

Student Veterans: Tapping into a Valuable Resource

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Student Veterans: Tapping into a Valuable Resource

Abstract

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent reduction in the size of the military coupled with a new veterans support program have resulted in a recent and dramatic increase in a traditionally underrepresented and underserved group on college and trade school campuses; the student veteran. In late 2008, Congress passed the Post 9/11 GI Bill to support the education and training of military members and veterans who have served on or after September 11, 2001. From its implementation through the end of 2013, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has recorded an increase of greater than 200 percent in Post 9/11 GI Bill awardees. Projections are for this number to continue to grow, reaching two million total beneficiaries by 2020.¹ In many cases, engineering and engineering technology programs have not adjusted their student support services to serve the rapid increase in these non-traditional students. Failure to understand and make the most of this non-traditional student population diminishes an outstanding opportunity for schools to utilize a unique set of knowledge, skills and life experiences that can enhance the traditional classroom.

Administrators, faculty members, and traditional students can get the greatest benefits from these traits only if they are aware of them and how they can be most effectively leveraged. At the same time, the veteran student may have unique challenges that must be addressed if programs are to take full advantage of this valuable resource. Universities are best served when they can recognize these challenges and learn how to best accommodate the administrative, medical and functional needs unique to veterans. Administrators and faculty members need to be aware of the various resources that are available to these students.

This paper presents an overview of issues with which the authors feel faculty members should be familiar. While not all inclusive, the most common student veteran support resources are highlighted and explained. The paper also relates common characteristics and unique strengths possessed by these students, as well as the challenges with which many must deal while pursuing their education. Finally, the paper offers specific suggestions in how the faculty, specifically engineering faculty, can capitalize on the strengths of these students to assist in achieving selected ABET student outcomes while also enhancing the educational experience of all students in a program.

Introduction

As force reductions in our military increase over the next four years (80,000 in the Army alone since 2012) and couple with the outstanding education benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), student veteran populations will continue to rise. This non-traditional student population offers an outstanding opportunity for schools to utilize a unique set of knowledge, skills and life experiences that can enhance the traditional classroom. Administrators, faculty members, and traditional students can reap the greatest benefits from these traits only if they are aware of them and how they can be most effectively used.

The comprehensive Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) benefits enable veterans to attend private schools they normally could not afford. This non-traditional student population growth should cause schools to take a more holistic view of their services. This is especially true for private universities, tailored to the traditional student. Student veterans are often balancing work and family and now find themselves navigating unfamiliar territory applying for both the school and their education benefits, outside of the routine support system provided by parents and other family members to traditional students. This can result in a higher level of anxiety that may be compounded if the veteran has Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or neuropsychological affects from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Schools that offer support for student veterans glean the leadership, maturity, work ethic and life experiences of these individuals. Understanding and facilitating the transition of the professional military culture to the campus environment allows for the transfer of these valuable traits to traditional students. It also fosters the growth of camaraderie amongst student veterans, increases retention of this demographic, and enhances their learning performance and success.

Understanding the Opportunity

By the end of 2015, the two year Department of Defense military force reductions reached over 52,800² with another 60,000 projected by the end of 2019 (Army and Air Force alone).³ Add this reduction in force with the normal military attrition rate, which varies from fourteen to twenty-eight percent depending on the Service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard) and time enlisted within that Service,⁴ an unpredictable job market, and the outstanding Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education and disability benefits, and you have a robust and rising student veteran population. Even with the low veteran unemployment rate of 3.9 percent⁵, veterans are moving from trade-style jobs toward a career they feel matches the leadership, business, intellectual and people skills they have acquired and honed in the military. In order to accomplish this transition, veterans must return to school and earn a degree. Until recently, most of these veterans aspiring to return to college faced a huge hurdle, the cost of tuition. Even with the traditional Montgomery GI Bill, these students would struggle to meet public university cost obligations, let alone covering the tuition at any private institution. They would have to resort to supplementing their GI Bill benefits with financial aid and high interest student loans. But in late 2008, the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill enabled students to significantly reduce out of pocket tuition expenses and apply to any university that accepted these VA benefits.

Today, most universities see student veterans utilizing one or more of the four most commonly used VA benefits. President Franklin Roosevelt signed the initial GI Bill into law in June 1944 and it has had multiple updates, most notably that championed by Mississippi Congressman Sonny Montgomery in 1984.⁶ The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) has two chapters: Chapter 30 for active duty and Chapter 1606 for Selected Reservists/National Guard. Military members, while serving on active duty or in a reserve status pay into the MGIB each month for one year to remain eligible. In return, the MGIB (MGIB-AD, Chapter 30) will pay a fulltime student veteran up to \$1789 per month, for up to 36 months, while enrolled in school. Selected Reservists (MGIB-SR, Chapter 1606) receive up to \$368 per month.⁷ Both Selected Reservists

and National Guard commonly utilize the Chapter 1606 benefits due to the lack of enough active duty days accrued during their normal service. However, due to the ongoing U.S. combat operations since late 2001, many National Guard members and Reservists have activated, deployed and become eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Veterans utilizing Chapter 30 of the MGIB usually exited the military prior to September 11, 2001 and are not eligible for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33) awards veterans serving in the Armed Forces on or after September 11, 2001, a maximum of 36 months of education benefits. This benefit pays a percentage of tuition, a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), and a book stipend based on the amount of active duty time served by the veteran. Table 1 is a summary of the award percentage earned based on the active duty time served. This information is useful for understanding at what level a specific student veteran’s education is funded. In speaking with a student veteran, two useful questions to ask them are, “How long did you serve on active duty?” and “Are you using GI Bill benefits to fund your education?” With this knowledge, a faculty member can have a general idea of how well a student veteran’s college costs are covered and if there may be some financial strain on that student.

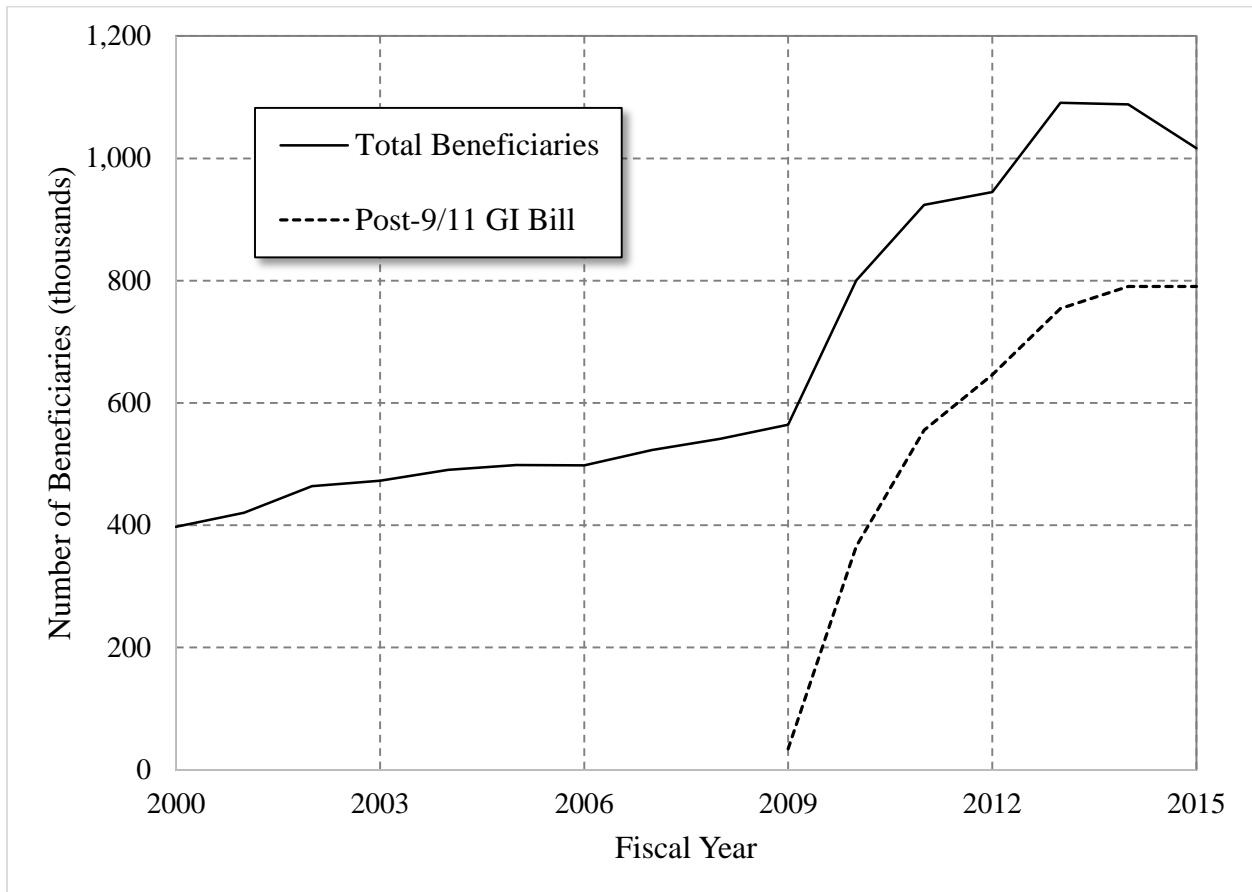
Table 1. Summary of Post 9/11 GI Bill Eligibility⁸

Member Serves	Percentage of Maximum Benefit Payable
At least 36 months	100%
At least 30 continuous days on active duty and must be discharged due to service-connected disability	100%
At least 30 months, but less than 36 months	90%
At least 24 months, but less than 30 months	80%
At least 18 months, but less than 24 months	70%
At least 12 months, but less than 18 months	60%
At least 6 months, but less than 12 months	50%
At least 90 days, but less than 6 months	40%

The BAH is a monthly payment meant to cover the cost of rental housing and utilities and is based on the median rental rate in the area in which the school is located. The BAH amount corresponds to the amount that would be paid to an active duty ‘E-5 with dependents’ (the fifth of ten enlisted ranks in the military). For example, the amounts can range from highs in the vicinity of \$3,636 in New York City to lows in the vicinity of \$909 in Fayetteville, AR.⁹ The book stipend is paid to the student veteran per credit hour. Both the BAH and book stipend are paid at the eligible percentage rate. The book stipend maximum pay is \$1000 annually for a 100 percent eligible student veteran. The tuition is also based on the eligible percentage. For State schools, the VA pays up to the maximum in-state rate and for private schools, the VA pays an annual total of the national average of \$21,084.89 for 2015. Since this amount is usually well below the annual tuition rate of private institutions, the VA will partner with private schools to equally split any balance due with the respective school if the student veteran is 100 percent

eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill. This Yellow Ribbon program enables no out of pocket tuition expenses for the student veteran while benefits remain. Since semester length is an average of 4.5 months or less and the benefit is exhausted on a daily basis only while the student veteran is enrolled, the student veteran has four years of paid college. In addition, if a student veteran has at least one day of Post 9/11 benefits remaining at the start of another semester, the VA will pay benefits for the entire semester.

The last VA benefit presented in this paper is the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) benefit. Many school administrators get this program confused with a part of the GI Bill, but in fact, these Chapter 31 VA benefits are disability benefits. Veterans must have a VA determined service-connected disability of 30 percent or higher, must apply via their State VA Office and receive a VA Case Manager that must approve these benefits for education purposes. These VR&E benefits pay up to 48 months of education benefits, all book and school supply items, and the same BAH rate as the Post 9/11 GI Bill (if eligible). Similar to the other VA education benefits, the benefit counts down by the day while the student is enrolled in courses.



Note: State statistics may include individuals who used their education benefits in more than one state. Therefore the national totals in the Annual Benefits Report summary statistics (Appendix table) should not be used to reflect the total number of beneficiaries during the fiscal year as these counts are calculated as the sum total of the state statistics.

Figure 1. Department of Veterans Affairs Education Program Beneficiaries: FY2000 to FY2015¹⁰

Lastly, these GI Bill and VR&E Program benefits may be utilized by accredited entities that accept the benefits for certificate granting schools all the way to doctoral degree programs. Of note, eligibility for these VA benefits is predicated upon the veteran having a discharge from their respective service under honorable conditions.

Since its inception in 2009, the VA has paid \$30 billion in reference to Post 9/11 GI Bill alone.¹¹ Figure 1 shows the increase in veterans utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill while Figure 2 shows the increase in veterans that have a service connected disability of 30 percent and higher eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) benefits.

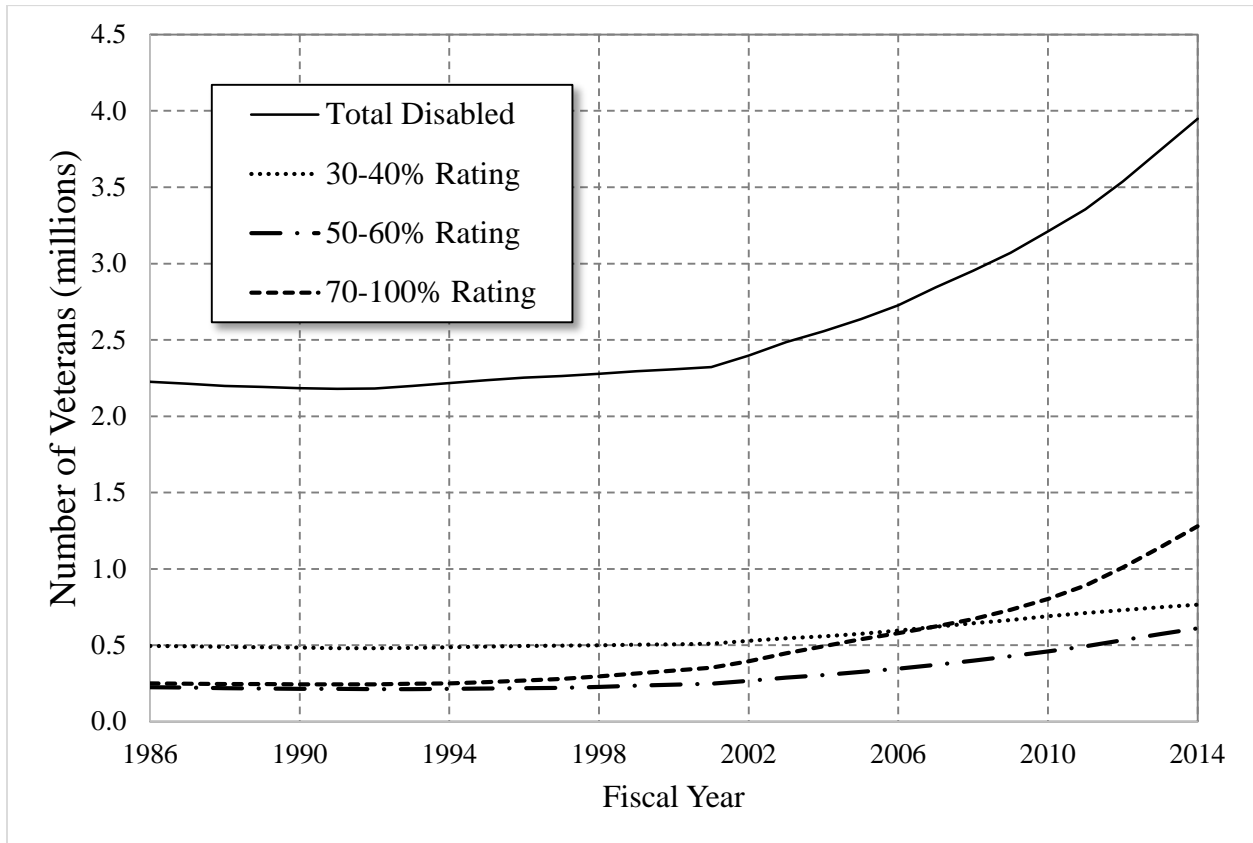


Figure 2. Service-Connected Disabled Veterans by Disability Rating Group: FY1986 to FY2014¹²

The increasing numbers of student veterans and increased VA benefit support only represent one part of the overall opportunity picture for this demographic. The most important component is the individual student veteran.

Understanding the Student Veteran

While there is no ‘typical’ student veteran, there are some experiences and characteristics that most share. The following is a list of some of the key characteristics of this particular student population drawn from the VA Campus Toolkit.¹³

- 73%-80% of Student Veterans are male; 21-27% are female

- With only 10-14% of military personnel being women, female Student Veterans are over represented in postsecondary education
- Only 15% of Student Veterans are traditionally aged college students. Most Student Veterans are between the ages of 24 and 40
- 47% of Student Veterans have children
- 47.3% of Student Veterans are married
- 62% of Student Veterans are first-generation students
- 79% Student Veterans using GI benefits are attending public schools. The remaining 21% are equally split between non-profit private schools and proprietary schools.

Close consideration of this listing reveals both strengths and opportunities that these non-traditional students bring to the college classroom as well as challenges that they must overcome in integrating into this new environment. Student veterans bring an enormous amount of maturity and life perspective with them. Most are mature beyond their years. They have a respect for authority that has been borne of necessity and an understanding of delayed gratification. They are focused and goal-oriented and possess a tremendous work ethic. Most have experiences in working with broad and diverse groups of individuals and bring with them experience and skills in leading small teams. They come from very diverse backgrounds and have life experiences unlike any traditional student on campus. Student veterans are older, typically commute to campus, work part or fulltime, often have a spouse and children, and make-up roughly four percent of the undergraduates across the nation.¹⁴

Student veterans may have unique challenges that must be addressed for schools and faculty to take full advantage of their capabilities. Moving into the collegiate environment brings challenges for many student veterans. This move represents a significant change in culture and can come with a certain level of anxiety as they adjust to a new norm. Many will not be interested in the 'typical' student activities. They have matured out of that phase of their lives. Most have been out of school long enough for their academic skills to have experienced some atrophy. They may have to work significantly harder initially to get back on par with their more traditional classmates. This can seem daunting at first. This period of adjustment can breed substantial frustration which can be significantly alleviated by letting veteran students know what to expect, ensuring them that they 'will' catch up and directing them to the appropriate support systems.

The balancing act of life/school/work can often be stressed by neuropsychological and/or physical maladies associated with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and combat or noncombat related physical injuries. These students, recently immersed in the warrior culture of the military, look for a sense of structure, team and mission. With the unstructured environment of campus life, student veterans often feel like outsiders, lacking commonality and camaraderie with the traditional undergraduate student. Universities are best served when they can recognize these challenges and learn how to best accommodate the administrative, medical and functional needs unique to veterans. Administrators and faculty members should also be aware of the unique resources that are available to these students.

For some, there will be the added challenges of navigating the VA system as they work through service-related injuries and disabilities; both physical and psychological. In many cases, they may also face micro-aggressions due to faculty and staff inexperience and lack of knowledge in associating with this student population. The most typical of these is the tendency to refer to every veteran as a ‘soldier.’ While this works very well for Army veterans, it can be perceived as a snub by veterans from the other Services. A useful question to ask student veterans is, “In which branch of the military did you serve?” The common monikers for each service are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Common Service Monikers

Service	Moniker
Air Force	Airman
Army	Soldier
Coast Guard	Coast Guardsman or Coastie
Marines	Marine
Navy	Sailor

Finally, some of the most significant challenges that student veterans face are those that are least visible. In a recent Quinnipiac University (QU) student veteran health and wellness survey conducted by QU’s Department of Physical Therapy, the top four responses on how to make “QU a more veteran friendly campus” were extra financial support, additional academic support, training for faculty/staff, and veteran specific counseling.¹⁵ In addition, current results for emotional conditions (Table 3) show the percentage of survey respondents affected and how these conditions relate to their military experience.

Table 3. Survey Results of Student Veteran Emotional Conditions¹⁵

Emotional Conditions	Currently Have	Result of Military Experience	Total Respondents
Anxiety	64%	92%	73%
Depression	72%	72%	57%
Stress	75%	63%	57%
Sleeplessness	89%	67%	47%
Addiction	57%	86%	35%
Panic Attacks	67%	67%	30%
PTSD	66%	100%	30%

Leveraging the Student Veteran

So, how can we get the most out of this invaluable resource and, just as importantly, how can our student veterans get the most out of us? A great starting place for engineering and engineering technology programs are the ABET Student Outcomes. By definition, ABET Student Outcomes “describe what students are expected to know and be able to do by the time of graduation. These relate to the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that students acquire as they

progress through the program.”¹⁶ For programs accredited under the Engineering Accreditation Commission (EAC), these outcomes are:

- (a) an ability to apply knowledge of mathematics, science, and engineering
- (b) an ability to design and conduct experiments, as well as to analyze and interpret data
- (c) an ability to design a system, component, or process to meet desired needs within realistic constraints such as economic, environmental, social, political, ethical, health and safety, manufacturability, and sustainability
- (d) an ability to function on multidisciplinary teams
- (e) an ability to identify, formulate, and solve engineering problems
- (f) an understanding of professional and ethical responsibility
- (g) an ability to communicate effectively
- (h) the broad education necessary to understand the impact of engineering solutions in a global, economic, environmental, and societal context
- (i) a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in life-long learning
- (j) a knowledge of contemporary issues
- (k) an ability to use the techniques, skills, and modern engineering tools necessary for engineering practice.

A quick look at many of these EAC student outcomes reveals knowledge, skills and behaviors that are important to all post-secondary students, not just engineering majors. In many instances, student veterans come into programs with a significant head start on their ‘traditional’ contemporaries with regard to many of the ‘soft’ skills. Table 4 presents a matching of student veteran strengths to selected EAC student outcomes that was compiled by QU engineering faculty veterans.

Table 4. ABET EAC Student Outcomes Matched to Veteran Student Strengths

ABET EAC Student Outcome	Student Veteran Strength
(c) an ability to design a system, component, or process to meet desired needs within realistic constraints such as economic, environmental, social, political, ethical, health and safety, manufacturability, and sustainability	- broad life experience – they are very useful for alternate perspectives in team discussions - many have received education and have extensive experience in ethical and morale standards - many have received education and have extensive experience in safety standards and risk analysis
(d) an ability to function on multidisciplinary teams	- experience working in diverse teams – include in diverse groups for a stabilizing influence - leadership experience – they can serve as group leaders and mentor other students in this role
(e) an ability to identify, formulate, and solve engineering problems	- experience in practical and creative problem solving
(f) an understanding of professional and ethical responsibility	- broad experience and comfort in working in a culture which values trust, loyalty, integrity and honorable behavior - they can be excellent mentors for other students
(g) an ability to communicate effectively	- experience in communicating with teams of diverse individuals via written and oral means
(h) the broad education necessary to understand the impact of engineering solutions in a global, economic, environmental, and societal context	- possess the broad background and experience along with some service-related education and training in different cultures and societal norms
(i) a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in life-long learning	- most student veterans are pursuing post-secondary education because the continuing professional education focus of the military has reinforced this fact - they can be valuable in relating this to less mature students
(j) a knowledge of contemporary issues	- many very well-versed on contemporary issues at the national and global levels through study and experience

Administration/Faculty Education

Given the challenges mentioned above that some student veterans will face, it is not surprising that targeted support can make a big difference in the initial adjustment and success of these students. For post-secondary institutions to get the most out of this valuable resource, they must understand the challenges and opportunities. By the end of 2013, over 690 institutes of higher learning had increased services and programs for student veterans.¹⁷ However, many of these services were limited to administrative support focused on VA benefits and not for counseling, advocacy and development of the individual. It is imperative for faculty and staff to have an understanding of what the best practices student veterans bring to campus as well as the challenges they face on a daily basis. In a recent Quinnipiac University survey on faculty knowledge about veterans, 96 percent of the respondents had never served in the military.¹⁸ This disparity will continue to exist between the military and its populace due to the nature of the “all volunteer force and its lack of interaction with the non-military communities. Therefore, schools must ensure they incorporate a military knowledge base to educate their staff and faculty. For those institutions that already have a veterans’ office and advocate on staff, faculty have a phenomenal resource who can not only help the student veterans, they can also help the faculty and administration become an effective advocate for this group. For additional funding and support, the schools’ veterans’ office can pair with their respective grants office to apply for veteran related grants such as the Department of Education’s Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success or Aurora Foundation’s Student Veterans Grant to name a few.

If your institution does not have an advocate on staff, all is not lost. Thanks to the internet, faculty members can learn the basics with much less effort than their freshmen student veterans will be expending to catch up to their ‘peers’. In addition to this paper’s bibliography, Table 5 below lists the URLs for some useful veteran websites.

Table 5. Useful Veteran Websites

Description	URL
US Veterans Affairs, Education and Training	http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/index.asp
Post-9/11 GI Bill Eligibility for Active Duty Veterans	https://gibill.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/947
Student Veterans of America	http://studentveterans.org/index.php
VA Campus Toolkit	http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/studentveteran/index.asp#sthash.i7bKLctl.dpbs

Conclusion

This paper has presented a cursory outline of Student Veterans and how this non-traditional student population offers an outstanding opportunity for schools to utilize this group’s unique sets of knowledge, skills and life experiences to enhance the traditional classroom and educational experience for all students. The increase in near-term force reductions in our military coupled with the outstanding education benefits provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) should make this a highly-valued demographic by any college or university. Aside from student veterans’ peers, faculty members will more than likely provide the most interaction with

this demographic on campuses. A holistic approach is necessary to assist and guide these non-traditional students to ensure the best chance for success and thereby best serve the entire learning community. Administrators and faculty members must educate themselves on veteran issues and interact with academic advisors and all university offices from admissions and financial aid to counseling and learning services.

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