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Military Friendly Universities and Helping Veterans Succeed Academically

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Military Friendly Universities and Helping Veterans Succeed Academically

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Chapter 1 Introduction

A military friendly university can make or break a veteran's transition to the civilian world; veterans need support services that are prepared to address the needs and concerns they bring onto the campus. It is important to understand what exactly constitutes a military friendly university because it is more than just a label put on by outside sources and/or the media. Many universities offer services geared towards veterans but identifying whether these services are enough to help veterans and service members returning from deployment, succeed academically is a major concern within higher education.

Background/History

The Department of Veterans Affairs has been helping veterans pursue their educational goals since 1944, when the Servicemen's Readjustment Act commonly known as the GI Bill was signed into law. This act has been noted as being "one of the most significant pieces of legislation ever produced by the federal government" (www.benefits.va.gov) and one that has significantly impacted the millions of men and women that have served our country. This bill at the time provided grants for school, funding for college tuition, low interest mortgage rates, job training, business loans, unemployment payments and more, and its original purpose was to help veterans transition to civilian life soon after coming back from deployment. Since then there have been many additions and variations to the original GI Bill, all of which now reside in law under Title 38 of the United States Code, however the goal has always been to assist veterans readjust into civilian life and provide these veterans educational opportunities that they may have missed due to their military commitments.

The most commonly utilized GI Bill benefit to date is the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, since its implementation date this benefit alone has “provided educational benefits to 773,000 veterans and their families, amounting to over \$20 billion in benefits” (www.va.gov) in just 7 short years. This bill has been providing financial support for tuition and housing for individuals whom have at least served for 90 days of service, service must have occurred after September 11th 2001; today the majority of student veterans utilize the Post 9/11 benefits at their college. As seen below, the Post 9/11 alone has been the most utilized VA Educational Benefit since 2010, in addition to the other programs within the GI Bill over 1 million veterans have utilized the benefits (the numbers have increased since then):

Beneficiaries who received education benefits by fiscal year¹

Education program	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	% change from FY 12 to FY 13
POST 9/11	34,393	365,640	555,329	646,302	754,229	17%
MGIB-AD ²	341,969	247,105	185,220	118,549	99,755	-16%
MGIB-SR	63,469	67,373	65,216	60,393	62,656	4%
VRAP	-	-	-	12,251	67,918	454%
REAP	42,881	30,269	27,302	19,774	17,297	-13%
DEA	81,327	89,696	90,657	87,707	89,160	2%
VEAP	448	286	112	76	29	-62%
Total	564,487	800,369	923,836	945,052	1,091,044	15%

Figure 1 Veterans Benefits Administration GI Bill Benefits Report www.benefits.va.gov

The GI Bill educational benefits are utilized by veterans in colleges all over the United States, and although the benefits do assist with the educational costs associated with getting a degree, they do not help with any other expenses nor do they assist with the needs that many veterans require in order to succeed academically. Because of this, it is up to colleges to have services readily available for veterans to utilize, in order to assist with their educational needs, in

addition to having competent and highly trained staff that are aware of the needs and challenge of this unique population. Unfortunately many schools are not equipped with enough knowledge as to what type of services veterans actually need, and because the Department of Veterans Affairs does not give schools any guidance on this subject matter, many schools must create services on their own, they must also find ways to train staff, and to alleviate any financial burden that the benefits do not cover.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to define what a military friendly university is, to determine the effectiveness of these military friendly universities, and to establish a correlation between the services offered at these universities, and the academic success of the student veteran population.

Research Question

The main research question asked in this study is whether universities have implemented services that have increased the graduation rates in the student veteran population. This study looks to establish a correlation between the services offered at colleges to the student veteran population, and the success/graduation rates of that population. The importance of this study is to offer insight and guidance to local San Francisco Bay Area colleges looking to implement a military friendly environment.

Research Sub-Questions

There are many questions that must be raised in order to get a full scope of effectiveness of any services that are available in these universities, including:

- (1) What steps has the university taken to build a campus climate geared towards supporting student veteran academic success?
 - (2) How does the university identify and address student veterans' concerns about their academic success?
 - (3) What additional services should be implemented to double the student veteran graduation/completion rates?
- And,
- 4) What are the needs and challenges of this population and has the university implemented services to address these topics?

Research Hypothesis

Services geared towards veterans in universities are effective in assisting veterans succeed academically. Ideally, the more services a university offers its student veteran population, the more opportunities this population has to succeed academically. The hypothesis to this study is necessary in order to find out whether services are helping veterans succeed academically or whether more needs to be done, essentially finding out what student veterans need in a college environment in order to be successful is the crucial and important in today's society where more men and women are returning from deployment and going back to school.

Research Assumptions

When analyzing military friendly universities, it's important to understand what exactly constitutes such a title, ideally a military friendly university is based on the services offered, the assistance given, the knowledgeable faculty, and the trained staff. Unfortunately many

universities get the title of military friendly from the media or publications that simply use very minimal criteria to qualify. In these cases, a military friendly university may not be the best option for a veteran; these universities may not have the best services accessible, or may not have the most qualified staff available, or they may not have the best intentions for the veteran. Ideally a military friendly university is generally an environment where student veterans feel safe, where there are services available not only on campus but online as well, and where there are highly trained staff and faculty that have a full scope of knowledge on VA related matters, including the needs and challenges of this population.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to San Francisco/Bay Area universities therefore there is a narrow selection of small, medium, and large public, private and nonprofit colleges and universities in the geographical area. The focus of this study is to understand whether there is a correlation between services made available to the student veteran population, in contrast to the academic success rate of this population, success rate is defined as completing a degree by maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Services made available outside of universities, such as in community based organizations, will also be analyzed and examined to determine whether a link between these organizations and universities should occur to help veterans transition to civilian life while aiding in their academic success.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The literature review journey started with the curiosity as to what scholarly work and other studies would be relevant to this study. The purpose of this study was to identify the best

academic, personal support and service programs universities and colleges throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, were implementing to assist returning combat and other veteran students. The main themes in this scholarly literature research include: (1) understanding the needs of veteran students; (2) mental and physical challenges and barriers; (3) current veteran student programs support readiness in universities and colleges; and (4) veteran focused community based organizations. The needs of veteran students are crucial because every single veteran has a unique need depending on their experiences in the military, it may be counseling is required, or additional time to complete an exam, or maybe even a helping hand in job searching, etc. Mental and physical challenges and barriers are extremely common for combat veterans, so it's important to have services available that cater to all challenges regardless whether it is a wheelchair accessible classroom or even one-on-one psychological counseling, barriers are not just physical but mental as well. Current veteran student programs support readiness in universities and colleges is crucial because having these services in place can be the difference between a student veteran succeeding or not, it can be the difference between a veteran graduation or failing courses, and it could also be the difference between a veteran transitioning into civilian life smoothly or possibly rocky. Lastly, veteran focused community based organizations are vital not only in the community but can provide universities assistance that would otherwise not be present on campus.

Understanding the Needs of Veteran Students

Anytime schools want to implement or improve services geared towards student veterans, it is important to understand the needs of these veterans, in order to help them transition to college. Given the increasing number of veterans returning to college and utilizing the GI Bill benefits,

“higher education must find ways to address the needs of this population and decrease the risk that they will leave college before achieving their goals,” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 14) which is why it’s also important to understand the differences between the average student and the average veteran, and that is because characteristics will be different, the needs will vary, and because of that retention and student outcomes will vary as well. In addition there are many levels of concerns and needs of each individual veteran, ranging from mental to physical disabilities, therefore it’s important to also have an understanding of these needs and provide proper training to staff and faculty. Keep in mind that the needs and challenges of each individual student veteran are unique, and can vary depending on age, gender, and individual military experiences. Challenges can range between mental and physical, some may have visible wounds others may have hidden wounds, nonetheless given the increasing number of veterans returning to college and utilizing the GI Bill benefits, higher education must find ways to address the needs and challenges of this population and decrease the risk that they will leave college before achieving their goals.

Veteran Students Mental and Physical Challenges and Barriers

The needs and concerns of veterans are wide and many, and that is because the effects of deployment are different for each individual, some of the most common would include mental and physical concerns such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) and physical impairments. Overcoming barriers is a struggle for returning veterans; generally the census is feeling lost or lonely because there is no micromanagement or sense of brotherhood in college as there is in the military, feelings of being different because of the physical impairments, or shame because of the mental disorders. It is important to know that

many civilian students and staff/faculty lack the understanding of a service member's experience, however with more and more service members returning from deployment with a mental health diagnoses or physical disabilities, it's imperative for universities to educate their population on the needs, concerns, but also the strategies as well.

Current Veteran Student Program Support Readiness of Universities and Colleges

Lack of services is a big contributor to the failure of veterans in higher education, especially because the GI Bill offers so many promises (financially) and veterans are not generally prepared for the realities. The realities are that many will need support and hands on, more than what they are accustomed to in the military and because of this many "student veterans face challenges that range from lack of disability accommodations to difficulty interacting with a younger body that represents a sharp contrast to someone transitioning from the demands of the military;" (Hamrick & Rumann, 2013, p. 6) many veterans need help adapting and navigating within the college environment, so services do need to be geared towards this so that there are no barriers present for veterans. Understanding what exactly a Military Friendly University is, is important, but it's also crucial to know that the term has a very loose definition particularly because the needs of veterans in one university may be different than the other. Looking at several universities it is apparent that military friendly universities begins with services and support both on campus and online to the veteran population; services can include a veterans club, priority scheduling, discounts and scholarships, accepting military training for credits, policies for withdrawing due to deployment, special accommodations, counseling, and so forth. Military Friendly Universities can vary depending on the needs of Veterans and service members however it's important to create a sense of community for these

veterans and have services available geared to help them transition to civilian life but also to help them succeed academically.

Veteran Focused Community Based Organizations (CBOs)

There are many community based organizations that offer amazing services to veterans and service members, one being Swords to Plowshares which provides services and care to more than 3000 veterans in the SF/Bay Area. Their services include health and social services, supportive housing, employment and training, as well as legal assistance. This particular organization has been around since the late 70's and many of the staff as well as volunteers are individuals whom have served, have spouses or dependents whom have/are currently serving, or simply have a passion for helping veterans and service members in the community. Having these types of services with such a great amount of help is essential for veterans but particular for student veterans whom may not have these services available in their university. The transition from military to civilian life is a difficult one without any support and by having these organizations in the bay area it offers the assistance veterans need to transition a bit more smoothly.

It is also important to review other studies that have been done on this topic matter, to compare and contrast the findings, results, as well as recommendations, and ultimately it's also important to look at all factors when implementing services in a university; determining what the needs are, what kind of staffing and training is required, what accommodations and adjustments needs to be made on campus, as well as what outside sources need to be reviewed and possibly brought onto the campus. Military friendly universities are not just colleges with titles they are

colleges with services to aid veterans succeed academically and help with the transition process to civilian life.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to establish a correlation between the services offered at colleges to the student veteran population, and the success/graduation rates of that population. In addition, this correlation will measure the effectiveness of military friendly universities in the San Francisco/Bay Area. Determining the most effective services and use of resources that have the greatest impact on veteran student success is a struggle within many universities, this is very important in the education industry because as more and more soldiers are coming back to the US from deployment, more will utilize VA educational benefits and even more veterans will require services to succeed academically more so than the average/typical college student.

In order to establish the correlation, the research design used in this study is a qualitative case study approach, where data collection comes first from a handful of universities in the bay area, including phone interviews with local school's VA certifying officials, in person interviews with several student veterans, surveys and as well as observations in local universities' veteran centers. Patterns, trends, and anomalies were then analyzed to determine the correlation between the availability of services to veteran students in connection with the academic success rate of that population. The main research assumption is that student veterans do not have access to enough support services in universities in order to succeed academically and that schools do not have enough knowledge or understanding of VA related issues in order to address the needs and concerns of veterans returning to school from recent deployment. The hypothesis of this study is

that if a university is classified as a military friendly university, than it should have services readily available for its veteran population, and that these services contribute to the academic success of their veteran population. Ideally, these services are effective in assisting veterans succeed academically; essentially the more guidance and assistance there is towards the student veteran population, the less stress and concerns come up, ultimately contributing to student success.

Many universities have services geared towards their student veteran population; they may include career and vocational support, counseling services, legal support, financial planning, and academic accommodations. It is important to understand what exactly it means for services to be effective in aiding veterans succeed academically; ultimately the goal is for veterans to complete their degree within 36 months, this is the amount of time allowed to utilize VA Educational Benefits. Although veterans do have 10 years to utilize these benefits after being discharged from the military, services may still show to be effective even if the student does not consecutively attend term after term, It is important to also understand what it means to succeed academically, grade point average, graduation rates, and dropout rates are three factors that measure the success of a student in college. A student must hold a certain GPA in order to maintain acceptable satisfactory academic progress, for example at Golden Gate University a “C” average of 2.0 GPA must be maintained as an Undergraduate, and a “B” average of 3.0 GPA must be maintained as a Graduate student. Generally if a student does not maintain satisfactory academic progress they are at risk of being disqualified from the University.

Becoming disqualified contributes to drop out rates, however dropout rates also have other factors that contribute to this, some students may not wish to continue their education at Golden Gate University for reasons such as lack of services, lack of class availability, location, professors' teaching styles, etc. So it's important that the services available help clear any student veterans' concerns. Concerns of veterans is an important issue that must be address when services are being created geared towards veterans, because this population is not like the average 18 year old college student, these men and women served in dangerous combat zones so they may be concerned with class size due to claustrophobic issues, they may be concerned with distance of each classroom location due to a disability or mobility issue, and so forth.

Lastly, graduation rates are a major indication that the University is doing what they can to help students succeed academically; the percentage of students that complete their intended degree within 3, 4, or 5 years is crucial, specifically because the Department of VA would like to see the veteran succeed and earn a degree (or certificate), not just take a class here and there.

The study focused on services available to student veterans, in a handful of universities in the San Francisco/Bay Area, the evolution of services available in these universities was looked at to determine which of these services has more of a direct correlation with veteran student academic success, and why these particular services are helping veteran students graduate and succeed academically.

Interviews with staff/professors, as well as student veterans at these Universities were conducted in order to get perspectives directly from those that provide the services and those whom utilize

them, this was used to understand the experiences of both parties and determine which services contribute the most to student veterans' success. Key informants include VA Certifying Officials at each university; these individuals are generally the first contacts for the student veteran population and have insight on the needs and concerns of this population. The student veterans are also a key group, they offer insight on their transition from military to civilian life, their needs and concerns, as well as what they consider a military friendly university to be. Other key informants also include other university staff that provide and facilitate services to the student veteran population.

Interview questions were created with the intent to provide an introduction of myself and of my study, in addition the questions were very basic and information which included information on number of veterans attending the university, the services that are offered at each university, the training offered to staff/faculty, as well as the events and workshops available for their student veterans.. The survey questions were created for the student veteran population to gain their perspective on what are military friendly universities, the kinds of services they have utilized in college, in addition to which services have helped them succeed or could have helped them succeed if available in the university. The idea behind the interviews and survey questions is to get the perspectives of everyone involved which includes the student veteran population as well as staff/faculty in universities.

The main research question asked in whether universities have implemented effective veteran services that have helped student veterans succeed academically. As more service members are returning back from deployment, more are starting back in college and utilizing the

services that are made available. Some colleges have implemented services geared towards their student veteran population for years while others are just now starting now. Ultimately it's important for the services to be effective, and to help veterans succeed academically.

There are many questions that must be raised in order to get a full scope of effectiveness of any services that are available in these universities, including: The sub-questions for this study included:

- a. What steps has the university taken to build a campus climate geared towards supporting student veteran academic success?
- b. How does the university identify and address student veterans' concerns about their academic success? And,
- c. What additional services should be implemented to double the student veteran graduation/completion rates?

These sub questions are crucial because they help determine the level of involvement within the university and its staff, and whether their involvement is enough to clarify the university as military friendly. The study does also focus on what a military friendly university is and it's important to comprehend and analyze what the university administrators are doing to create a military friendly environment but also what they are doing to implement services which will ultimately help veterans succeed academically.

The dependable variable for this study is current student veterans, they are affected by the independent variable which is the services that are available and whether they are successful in assisting veterans succeed academically. The study included evaluating the services that are

currently available in San Francisco/Bay Area colleges to determine whether these services are effective in student veteran academic success. The availability and readiness of these services was also looked at, for both in person and cyber students, to evaluate whether the different population is affected.

Controlling the internal and external validity is important because it ensures that the data is official, legitimate, and without any manipulation. External validity in this study includes making generalizations about the possible results; this was controlled by having a survey in place where concrete data was gathered from student veterans. The internal validity in this study dealt with the design of the study itself which may or may not yield specific conclusions, this was controlled by only having current, past, or prospective student veterans take the survey. By having this requirement in the survey, it provides data from actual students utilizing services in universities.

Operational Definitions

Universities

For purposes of this study, universities studied will include 5-6 San Francisco/Bay Area colleges (CSU, UC, Community College, and Private) that have student veterans.

Veteran Services:

Services that are available to veterans may include career and vocational support, counseling services, legal support, financial planning, and academic accommodations.

Services are readily available:

University has implemented services that are easily accessible, and these services are available for all students, specifically for the student veteran population, regardless of whether they are an in person or cyber student.

Academic success:

For purposes of this study succeeding academically is demonstrated by looking at graduation rates, course completion rates, and GPA averages within the veteran population.

(The hypothesis of this study is that if a university is classified as a military friendly university, than it should have services readily available for its veteran population, and that these services contribute to the academic success of their veteran population.)

Chapter 4 Results and Findings

This chapter represents an analysis of the survey and interviews conducted for the hypothesis. Both primary and secondary data was researched, collected, analyzed, and compared for this study. The results and findings of this study are reviewed in this chapter to determine whether or not services are readily available for veterans and service members in universities and are effective in assisting this population succeed academically. The results identified in this study help to define a military friendly university that provides services and has support systems in place to help veterans succeed academically.

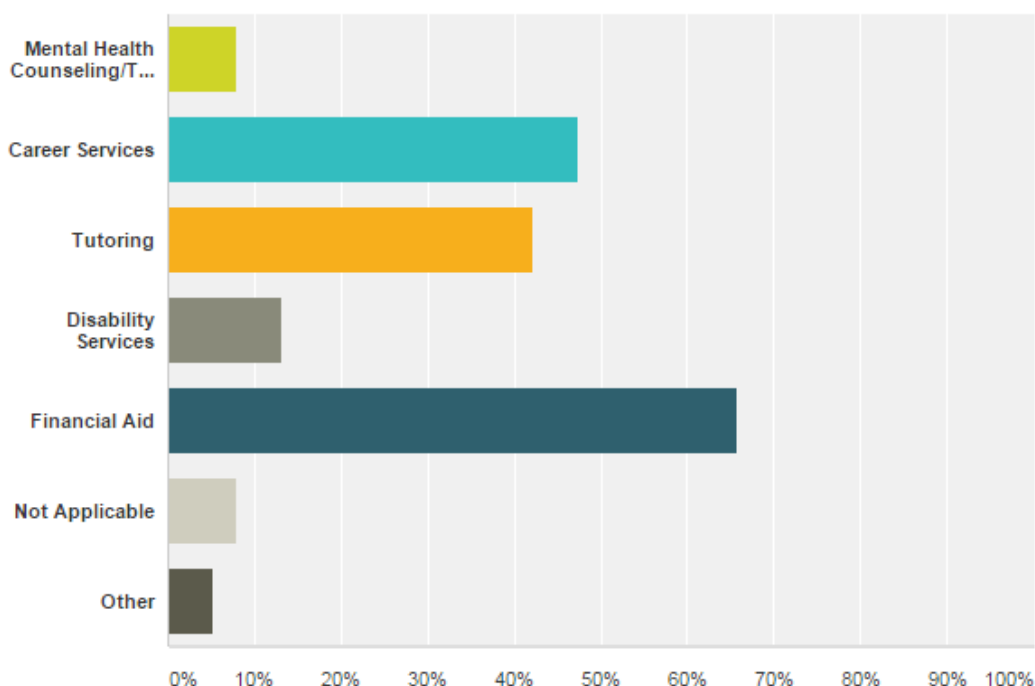
Primary data was collected for this study using a contact list of veterans and military members whom are currently attending college, have recently attended, or are looking to attend, in the Northern California area. Veterans and military members answered a variety of questions including multiple choice and short answer questions, provided through SurveyMonkey.com. Individual data was also collected from a focus group of current and prospective students whom are either currently in the military or have served in the past. In addition, phone interviews with several VA School Certifying Officials through San Francisco bay area colleges. The phone interviews were conducted in an informal question and answer process, the same questions were asked amongst all the participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a few student veterans that are currently attending local colleges, format of these interviews were also informal through conversational question and answer. The purpose of these in person interviews were to get a perspective on VA issues relating to veteran needs and concerns, as well as perspectives on military friendly universities.

Survey Results

What services available in your institution have you utilized?

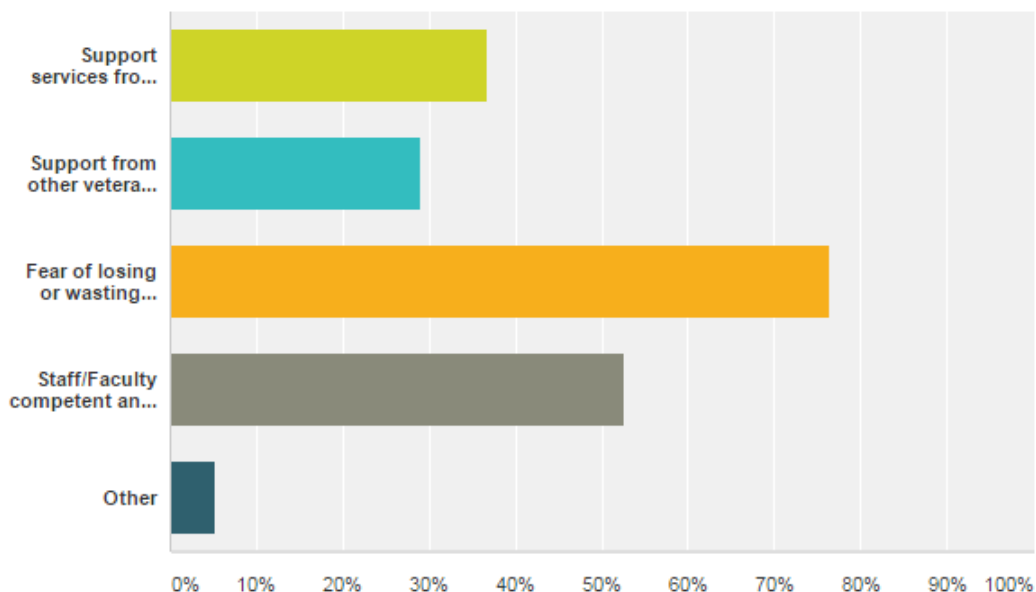
Out of 38 veterans and military members whom answered this question, an overwhelming majority stated that they have utilized Financial Aid (25 respondents - 65.79%), Career Services (18 respondents 47.37%), and Tutoring (16 respondents 42.11%) in their institutions. The two least utilized services of those surveyed included Mental Health Counseling/Therapy (3 respondents 7.89%) and Disability Services (5 respondents 13.16%). More than one response could have been selected when answering this question. With the rising

costs in the San Francisco Bay Area, it comes to no surprise that Financial Aid is the top selected option, although the GI Bill VA Educational Benefits do offer a generous amount of assistance towards tuition and living expenses, student veterans do still need assistance with additional costs that may not be covered fully by the benefits.



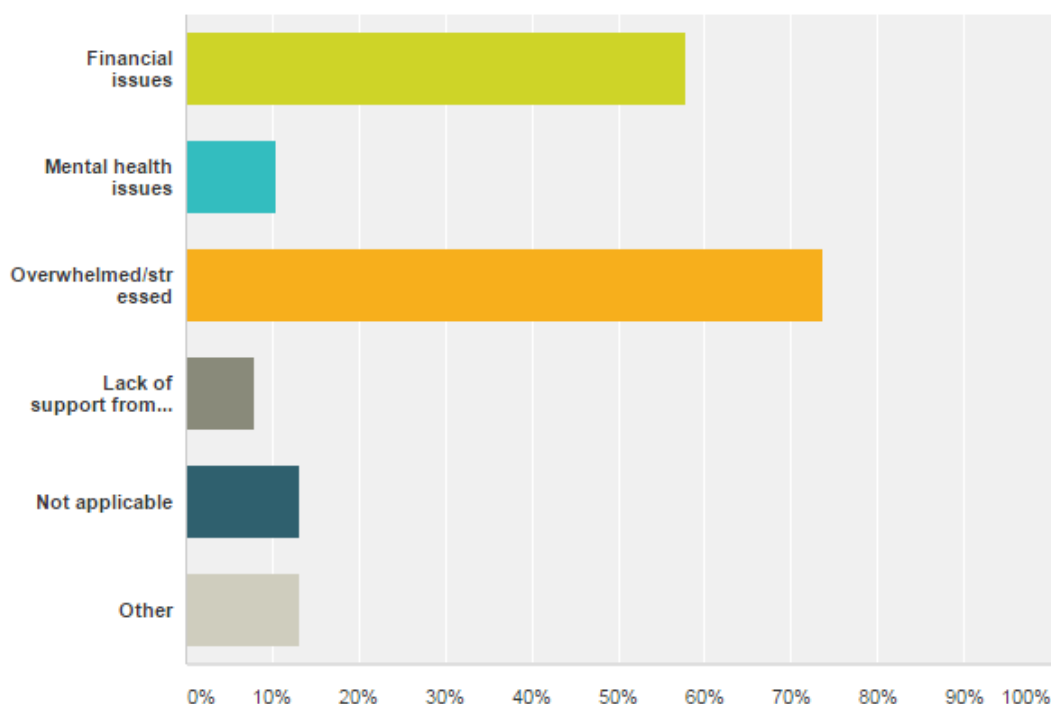
What reason, if any, has assisted you in succeeding academically?

Out of 38 veterans and military members whom answered this question, an overwhelming majority stated that fear of losing or wasting benefits (29 respondents 76.32%) was the primary reason that has assisted this population succeed academically. Having staff/faculty competent and knowledgeable in VA related matters/concerns was the next highest reason for succeeding academically (20 respondents 52.63%). The least two reasons selected of those whom respondent were support services from the university (14 respondents 36.84%) and support from other veterans and service members on campus (11 respondents 28.95%). More than one response could have been selected when answering this question.



What reason, if any, do you think caused you (or may cause you) to not achieve your academic goals?

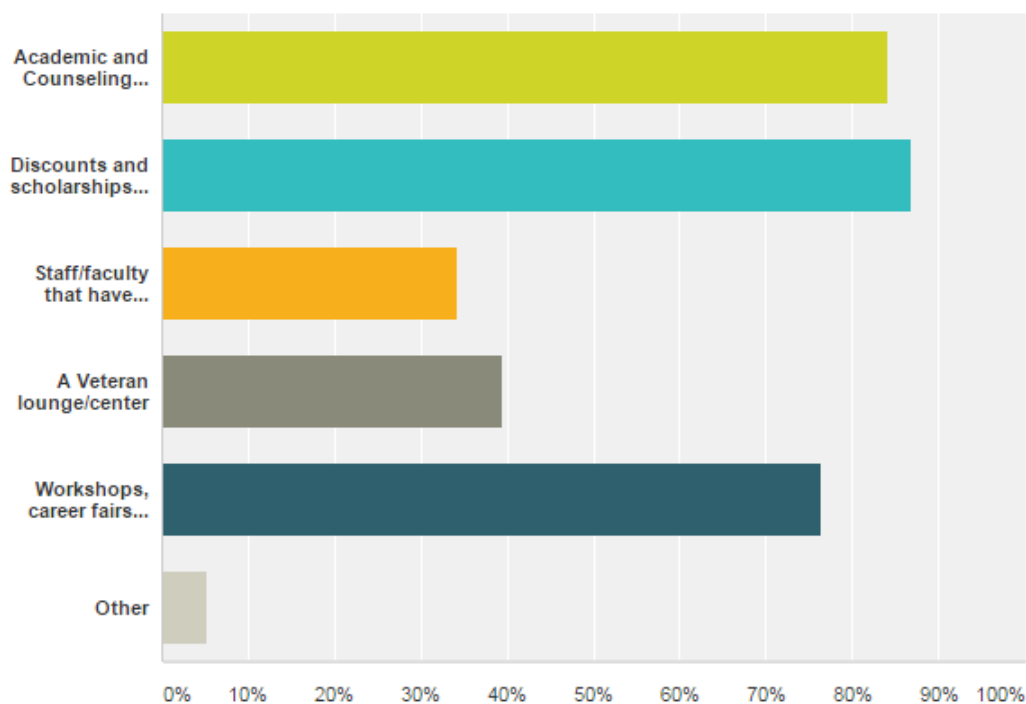
Out of 38 veterans and military members whom answered this question, an overwhelming majority stated that Financial Issues (22 respondents 57.89%) and Overwhelmed/Stressed (28 73.68%) were the top two reasons why they may not have succeeded or may not succeed in their institutions. The least choices selected were mental health issues (4 respondents 10.53%), and lack of support from the university (3 respondents 7.89%). More than one response could have been selected when answering this question. Although the bay area has some of the top housing allowance benefits in the country, with the rising costs it is still not enough for many veterans and military members that have a family, or unforeseen expenses such as medical or child care costs, it comes to no surprise that financial issues is a top reason why many student veterans and military members drop out or don't succeed academically.



You consider a Military Friendly University to have the following:

Respondents had 6 areas to select from, in which more than one response could have been selected when answering this question. The top three responses selected of the 38 respondents included academic and counseling services specifically geared towards veterans, service members, and dependents (32 respondents 84.21%), discounts and scholarships for veterans, service members, and dependents (33 respondents 86.84%), and workshops, career fairs, events for veterans, service members, and dependents (29 respondents 76.32%). The least two responses selected included staff/faculty that have served in the military or are dependents of those whom have served (13 respondents 34.21%) and a veterans lounge/center (15 respondents 39.47%). Two respondents selected other in which the response included a military friendly environment and culture (no additional elaboration) and an understanding of the military work life. Students like to see services available in their universities, although they may not utilize them all, the concept here is that it offers ease and assurance that if the time comes where a

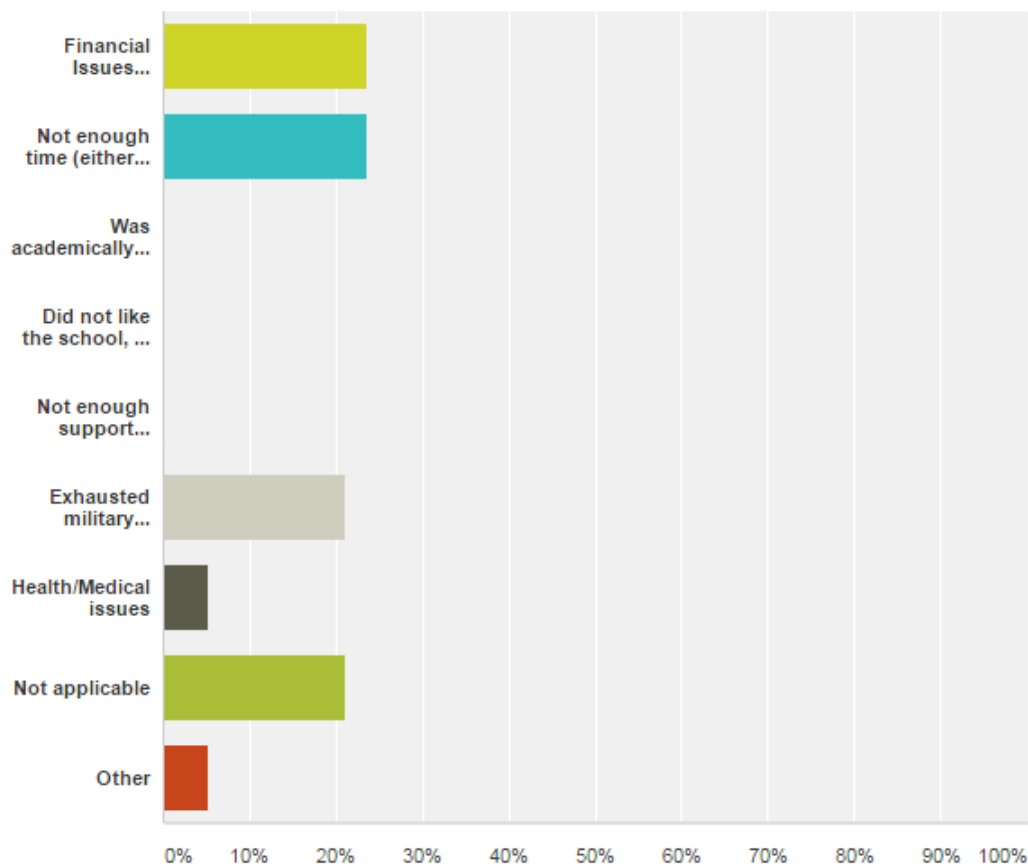
particular need arises, then the availability of the services is of tremendous help. Having all of these services available offers reassurance that the help is there if needed, which is why many respondents selected multiple choices as to what makes a military friendly university.



If you are currently taking a break from school, have dropped out, or are planning to do either one, please select the reason(s):

Only one response could have been selected for this question, 8 respondents selected not applicable. The two top reasons selected included financial issues either couldn't afford it, and/or school was too expensive (9 respondents 23.68%) and not enough time either because of work, kids, or other obligations (9 respondents 23.68%). Health and medical reasons was the least selected option with only 2 respondents 5.26%. Two respondents left comments which included financial issues could not afford without benefits, and Tuition Assistance benefits capped therefore could not afford it. The two top selected choices correlate with one another

because often times having to work more hours or not opting for child care is directly correlated with finances and not having enough funds to cover all expenses.



Significant Findings from Survey Data

1. Financial Assistance is needed regardless whether a student is utilizing VA Educational Benefits or not. The rising costs of San Francisco Bay Area living has made it extremely difficult for veterans and military members to go to school and afford their living expenses without having to work. The Post 9/11 VA Educational Benefits offer a housing allowance monthly stipend, amount varies based on school zip codes but can be anywhere from \$1000 to \$4000 a month, also depending on veteran eligibility. The purpose of the housing allowance is so the student can focus on their education and not have to work, however with the cost of living rising and students needed to work full

time, it puts a burden on the student to have to choose between working more hours and/or taking fewer units, extending their graduation dates and also resulting in a shortage of VA Educational Benefits. Although many student veterans and military members are covered 100% in tuition by the VA, they often must rely on Financial Aid to aid with additional expenses such as medical bills, child care, rise in rent expenses, etc. Often times this results in loan debt, specifically for graduate students whom don't have the same opportunities to qualify for federal Pell grant which is only available for undergraduate students by the federal government. The data shows that there is a lack of funding as well on the university level to aid in the additional educational costs, often many universities do not have grants or scholarships that veterans and military members can utilize for other educational expenses, such as rent and transportation.

2. VA Educational Benefits are not only essential for veterans and military members but they are a motivation and reason to succeed academically. With only 36 months of full time benefits, and 15 years to utilize after the veteran's separation date from the military, it is essential that academically a student stay on course (i.e. pass classes and register and take courses intended for their degree) because once the benefits have exhausted they are gone. Many individuals whom join the military have stated that the benefits are one of the reasons why they joined, to know that their education would be funded and/or that their children would have benefits for years on end, therefore to have served our country and not utilize their benefits to its full extent is truly an option that many do not seek out. Once the benefits have exhausted, military members and veterans often times find it difficult to continue with their education, often times leading to borrowing additional

student loans, leading to a rise in their student debt total, or not succeeding academically because of the financial burden and/or completely dropping out of college from not being able to afford the costs. The data shows that student veterans are determined and motivated to succeed academically within those 36 months because without the benefits it becomes challenging to succeed and to complete their degree.

3. Although it is important to have many services in a university, such as career planning, counseling, disability services, workshops, career fairs, and so forth, many student veterans do not seek out these services more than likely because of limited free time, from not being on campus many days of the week, or from lack of knowledge about these services. The data shows that having as many services readily available to veterans as possible ties in with their ideals of what a military friendly university actually is. Having these services readily available offers assurance that if the services are ever needed, then they are available to seek out. Having services and workshops geared towards veterans provides this population a sense of community and the belief that a university is doing all they can do create a military friendly environment.

Personal Interview Results

Anonymous current Golden Gate University student

1. What degree are you currently working on and why did you select the university that you are currently attending?

I'm currently working on my BA in Management, and I picked this school because of the housing allowance, it's one of the highest that I've seen. Also it's close to BART and they have a lot of online classes.

2. Do you utilize any services at your current university?

I use tutoring to help with my papers because I am not really good with grammar and paper structure. I also use career services to help with my job search; once my benefits are up I know financially I need to find a job right away. I'm on campus only once a week so I don't have time to use any other services.

3. Do you believe your current institution is military friendly? What do you think your current institution could do to help you more, either help you succeed academically and/or help you transition to civilian life?

Yes, the staff is knowledgeable and always willing to help. The school participates in the Yellow Ribbon program so that helps financially. Although the staff is knowledgeable, I wish there was a VA rep at the school, someone hired by the VA knowledgeable on all VA matters. Sometimes I've been told because of privacy laws the school can't help in certain areas so it would be nice to have a government official at the school that can provide all the answers rather than having to go through multiple sources for a response.

Ryan Gonzalez Prospective San Francisco City College student

1. What degree are you currently looking to work on and what caught your interest in this college?

An associate's degree, I am not sure in what yet. My friend goes here and he recommended it because there are a lot of veterans on campus and the community seems very strong here. But also because of the housing allowance, it's over \$3000 a month.

2. Are you planning to utilize any services at this college? If so, why are these particular services of interest to you?

Yes I believe so, because I will be on campus a lot I plan on using their veteran center, also they have an alliance club. I am interested in these services because of the community, the brotherhood, and to be around other veterans that have the same experiences as me.

3. What do you think CCSF could do to help you succeed academically and to help you transition to civilian life?

Have staff that know about the military life and won't just brush me off to the next person. I heard that CCSF has staff that are veterans or have worked with the VA so I feel good about going to them with questions and not get the run around that I have at other colleges.

Anonymous current UC Berkeley student

1. What degree are you currently working on and why did you select the university that you are currently attending?

I am currently working on my BA degree in Sociology. I selected it for the reputation.

2. Do you utilize any services at your current university?

I utilize career services for job searching, tutoring, and financial aid to help with additional living expenses that the GI Bill doesn't cover.

3. Do you believe your current institution is military friendly? Please elaborate.

They are a great university, very well-known throughout the country; I just haven't really utilized many VA related services to say whether UCB is military friendly or not.

4. What do you think your current institution could do to help you more, either help you succeed academically and/or help you transition to civilian life?

As long as I get my benefits to help pay for school and living then I am satisfied, at the end of the day the school is amazing in terms of education, and if they continue to process my VA benefits on time that is ultimately what will help me succeed – not having to worry about whether I have enough money to pay for rent.

Anonymous past Golden Gate University student

1. What degree did you work on at GGU, and did you complete it?

I worked on my Masters in Taxation. I eventually completed it but I took many breaks because of my work schedule. Since I didn't have full VA Benefits (rated 50%) I had to work to help pay for the part of tuition which the VA didn't pay for. When funds were low I had to take a few semesters off to work full time.

2. Why did you select GGU?

Good reputation for the taxation program, but also the housing allowance was one of the highest in the bay area.

3. Did you utilize any services at Golden Gate University when you attended?

Financial Aid, took out some loans to help pay for expenses.

4. Do you believe your Golden Gate University is military friendly? Please elaborate.

Yes, however I wish they had scholarships or discounts for veterans. I would not have taken out student loans if the university offered a discount or a grant for the percentage that the VA wouldn't pay for. Unfortunately the discounts they had at the time were for undergrads only.

5. What do you think Golden Gate University could have done to help you more, either help you succeed academically and/or help you transition to civilian life?

Financially help their veterans more, also have a VA/government expert in their career services department, I would have liked to get some help with resume building but they had a hard time translating my military job experiences into civilian life experiences.

Significant Findings from Personal Interviews

1. Benefits are an essential part of a veteran and military member's college process. When searching for a university to attend, many veterans and military members focus on their benefits to ensure that they can maximize the Post 9/11 to the full extent. Generally this focus is on selecting a university where their tuition is fully covered, and where they can receive the highest housing allowance benefits as possible.

2. Veterans and military members feel that there can sometimes be a disconnect between the VA and the schools, which is why it is important for them to have staff and faculty whom are very knowledgeable in VA related issues. Staff and faculty that are either veterans themselves, have worked for the Department of VA, or are highly trained to understand all military aspects is essential in the trust of this population. Veterans and military members are putting their trust in these universities to ensure that their benefits are processed in a timely manner, that their concerns are being answered within a reasonable amount of time, and that their needs are being met if needed.
3. With today's society, modern technology is a must and this population is no stranger to online classes. Many veterans and military members attend classes online (or a combination of in person and cyber) this is partly because of busy work schedules, having to take care of a family, or even health concerns. The data shows that many services in universities may not be of much interest to this population, simply because the population is not on campus to fully utilize the services. Although the needs may still be present, the use of services on campus are not a priority or a requirement for many veterans and military members at this present time.

Expert Interviews Results

Kevin Miller the Strategic Development and Communications Coordinator for Swords to Plowshares.

1. What are the major needs of student veterans that you've encountered?

Access to affordable housing and legal services for disability compensation and pension claims.

2. What do you think schools can do to support their military students?

Create partnerships with local organizations such as Swords to Plowshares to implement services and training to address the needs of the student veteran population.

3. What are some of the complaints you hear about from students that are currently attending local universities?

A majority of the complaints I've heard deal with re-integrating within the civilian community. Most of their academic advisors and peers haven't had any cultural competency training in military/veterans issues and/or culture and there can be a disconnect that stems from that.

4. What are some of the reasons why you believe student veterans don't succeed academically?

My opinion would be that if a veteran doesn't succeed academically is due to lack of support or access to resources to help them succeed.

5. What are some of the reasons why you believe student veterans do succeed academically?

Student veterans with a strong support network and access to additional resources tend to have higher success rates.

Jennifer Rosko Director of Student Involvement at UCSF

1. How many veterans and service members are currently utilizing VA Educational Benefits at your school?

Total number of veterans on campus is around 70; not all are utilizing educational benefits but most are – these are individuals whom have self-identified through admissions process and/or through veteran newsletter request.

2. What kind of services do you have available on campus and online for veterans and military service members? What kind of events, career fairs, workshops, etc, does the university host for veterans?

Services are not geared towards veterans alone, we have reception for veterans (for example) but everyone is invited. Most of our students are not very responsive so it can be a challenge to have a big turnout at some of the events.

3. What kind of training do you provide to your staff and faculty to handle military related issues and concerns?

We have had VET NET ALLY training for staff. We also created a veteran support services and a veteran friendly website.

4. What are some of the issues you face with your student veteran population?

Students are non-responsive, they don't read emails so they are not very aware of the events and services that are available for them.

Anonymous Certifying Official in a local CSU

1. How many veterans and service members are currently utilizing VA Educational Benefits at your school?

Around 350 that use VA benefits.

2. What kind of services do you have available on campus and online for veterans and military service members? What kind of events, career fairs, workshops, etc, does the university host for veterans?

We have fee waivers, campus events, counseling, career and goal planning, peer mentoring, and so forth. We have a veteran student organization that offers these services to the population.

3. What kind of training do you provide to your staff and faculty to handle military related issues and concerns?

On the job training, sometimes we have experts come in to do presentations on VA related topics such as PTSD.

4. What are some of the issues you face with your student veteran population?

There is only so much we can do as a certifying official, with privacy laws if it doesn't deal with student tuition the VA forces the veterans to handle the issue; schools cannot get involved so it becomes hard on us because students expect us to do more but we can't.

Significant Findings from Expert Interviews

- 1) Schools have plenty of services available to their veteran population however most students are unresponsive and do not attend. Reasons are that students are either not on campus enough, or don't know about the services.
- 2) There is only so much that school VA reps can do, because VA policies are so strict, it can hold back schools from doing more.
- 3) CBO's are out there to help; one of their top goal and focus is to gain relationships with local universities, to build a community, in order to meet veteran needs.
- 4) The student veteran population has many concerns including housing issues, reintegrating to civilian life, legal services, and want a strong support network.

Hypothesis/Sub-questions/Assumptions Relating to Data Results

The hypothesis of this study is that if a university is classified as a military friendly university, than it should have services readily available for its veteran population, and that these services contribute to the academic success of their veteran population. However, it appears that

if a veteran is an online student, the question now becomes whether this population would utilize more services if they are made available through an online portal.

A sub-question for this study is what steps has the university taken to build a campus climate geared towards supporting student veteran academic success? The data show that having competent and knowledge staff, and if possible having prior military experience or VA knowledge, builds a community within the university and the student veteran population, where trust is built and maintained.

Another sub-question is how does the university identify and address student veterans' concerns about their academic success? The data shows that the financial aspect of a student's college career is essential to ensuring their academic success; a university's focus on financially assisting this population to ease the costs related to the rise in living expenses in the San Francisco Bay Area, would assist this population succeed academically.

An assumption is that services geared towards veterans will aid them in succeeding academically however based on the data, the concern is more so on the financial side rather than the actual services. However, it appears that services such as career planning and resume building are essential for this population because they are limited on their VA educational benefits, these type of services are priority to ensure a job is landed soon after graduation. Since many individuals from this population rely on their military benefits and financial aid to support them financially, once the benefits have exhausted, the success rate lowers because school then becomes too costly.

Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The results from the survey and interviews conducted in this study show several areas for review, in order to implement services and techniques in local universities, to help veterans succeed academically. The following conclusions and recommendations are provided below.

Conclusion 1

With the rising costs in the San Francisco Bay Area, financial assistance is needed; although the GI Bill benefits do offer a generous amount of assistance towards tuition and living expenses, student veterans do still need assistance with additional costs that may not be covered fully by the benefits. The data not only shows that student veterans utilize Financial Aid the most out of all the services available in their university (65.79%), but that financial issues is the second highest selected option (right below stressed/overwhelmed) when asked what reasons have caused them (or may cause them) to not achieve their academic goals (57.89%). Although the Bay Area has some of the top housing allowance benefits in the country, with the rising costs it is still not enough for many veterans and military members that have a family, or have unforeseen expenses such as medical or child care costs. The study also found that students whom were taking a break from school, or dropped out, or even planning to do either one, selected financial issues and not enough time (because of work hours, children, etc.) as the top two reasons. More and more student veterans decide to attend school full time in order to maximize their benefits, which means they generally do not work, however when it becomes a financial burden often times students will drop out or not successfully complete their course load resulting in cycle of stress and anxiety.

Conclusion 2

The majority of veterans and military members that are utilizing VA Educational Benefits and took the survey find it that this is their primary motivation for succeeding academically in their current and/or past institution. Ironically, a benefit that was meant to help veterans be successful in life after coming back from deployment is doing just that in current times. The Post 9/11 GI Bill which offers 36 months worth of benefits has been an essential part of student veteran success, in fact in the survey 65% of respondents stated that the fear of losing or wasting their educational benefits was the reason they succeeded academically.

Conclusion 3

Of the surveyed population, 84.21% stated that a military friendly university is one that has services specifically geared towards veterans such as academic and counseling. However, the survey also shows that services such as academic and counseling are not very much utilized; this can be due to the fact that many students now days generally take a combination of in person and online classes particularly the population surveyed (83.78%), which means that they are not on campus much to utilize the services. This is in conjunction with the expert interview, who stated that many students are unaware of the services available, are unresponsive, or simply are not on campus enough. Although it appears that academic and counseling services may not be utilized as often, it is important for the surveyed population to know that these services are available if the need to utilize them arises. The concept here is that it offers ease and assurance that if the time comes where a particular service is needed, then the availability of that service is of tremendous help.

Conclusion 4

The study shows that there is a major disconnect between the Department of VA and schools, not only do experts in the field agree with this, but student veterans interviewed have also expressed their concerns. VA policies create barriers between school certifying officials and the department of VA and that is because School Certifying Officials are very limited as to how much information is given to them by the Department of VA, generally very general benefits eligibility is provided and tuition payment information as well, however any other issues such as any student veteran debts must be handled directly by the student themselves. This can become a burden on the student whom generally may not know how to handle these situations nor ask the right questions to get these issues resolved. Often times this population will seek the advice and assistance of the school's VA rep but there is only so much the school can help with. Additional barriers include the lack of training and the lack of knowledge at the school level; on many campuses the training is on the job, and/or not directly handled nor supervised by a VA expert, which can result in miscommunication with the possibility of providing incorrect information.

Recommendation 1

Expand on discounts/scholarships on the university level. The goal here is to help veterans and military members financially with expenses that the GI Bill does not cover. This is important because this population's main concern is to be able to afford college; majority of veterans whom attend college quit their jobs to attend school full time, therefore finances is a major stress and concern which schools should help alleviate. Actions required include seeking out donors whom are willing to donate funds for this population, such as alumni whom are veterans, veteran and military groups, etc. In addition, adjust the school's budget to include

scholarships/grants for this population. Realistically this can be done, veterans bring in a lot of money to universities because of the GI Bill, and the investment is essentially worth it for schools to offer scholarships and discounts, because it will eventually bring in a higher population of student veterans. Timeframe would be 6 months to a year; budgets in a university are generally updated at the end of the fiscal year, in addition seeking out donors would be a continuous process.

Recommendation 2

Partner with Community Based Organizations. The goal here is to create a partnership with Community Based organizations such as Swords to Plowshares with similar goals to help veterans and military members succeed academically. This is important because at the end of the day we are here to serve the veterans, as a school we are here to ensure they succeed academically, as a CBO they are there to ensure all veteran needs are met (whether that means housing, legal representation, counseling, etc.). Actions required include outreach to CBOs, create the partnership, and set up connections. The partnership can include staff training, workshops to students; here you're also creating references for the student veteran population. This goal can be achieved because there are groups such as Swords to Plowshares that are eager to assist, this organization for example is eager and already has set up partnerships with many local universities, and they have staff ready to come to schools to help. Timeframe would immediate but it would also be a continuous process, and that is because a simple phone call can be set up immediately; these organizations are here to help.

Recommendation 3

Formalize training, the goal here is to ensure that all staff and faculty are aware of VA and military related issues/needs/concerns. This is important because if you are serving a population that is unique and has special needs that are not seen in any other population, then you need to be trained, alert, and knowledgeable of these needs to better serve this population. Actions required include bringing in knowledgeable experts from VA groups, either local CBOs, county VA offices, or directly from the Department of VA. In addition, setting up workshops and webinars to train with VA related topics, create pamphlets and reading materials for staff to keep on hand for reference. This is a continuous process but timeframe would be between 2 to 3 months to bring in expert and formalize the training.

Recommendation 4

The Department of VA must create a VA School Certifying Official Academy where VA reps are officially trained and certified by the VA. Since finances are on the top of the essential worry list, it is important for one of the most valuable position in a university (the VA rep) to be the most knowledge expertise in VA related matters. The goal here is that the VA rep would be the go-to person; because they will be trained by military VA officials they would have the most up to date knowledge on VA related matters, and students would be comfortable and have trust in that person. This is important because often times training for the Certifying Official position is on the job, and really takes a few years to fully become competent. It's important because if you have a rep that is aware of all the needs, concerns, issues, laws, etc., students would be comfortable and have trust in that person. It creates a bond and open communication, often times student veterans don't trust just any regular staff and it can create tension and ultimately this is

not helping them succeed. Actions would require schools to voice their suggestions to their Education Liaisons, each school is assigned one. This liaison works directly with the Department of VA whom already do have workshops available for schools therefore an official academy is not very far reached. This goal can be achieved, specifically because more military members are returning from deployment and going to school, the priority of the VA is to ensure that these individuals transition well from military to civilian life, there is a big push for educational benefits because every year the benefits get better (higher tuition payments, higher housing allowance) therefore it is feasible for an academy to be set up. There is already an academy available for county VA employees – it is set up by the California State Approving Agency, therefore the training and set up would be very similar.

Recommendation 5

The VA that prevents school VA reps the access to certain information, specifically when it deals with housing allowance and tuition/housing allowance debts, this creates a burden on the veterans who then have to reach out to the VA and it can be very stressful. Allowing VA school reps to have access to more information would be ideal and would create a smoother bridge between the VA, the schools, and the student veteran. The goal here is to have the VA rep be the go-to person, to be a VA certified individual whom can be the link between the student veteran and the VA. The goal is to also have the school VA rep be able to call the VA on their behalf, to file appeals on their behalf that relate to educational benefits, to get their benefits eligibility so payments can come in earlier and on time. Often times the military culture is very proud and many don't ask questions, so the goal is important because it eases the burden from the veteran onto the schools, by allowing schools to have a little bit more access to their information the

student can then focus on succeeding academically. Actions required include consulting with the VA Education Liaison and the California State Approving Agency, they are the ones who would have to advocate to congress to make the changes. This goal can be achieved, currently the Department of Education allows schools to have an immense amount of person information, student credit score decisions, their full loan borrower history, etc., and therefore it is possible for the VA to allow information to schools to better serve the veterans. Timeframe, I foresee changes to happen over the next 2-3 years, because there have been talks already in congress to give schools more access I believe if the State Approving Agencies advocate for it, then it can be achieved sooner than later.

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Appendix A Student Veteran Survey through SurveyMonkey.com

1. What is your gender?
 - a. Male b. Female
2. What is your age?
 - a. 18 to 24 b. 25 to 34 c. 35 to 44 d. 45 to 54 e. 55 and over
3. What type of institution are you currently attending, have most recently attended, or are planning to attend?
 - a. Community College b. CSU c. UC d. Private not-for-profit
 - e. Private for-profit f. other
4. What type of degree are you currently working on, have most recently worked on, or are planning to complete?
 - a. AA b. BA/BS c. MA/MS d. Ph.D e. N/A f. Other
5. Are you currently taking, have attended, or are planning to take online or in-person/on campus classes?
 - a. In person classes only b. Online classes only c. A combination of
online and in person classes
6. What services available in your institution have you utilized?
 - a. Mental Health/Counseling b. Career Services c. Tutoring d. Disability
Services e. Financial Aid f. N/A g. Other
7. What reason, if any, has assisted you in succeeding academically?
 - a. Support Services from the University b. Support from other veterans and
service members on campus c. Fear of losing or wasting educational benefits

- d. Staff/faculty competent and knowledgeable in VA related matters and concerns
- e. Other

8. What reason, if any, do you think caused you (or may cause you) to not achieve your academic goals?

- a. Financial Issues b. Mental Health issues c. Overwhelmed/stressed
- d. Lack of support from university e. N/A f. Other

9. You consider a military friendly university to have the following:

- a. Academic and Counseling services specifically geared towards veterans, service members, and dependents.
- b. Discounts and scholarships for veterans, service members, and dependents.
- c. Staff/faculty that have served in the military or are dependents of those whom have served.
- d. A Veteran lounge/center.
- e. Workshops, career fairs, events for veterans, service members, and dependents.
- f. Other.

10. Do you consider the institution that you are currently attending, have attended, or are planning to attend as Military Friendly?

- a. Yes b. No

11. If you are currently taking a break from school, have dropped out, or are planning to do either one, please select the reason(s):

- a. Financial Issues (couldn't afford it, school was too expensive)
- b. Not enough time (either because of work, kids, or other obligations)
- c. Was academically disqualified, did not meet GPA/Academic standards

- d. Did not like the school, its staff and/or professors
- e. Not enough support services at the university
- f. Exhausted military educational benefits
- g. Health/Medical issues
- h. Not applicable
- i. Other