Veterans in Higher Education

Since 1944, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (also known as the G.I. Bill) has provided educational assistance to service members, veterans, and their dependents through stipends for tuition and other expenses for college or trade schools. This assistance has expanded access to higher education for veterans and their families. By 2017, 5.2 million veterans (28% of all veterans) over the age of 25 had completed a postsecondary degree or credential.

Demographics

- In 2016, the majority of student veterans were between the ages of 24 and 40.
  - The average age for a veteran starting postsecondary education was 25.
  - Only 15% of student veterans were traditionally aged (ages 18 to 23).
- In 2016, 47% of student veterans were parents and 47% were married.
- In 2014, 73% of student veterans were male and 27% were female.
- In 2014, 63% of veterans enrolled in higher education were White, 17% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, and 6% identified as “other” or multicultural.
- In 2014, 62% of student veterans were first generation college students, 67% had at least one parent with some college training who did not earn a degree, and 6% were foreign born.

Enrollment Trends

- In 2015, The average time between high school graduation and college enrollment for veterans was 5 years.
- In 2015, 44% of student veterans enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs.
  - 54% enrolled in associate programs or certificate programs.
- In 2015, 38% of veterans enrolled in community colleges and 23% of veterans enrolled in private for-profit institutions.
  - 54% of student veterans were enrolled in associate degree or certificate programs and 44% were enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs.

Fields of Study and Academic Trends

- Top fields of study for student veterans in 2015 were as follows:
  - 18% majored in business, marketing or related fields;
  - 15% majored in health professions; and,
  - 8% majored in engineering.
- In 2015, about 14% of degrees earned by student veterans were in STEM.
- In 2016, student veterans had an average GPA of 3.35.
Challenges/ Barriers

- Student veterans were less likely than non-veteran students to invest time outside of the classroom on activities not essential to the completion of their course as a result of parenting responsibilities, work, or other factors.
- Student veterans reported difficulties transitioning from a military style of technical learning and a hierarchical organizational structure to a university learning environment.
- Military service members and veterans relocate often due to service, and these frequent moves made it challenging for veterans to establish residency in any one state for purposes of qualifying for in-state tuition rates at public institutions.
- Because of deployments while in school, some veterans experienced the loss of scholarships, tuition dollars, and academic credits during the academic school year.
- Student veterans often faced mental health challenges.
  - Between 7% and 8% of student service members and veterans reported a past suicide attempt and up to 35% reported having suicidal thoughts.

SOURCES


“Today’s Scholars: A Closer Look at Majors that Student Veterans are Pursuing,” Student Veterans of America, March 2018.


“Who are Today’s Student Veterans?” VA Campus Toolkit, April 2014.

“Yellow Ribbon Program,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, August 2018.


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