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California colleges eager to help veterans under new GI Bill

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Just a tiny fraction of veterans attend California's colleges. But now schools are preparing for an influx of student soldiers after lawmakers overhauled the GI Bill, making higher education accessible to a new generation of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The benefits come as California campuses launch new programs to ease the move from combat to college, offering everything from a sympathetic ear to early course placement.

"There's been a fundamental shift. Now education can be your full-time job," said Patrick Campbell, a University of California-Berkeley grad who was a medic in Iraq and now works for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, based in Washington, D.C.

The new legislation, signed into law June 30, was the biggest overhaul since the GI Bill was originally enacted in 1944, turning a college education into a right of middle-class America. However, over the decades, the much vaunted college benefits didn't keep pace with the soaring costs of tuition.

Full ride

This new benefit not only pays for a four-year full ride at veterans' in-state college, it also helps with housing and other expenses.

"Until now, the money paid by the GI Bill barely paid for community college. Now you can go to any California State University or University of California campus for free," said Campbell, who borrowed about \$100,000 to attend law school. "Thousands of vets can go to the best school - not just the cheapest school."

The new provisions go into effect in August 2009.

"I am ecstatic. It will make college so much more easy, and appealing, for vets," said Joshua Karrasch, 27, a premed student at UC-Santa Cruz who served as a medic with the Expeditionary Medical Force in Kuwait.

To afford school, Karrasch landed a job with an ambulance company. He cashed out his military retirement plan, bought a 1972 camper trailer and moved to a trailer park.

Local colleges are also offering veterans help - saying they deserve a reward for their years of sacrifice. Admission officers promise to look at their application not once, but twice. Like athletes and handicapped students, vets will get priority when picking classes. Mentoring and counseling services are available.

Although California campuses pride themselves on student diversity, veterans have not had much of a presence. Of the 4.3 million students in the state's higher education system, only an estimated 21,000 are veterans on the GI Bill. The majority of vets, about 16,000, attend community colleges.

The new law will swell the ranks, Campbell predicted. He calculates that it will bring about \$432 million in educational benefits to the state.

"The number of veterans at UC-Berkeley increased this year, and we're likely to see that number grow,"

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said Ron Williams, campus coordinator of Re-entry Student and Veterans Programs and Services. About 150 Berkeley students have identified themselves as veterans and are majoring in everything from engineering and languages to philosophy and peace and conflict studies.

While campuses like Berkeley and Santa Cruz are famed for their anti-war sentiments, veterans say their fellow students criticize policy-makers, not soldiers.

"A lot of people at UCSC dislike the military, but I feel very welcomed. I have never been asked inappropriate questions," Karrasch said. He helps students like himself by volunteering at UC-Santa Cruz's new "peer mentoring program" for vets.

Successful students

The schools say that veterans enrich campus life. They are more focused and bring a wealth of real-world experience to classroom discussions, educators say. Most important, they help educate civilians about the military - at a time when few young people, especially the educated elite, interact with former soldiers.

"Veterans bring leadership, maturity and life skills that make for highly successful students," UC-Berkeley Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau said in a letter to Congress earlier this year urging support for expanded educational benefits.

Stuart Martin joined the Marines when he was 17, not ready for college, but wanting to see something of the "real world." He vividly recalls the recruiter assuring him that college would be paid for once he completed his five-year enlistment.

With sharp academic skills, he enrolled at Monterey's Defense Language Institute to learn the

Persian language Farsi, then was deployed to Iraq. As a translator attached to the intelligence arm of his unit, his life was never in danger - but it was stressful.

Now at UC-Berkeley, "I had an amazing spring semester," he said. In Farsi classes, he can contribute vocabulary used in economics and diplomacy; native speakers, he said, tend to be more familiar with household terms.

"I feel appreciated here," said Martin, who is double-majoring in rhetoric and Persian literature. "I feel like I'm contributing to the community."

On campus, "the VIP treatment really helps," he said. Priority registration secures the classes he needs to quickly graduate; at 23, he is older than most classmates. "Most people my age are already in careers."

The added money is desperately needed, because Martin's current \$1,800 monthly GI benefit doesn't cover expenses. "When I was in the military, I was making a pretty good salary," he said. "But it is literally hard to even eat right now."

With the passage of the GI bill, thousands more veterans like Martin and Karrasch will soon arrive on California campuses, Campbell said. The expanding programs could mean the difference between success and failure.

"We don't want them just to get in - we want them to thrive," he said.

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