



FIVE WAYS TO SUPPORT VETERAN TRANSFER STUDENTS

When Marine Corps veteran, Erin Georgia, decided to use her Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to go to community college, she hadn't written an essay in 15 years.

Like many veterans, Georgia was in her thirties and married with children when she decided to go back to school. She needed smaller class sizes, an opportunity to ease back into school academically and socially, flexible course offerings, and a campus close by.

The option for smaller class sizes, more personalization, and her need for remedial math, or as Erin puts it: "As a mother and a Marine, I was not doing algebra in Iraq"—were all reasons why she chose to go to Jefferson State Community College (AL).

In addition to the reasons Georgia mentioned, community colleges offer veterans an opportunity to ease back into school academically and socially, flexible course offerings, and convenience in location.

Community college was a good fit for Georgia. After graduating in 2016 with an associate of arts degree and a 4.0 GPA, Georgia transferred to Samford University (AL) where she received a

scholarship and is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in organizational leadership.

While it's impossible to generalize such a diverse population of students and their needs, looking for commonalities in veteran transfer student experiences gives us clues about how we can effectively serve and counsel them when they are considering a community college, then transferring to a four-year. Here are five areas where they need support:

1. FINANCES

A recent study from the Institute for Veterans & Military Families says when veterans and service members were asked about problems or barriers that hindered their pursuit or achievement of their education goals, 56 percent of respondents said lack of financial resources/financial burden and 25 percent said GI Bill benefits expiring before they complete their degree. Starting at a community college can be a benefit for veteran transfer students with more limited financial resources.

Katie Giardello, director of veteran and transfer initiatives at the Michigan Community College Association, noted it's important for professionals working with the students to think holistically about students' goals to maximize the various education benefits available to them. "If they

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT VETERANS

- Average age upon entry into postsecondary education: 25
- 44 percent are married
- 52 percent have dependents
- 79 percent are male
- 38 percent attend public two-year
- 23 percent attend private for-profit
- 19 percent attend public four-year
- 10 percent attend private nonprofit four-year

Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

want to get a master's degree it makes more sense to use [their GI Bill benefits] at a higher cost institution or [toward] a higher cost degree," she said. Ensuring these students fill out the FAFSA and helping them identify scholarships is also vital. Lot of factors play into the final decision.

2. STRUCTURE AND CLEAR POINTS OF CONTACT

"Service members are accustomed to structure. They are given a mission, are shown how to complete it, and know what the expectations are for completion," says Holly Wheeler, a

contributing author for *Preparing Your Campus for Veterans' Success*. "When they arrive at college they expect the same structure. They are looking for an established procedure that tells them how to enroll, when to enroll, and where to turn in their paperwork. Providing a clear location and a point of contact for military students is the first step toward modeling the environment military students have become used to."

Professionals who work with veteran transfer students often describe them as being independent and having greater self-efficacy in accomplishing tasks. However, Georgia points out that it's critical that staff tell students what they need to do and to not assume students know everything about the process.

"By the time I had gone to Jefferson State I had done all my research," said Georgia, "I had talked to the VA, figured out what program I wanted to be in... the military teaches you to be self-sufficient and to take charge of whatever you're doing." But, she said, this doesn't mean veterans can do it all alone. "There's a lot of information that we don't know when it comes to the education realm. We just need somebody to help us navigate that."

Missy Helbert, a senior academic advisor at Texas Tech University and Marine Corps veteran and former transfer student, echoed this sentiment: "Most veterans are very disciplined... you tell us what to do, we're going to do it. If you tell us the steps, we'll follow them. But a lot of veterans don't know the steps."

3. VETERAN-SPECIFIC SERVICES

Many campuses have a dedicated office for veteran transfer students. Texas Tech University's Military & Veterans Program department (MVP) is one example. Helbert described the office as a place where students can go to get help with paperwork, benefits, financial aid, and more. "The advisors who work there all go through MVP training and upon completion, get a green sticker that lets veteran students know they're veteran-friendly and can help them with their needs."

The study *Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members* looked at programs, services, and policies that colleges had in place to serve veterans and military personnel, and found that colleges with offices dedicated to supporting military students were more likely to:

- Offer services and programs specifically for service members and/or veterans

- Make programmatic changes according to service members and/or veterans' needs
- Target service members and veterans for recruitment
- Add or expand training for faculty and staff
- Tailor common services for these service members and/or veterans

In addition, many veterans face challenges managing mental or physical disabilities resulting from their military experience. Services should be available to them. Staff and faculty should know and look for signs that these students need help.

4. TRANSFER PATHWAYS

A subpopulation of transfer students, veteran students face challenges related to navigating the transfer pathway through higher education. They have to figure out how their credits apply and transfer at different institutions, how to navigate systems tailored to traditional student majorities, and how to develop a sense of belonging.

There are no set rules. "Some states have legislation that requires universities to accept those community college transfer credits for military training, but most do not... it's really a disservice to the student if they have other goals to move on and they can't get that credit to go with them," said Giardello. But, she and others are working on solutions.

Giardello serves as a leadership liaison for the Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit (MCMC), an interstate partnership of 13 working to advance best practices designed to ease the transition for veterans from military life to college campuses. To create and sustain this work, they are establishing best practices, such as convening a workgroup with staff across campus (registrar/records, admission, financial aid, student services, veteran services). "When it comes to awarding credit, there's not one single person that can crack the code of military credit on a campus. It has to be a concerted effort..." she said.

This advice applies for general transfer credit, as well. Giardello also emphasizes use of common military language and assessment of student veteran experiences. "If we can accommodate, structurally, these students in a more efficient manner, then that helps us moving forward... it might be a heavy lift for campuses that haven't done a lot of course equivalency work, but in the future, it saves time and money. And it does a better job of communicating to a student base

POST 9/11 GI BILL BENEFITS



The Post-9/11 GI Bill received \$11 billion in education benefits. The benefits include:

- full tuition and fee costs at any public college or university for in-state students or up to \$18,077.50 per academic year toward a private or foreign institution
- a monthly housing allowance
- an annual book and supplies stipend

that has goals we can help them meet and the money to finance their education." Like other transfer students, veterans should plan their path from two- to four-year college before they enroll.

While at the community college, Georgia received six credits for health and military history from her military experience. When researching schools to transfer to after community college, she looked for schools that would accept the most transfer credits. "I finally settled on Samford University because they would take my entire associate's degree from my community college and I could transfer right into [being a junior]," she said.

5. CULTURAL

Campuses can assist veteran transfer students with the cultural transition from service to school and civilian life by hiring those who best understand their experience. Hiring veterans to work with—and connect with—veteran transfer students is instrumental.

No one can understand better than someone who's been in the military and through the transfer process. Veterans also feel an emotional connection. Georgia said, "We have a connection. We have a brotherhood with other veterans. When I meet another veteran we can usually talk and communicate much better... I can talk to somebody about war in a nonthreatening manner. We can talk to each other about experiences we've had in the warzone and really ask if you're OK and look out for each other."

Student mentoring programs, student veterans organizations on campus, and partnerships with community veteran organizations can also effectively serve veteran transfer students in higher education.

Transfer Trends is a standing column written by **Heather Durosko**, NACAC's assistant director of strategic initiatives.