded a more pragmatic approach to college education. Veterans, who were used to the no nonsense aspects of military training, expected the college experience to be focused on the single goal of getting them a job in corporate America and college curriculums were forced to respond. The peer influence of veterans helped the performance of their nonveteran classmates, causing the post war graduating classes (1949-1950) to be hailed as the best ever.

Serow (2004) refutes much of the prior research on the effects of veteran students in the classroom following World War II. His research found that the majority of changes to college education following the war were the results of trends started before the war and that the G.I. Bill is given false credit for these trends. While he did find a higher amount of maturity and motivation among veteran students tied to more academic achievement, he concluded that the only two significant effects of the G.I. population were to increase equal access for both the lower income and minority veterans to previously elite campuses and the increase in individualism within the college student community.

Teachman (2005) studied the Viet Nam era veteran community and compared the social situation of the 1960's and 1970's to that of the Post-war era. He concluded that broad based civilian programs to stimulate college attendance minimized the advantages of veteran students in the Viet Nam era. Nonveterans had easier access to higher education as a result of these programs. Unlike in World War II, Viet Nam veterans lost much in the way of educational opportunities as compared to their nonveteran peers due to mandatory military service that caused huge gaps in their schooling. However, counter-intuitively, veterans who served a longer the period of their enlistments were more likely to close this opportunity gap and eventually equal or surpass the educational achievement of nonveterans peers. He also found that the Viet Nam era G.I. Bill was not financially significant enough to provide veterans with more access to higher education than civilians. Joanning (1975) found that Viet Nam veterans had higher average grade point averages than nonveterans, but Card (1983) found that they were less likely to actually complete their four years degrees.

Literature on the Current Conflicts

DiRamio et al (2008) published the first significant study on college veterans of the current Iraq and Afghan conflicts. The modern veteran is irritated with the immaturity and impatience of their civilian peers who have not faced anything more daunting than homework. They prefer to be quiet and neutral in class and resent instructors that make an issue of their veteran status in classroom discussions. They do want faculty and administrators to be aware of their special status, however. The current G.I. Bill is insufficient to cover tuition and living expenses, so the modern veteran works on the side. Bureaucratic red tape delays benefit payments from months to years and campuses provide almost no special support for veterans beyond some assistance in filing financial aid forms.

The uncomfortable environment on today's college campus is keeping many veterans away. McMurray (2007) found that veterans are now more likely to avoid campus life altogether and instead pursue online education. Field (2008) found that the lack of funds in the modern G.I. Bill is keeping veterans away from the top schools. Only six percent of veterans use the G.I. Bill to

attend one of the top 500 nonprofit colleges. The majority of Gulf war veterans are selecting community colleges, for profit schools and online learning because they cannot afford tuition and living expenses at the better schools. The changes in the G.I. Bill in 2009 will give veterans greater access to public colleges but access to top private schools will remain financially prohibited.

Recommendations

The following are findings/recommendations for educators and college administrators in dealing with veteran students distilled from the research on the historical and current situations:

- Veterans are more mature and motivated than the typical student. Their presence in the classroom, far from being a disruption, will increase the performance of the class as a whole. Administrators should work to make their colleges more accessible to veterans.
- While veterans want their schools to recognize their special needs and experiences, they do not want special attention drawn to them in class.
- Bureaucracy extensively delays federal benefits. Schools should delay tuition and housing payment due dates until veteran's benefits are actually received.
- Veterans seek out companionship on campus. Schools should welcome the formation of veterans' organizations on campus.
- Veterans get higher grades, but also suffer higher drop-out rates. They are uncomfortable with typical college life and 'meaningless' traditions.
- Modern veterans are drawn to online education to avoid the difficulties of campus life. This eliminates the benefit they can provide to the typical classroom.
- Marriage for veterans does not detract from, but rather enhances academic performance.
- Veterans have been a small minority for most schools, but with 1.5 million currently deployed, this is destined to change as these conflicts resolve. Most physical campus schools so not provide adequate support to veterans because of their low population and are not prepared for an influx of post conflict students and their special needs. Handicap support facilities are not resourced to handle an influx of injured veterans.

- The expected changes to the G.I. Bill in August of 2009, while much better than the immediate predecessor, do not come close to approaching the generosity of the original program. They will allow more students into public state schools, however.

Accommodation for veterans will have large start up costs for colleges and universities, but will pay significant dividends.

References

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- Olson, K. W. (1994) The Astonishing Story: Veterans make good on the nation’s promise. *The Educational Record*, Washington Volume 75, pages 16-28
- Serow, R. C. (2004) Policy as Symbol: Title II if the 1944 G.I. Bill. *Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 27 pages 481-499

Teachman, J. (2005) Military Service in the Vietnam Era and educational Attainment, *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 78, pages 50-68

Annotated readings:

Dabbs Jr., J.M. (1992) Testosterone and Occupational Achievement, *Social Forces*; March, 1992 pages 813-824.

The report studied the testosterone in 4,462 veterans and found that those lower in testosterone were more likely to pursue education and higher status jobs. These findings link with the idea that the veteran student is unlikely to fit the 'dominance' model of the military (those with higher testosterone according to the study) commonly portrayed in literature. Instead the veteran student is less dominant and has a greater desire to blend in.

Fincher, C. (2001) Higher Education and World War II. *IHE Perspectives*. February 2001 pages 2-10

This is a summary of article prepared six months before D-Day on the planning for the G.I. Bill. It reflects the national focus on the veteran education program, the seriousness of this program and the social readjustments that would be required in the post war era. The articles reflect incredible foresight about the resultant situation. This is a useful piece to show how much more focus is needed in the current environment.

Gaines, F. P. (1945) Opening the Doors of Opportunity: Liberal Education and the Veterans. *Liberal Education*, Fall, 2004, pages 32-35.

This famous speech by the then president of Washington and Lee University was first delivered over the Columbia Broadcasting System. Gaines recommended to the American Association of College that they prepare for the wave of veterans and their unique needs. He predicted that they would desire pragmatic education, but recommended that colleges focus on a well-rounded liberal arts education.

Greenberg, M. (2007) Agents for Change: Off the Well-Trod path in Academe. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 54, Issue 11, page B5

This article by a former college dean found that veteran students gained new access to elite schools and broke up the “private, elitist, white, Protestant” monopoly there. Additionally, these veterans after graduation often pursued academic careers and diversified the faculties of colleges across the country.

Herrmann, D, Raybeck D, & Wilson R. (2008) College is for Veterans Too, *The Chronicle of Higher Education Commentary*, Vol. 55, Issue 13, Page A99

This article found that colleges are not adequately prepared for veterans. The delay in benefits is not adequately addressed or compensated for by the universities. Faculty member often isolate veterans by making pejorative statements about the military in class to spark discussion. Faculty with veterans in their classroom should work to have a more balanced approach to discussions of the military and its role in society in order to integrate the veterans into the discussion.

Riemer, S. (1947) Married Veterans are Good Students. *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 9 pages 11-12

This article, though short, provided a detailed empirical analysis of the performance of married veterans. Contrary to common presumption that married life would detract from studies, the 24% of veteran students that were married in the study had average grade point averages 10% higher than the mean. Women veterans performed even higher.

Willenz, J. A. (1994) Invisible Veterans. *The Educational Record*. Washington: Fall 1994. Vol. 74, pages 40-46.

This article notes how most studies of the veteran students in the post World War II era ignored the population of female veterans. Of the 350,000 women who served in the military during World War II, 35% used their GI Bill benefits. At first glance this seems unremarkable considering 40% of male returning veterans used their benefits. However, given the cultural environment of the time towards women’s education, the fact that one third pursued advanced schooling is notable. The women’s benefits did not equal the men’s in aspects, for example, a woman could never claim her spouse as a dependent for living allowances.

Wright, J. (2008) Serving Those Who Have Served Their Country, The Presidency.

Washington: Spring 2008. Vol. 11, Iss.2 Pages 14-21

This article analyzed the inadequacies of the current G.I. Bill for most veterans as well as the inability for colleges to fairly analyze their applications/resumes. Little or no credit is given to the life experiences the veterans bring to the student body when making admissions decisions. It found that campuses are not prepared or oriented to welcome new veterans from the current conflict. Universities do not share 'best practices' on how to deal with veterans as they do with other social groups.

Additional Readings

Byman, D. (2007) Veterans and Colleges Have a Lot to Offer Each Other. *The Chronicle Review*, Vol. 54, Iss. 16, Page B5

Hollingshead, A. B. (1946) Adjustment to Military Life. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, Pages 439-447

Mangan, K. (2008) Disabled Veterans Get Hands-On Training in the Art of Entrepreneurship. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 55, Iss. 2 Page A39

Pitman, V. & Osborn, R. (2000) Paragons of Academic Virtue: World War II Veterans in the Media of Popular Culture. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, Vol. 48, Iss. 2, pages 21-27

Schreiber, E. M. (1979) Enduring Effective Military Service? Opinion Differences between U.S. Veterans and Nonveterans. *Social Forces*, Vol 57, Iss. 3, Pages 824-839.