
Today's News

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GI Bill Could Be a Boon to For-Profit Institutions

By [KELLY FIELD](#)

Washington

If Congress passes a bill to expand veterans' education benefits, the biggest beneficiary—after the veterans, of course—could be the University of Phoenix.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the for-profit giant enrolled 17,221 veterans during the last fiscal year, making it the top recipient of federal GI aid. Two other for-profit institutions, American InterContinental University and American Public University, ranked second and third, with roughly 3,700 veterans each.

Keith Wilson, director of the department's education office, said veterans gravitate toward online institutions and colleges near military bases, like the University of Maryland at College Park, which ranked fourth, with 3,359 veterans.

"A lot of it is driven by convenience," he said in an interview on Thursday during a veterans-education conference at Georgetown University. The conference, which is sponsored by the American Council on Education, aims to educate college presidents about how to better serve student veterans.

Mr. Wilson said he expects colleges will step up their efforts to recruit veterans if Congress passes the tuition-benefits bill, which would provide veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with enough aid to attend the most expensive public institution in their state for four years. But he doesn't expect enrollment patterns to change much, given veterans' tendency to stay close to home.

"I think there will be a pretty big push and a lot of competition," he said. "But I don't see people moving en masse across the country."

Still Under Negotiation

His remarks came as President Bush was backing away from a threat to veto the legislation, which is part of a supplemental spending bill to finance the wars.

Mr. Bush indicated this week that he could support the expanded tuition benefits if Congress agreed to make the benefits transferable to the spouses and children of veterans. The president had previously said he would veto any bill that exceeded his spending request or that tied the hands of military leaders.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the tuition benefits last month but refused to provide funds for the wars. The Senate passed the bill last week, after adding billions of dollars for the wars.

Since the Senate action, members of the House have been negotiating with the White House to strip most of the

domestic spending from the bill. The House is expected to vote on a pared-down version of the measure next week.

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Preparing for an Influx

The impediments and setbacks came in ways big and small. Josh Webster had his academic scholarship from the University of California at Los Angeles reduced from \$5,000 to \$1,000 because the federal government was paying him veterans' benefits for the time he spent as an Air Force para-rescue jumper. As Derek Blumke sought to gather information about potentially attending the University of Michigan as he departed the Air Force in 2005, officials there transferred his call from office to office six times, he said, before telling him they could not help him because he was not yet a student.

And when Blumke broke through the barriers and enrolled there, he remembers a classmate, upon finding out that he had been in the military, asking "if I had killed anyone," Blumke said, recalling the query with exasperation. "My answer was 'No, but thanks for asking.' "

Webster and Blumke were among a group of current and former military service members who joined dozens of college administrators, government officials, and other interested parties for the first afternoon of a two-day summit, ["Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America's Veterans,"](#) sponsored at Georgetown University by the American Council on Education.

The event comes amid growing attention in higher education, and in society generally, to the issue of how to ensure that the growing legions of men and women who have represented their country in the armed forces return successfully to society. While some colleges have long served military service members and veterans, and many others are just beginning to report growing numbers of veterans flowing onto their campuses, most educators and military officials expect that a boom is around the corner. That's partly because the number of men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to rise and partly because, as now appears likely, the government is poised to significantly expand educational benefits for veterans, under [legislation that Congress is on the verge of passing](#).

"At some point there's going to be a major influx in the number of veterans going to school," said Patrick Campbell, legislative director for Iraq and

Afghanistan Veterans of America and a recent graduate of Catholic University of America's law school. "A lot of schools are treating veterans just like every other student, and that's just not going to work."

"We have to reintegrate veterans back into our society," said U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican, Vietnam veteran, and leading co-sponsor of the bill now surging through Congress. "Education does that about as well as any sphere of our society. You shape people in ways that other groups can't," he told the college officials in the audience.

While many college officials recognize (and embrace) the role that they might play in helping service members make their way back into society, they also recognize — as student veterans at the conference made abundantly clear — that they may not be ready for the invasion of former service members. That is both a recognition that some veterans pose unusual challenges — because of physical injuries or psychological ailments, for instance — and that campuses unaccustomed to dealing with veterans may not be fully equipped to deal with their needs.

Various speakers discussed a wide range of barriers — financial, attitudinal and other — that military veterans faced in finding their way into and through higher education. Josh Webster's situation, in which he found himself losing potential financial aid from his institution because he was receiving educational aid designed for veterans, is all too common, said Edward M. Elmendorf, senior vice president for government relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Many colleges' student aid systems count that "earned" benefit — earned, Elmendorf noted, by putting their lives on the line — as a "resource" that reduces the financial aid they qualify for. AASCU has called for legislation that would prohibit colleges from taking that step.

Other practical problems emerge when student veterans can't pay their tuition bills because the government moves too slowly in delivering their educational benefits, and colleges must change their behavior if they "mean to be a friendly and inviting place for veterans," said Molly Corbett Broad, the new president of the American Council on Education. "There is often very little flexibility from our financial aid offices when [veterans] would request a tuition deferral because they hadn't gotten their veterans' benefits on time," she said.

There was widespread agreement at the meeting that the veterans' benefits bill sponsored by Hagel and Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia, assuming it becomes law, virtually wipe out the financial barriers to college that veterans face. Especially, Campbell of the veterans' association argued, if private colleges and graduate schools find ways to bring their tuitions within reach of the benefits contained in the Webb bill, which would essentially cover the costs of attending the average four-year public college.

But perhaps even more difficult — for the veterans to encounter and for the colleges to resolve — are the social and cultural barriers. The student who asked Blumke whether he had killed someone was just one of the many factors that made his transition to Michigan difficult. Blumke had gone into the Air Force after graduating high school with a 1.5 grade point average, figuring that he wasn't cut out for college. After six years in the service, though, he changed his mind, frustrated by the fact that he felt just as smart as many of the people to whom he reported.

Blumke spent some time at a community college and then had his frustrating experience trying to transfer to Michigan, where there was "nobody to answer my questions." (He urged college officials to set up committees to assess the services they provide for veterans and how they might be improved, and then to create a single point of contact to which veterans can turn.)

Once on the campus, he lived in an apartment by himself, feeling "like I didn't know anybody and was alienated from the rest of the class." "I know it sounds like it was leading to depression, and it was," Blumke told the audience. "Being a psych major, I treated myself, of course," he said to chuckles

from those familiar with the form of self-medication that many college students engage in.

Blumke also took a more positive approach, though; he helped form a student veterans' group on the Michigan campus, of the sort that are increasingly cropping up on quite a few campuses. "We try to highlight the issues they face, and help them try to figure out how to fit in."

Speakers alternated between minimizing and emphasizing the ways in which veterans differ from other students; Steven Xenakis, a physician and retired Army general, noted that despite the many news articles about psychologically troubled veterans of the Iraqi and Afghan conflicts, only about 20 percent of student veterans show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury. Others suggested that those numbers might be suppressed because soldiers don't want to reveal their conditions in ways that might get back to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In general, though, the most common theme seemed to be that military veterans are in many ways more prepared to flood onto college campuses than most institutions are to receive them, and that that has to change in the coming months and years.

"There's an awakening on many campuses," said Kathy Snead, president of [Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges](#), "that we're not doing as much as we could."

The two-day meeting continues today with presentations about various initiatives that institutions such as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and the state of California have undertaken to ease the path into higher education for veterans.

— [Doug Lederman](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/06/06/vets>.

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