

# THE PATH FORWARD

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What Universities Need to Know  
to Help Student Veterans Succeed



**Swords to  
Plowshares**

VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

ENTER



**Institute for Veteran Policy**  
April 2018

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# Executive Summary

Swords to Plowshares' Institute for Veteran Policy conducted qualitative research at four San Francisco Bay Area colleges and universities in 2017 to assess formal and informal supportive practices on campuses and to better understand the direct challenges and needs of student veterans. Eight focus groups with 75 veterans and nine individual interviews with campus staff were conducted with participants from University of California, Berkeley (UCB), City College of San Francisco (CCSF), San Francisco State University (SFSU), and University of San Francisco (USF).

Results varied from campus to campus, but we found that student veterans face common challenges, which may hinder their ability to do well in school. Some are tightly connected to military service and veteran identity. Others are related to veteran resources and the ability for institutions, faculty, and staff to both understand and respond to their needs.

Universities and colleges can take intentional steps to create a veteran-friendly campus. None of these steps are terribly difficult or expensive, but they require cultural competency training and practices, as well as some investment in space and staff dedicated to this population. These efforts include targeted outreach to potential veteran students, opportunities for veterans to engage with their peers and other student groups, adequate staff devoted to veteran education benefits certification, a staffed location for a Veteran Resource Center (VRC), cultural competency education for staff and faculty, partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and veteran service organizations (VSOs) to bring in more resources, and recognition of veterans as a unique contribution to overall school diversity.

Our key takeaway is that veterans need more than their education benefits to ensure academic success. The majority of veteran challenges are not directly caused by their school, but colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to intervene and respond. Further, their response and support are demonstrative of the goodwill of schools who are receiving education benefits on behalf of the veterans attending them.

The following material outlines key findings and suggests actions that can improve outcomes for student veterans. While these findings reflect interactions with specific Bay Area institutions, insights and recommendations are of use to the broader community of post-secondary education professionals.

## Main Findings

- Challenges with transition from military to school can be worsened by inaccessible resources and inadequate information
- The G.I. Bill isn't enough for veterans to be financially supported in school or to finish a degree, and many veterans are living in poverty
- There is a cultural disconnect among veterans and nonveterans in veterans' lived experiences and this affects their relationships with other students, faculty, and college staff
- Veterans feel faculty and staff lack veteran cultural competency and provide mixed levels of support
- Veteran resource centers are stretched beyond capacity, and proactive staff go above and beyond reasonable expectations to serve veterans
- Certifying officials are overburdened and undertrained, and are often relied on for duties outside of veteran benefits
- Peer mentorship prevents many veterans from school burnout, fallout, and crisis
- Career counseling does not adequately prepare veterans for the civilian workforce or consider their military experience
- Housing support is essential and lacking
- Schools claim to be "veteran-friendly" but veterans don't understand why, and they want schools to have more explicit criteria

# Table of Contents

<b>Background and Methods</b>	1
<b>Demographic Overview of Participants</b>	1-2
<b>Findings</b>	
Transition is a Lifelong Process, and Transition to School is Challenging	3-4
The G.I. Bill Isn't Enough	4-6
Faculty Provide Mixed Levels of Support	6-7
There is a Disconnect with Nonveteran Students	8
Veteran Resource Centers and Staff are Crucial	8-10
VRCs are Underfunded	9-10
VRCs Need to Conduct Specific Outreach	10
Mental Health Shows a Greater Need for Counseling and Wellness	11
VA Healthcare and Service-Connected Disability Benefits Require Coordination	11-12
Vocational Rehabilitation Benefits are Underutilized	13
Certifying Officials are Overburdened and Undertrained	13-14
Career Counseling is Underwhelming	14-15
Academic Advisors Need to Create Solid Plans	15-16
Peer Mentorship Prevents Many from Fallout and Crisis	16-17
Veteran Clubs Should be Encouraged	16
Families are the Conduit to Care and Benefits	17
Housing Support is Essential and Lacking	18
Family Housing Is Especially Difficult to Secure	18
Veteran-Specific Housing Resources are Not Well Understood	18
Awareness of Grants and Scholarships is Low	19
Minorities are an Underserved Student Veteran Population	19
Women Veterans May Feel Unwelcomed in Veteran Spaces	19
LGBTQ+ Veterans Nearly Absent Among the Ranks of Veteran Clubs	20
Racial + Ethnic Minority Veterans Still Underrepresented Despite an Increase in Military Service	20
Schools Should Have Specific "Veteran-Friendly" Criteria	20-21
<b>Limitations of Our Study</b>	22
<b>Discussion of Our Findings</b>	22-23
<b>Conclusion</b>	23

# Background & Methods

In Spring Semester 2017, Swords to Plowshares' Institute for Veteran Policy conducted eight focus groups with 75 veterans attending four San Francisco Bay Area institutions: University of California, Berkeley (UCB), City College of San Francisco (CCSF), San Francisco State University (SFSU), and University of San Francisco (USF). The schools were selected because they represent diversity in both school type and in existing services for veterans. Veterans were sampled through on-campus, in-person outreach and online social media campaigns. Potential participants completed a survey questionnaire inquiring about demographic, educational, and veteran-specific information when they registered for the focus group. All veterans currently attending one of the schools we studied were eligible to participate, although we limited each focus group to 20 registrants. Participants verified veteran status with a military ID card, VA card, or DD214 documentation. Veterans were provided a \$75 gift card at the conclusion of the focus group.

Face-to-face and phone interviews with nine campus staff among the schools from veteran resource centers,

certifying officials, disability offices, financial aid personnel, and faculty were also conducted to further inform our research. Campus staff were not given financial incentive to participate. Campus staff and veterans were informed of their rights as research participants, and we obtained written consent prior to the start of the interviews. All recordings and transcripts were confidential to Swords to Plowshares policy staff.

Focus group protocol included an interview script, but investigators employed a community conversation style to allow for open-ended discussion and encourage feedback outside of what we initially sought to investigate. Interview and focus group topics centered on veteran-specific resources, support from administration, transition to college, education benefits, disability and accommodations, relationships with faculty and non-veteran students, and career preparation and resources. Data from the focus groups and interviews were inductively analyzed and coded by two lead investigators and two additional staff to identify common themes.

## Demographic Overview

Overall, student veteran participants were representative of the general veteran population. The majority were male, served in the Army, and most separated after 2001 (known as Post-9/11 veterans). While we attempted to identify veterans who do not access veteran-specific resources, a majority of all veterans we surveyed had sought out at least one service, although they may not receive VA services regularly. African American and Latinx identifying veterans were represented in the sample, but in some specific focus groups were underrepresented, and overall racial and ethnic minority veterans were understudied. While overall, female-identifying veterans were representative in our sample (10 veterans; 13% as compared with 9.4% of the U.S. women veteran population), female-identifying veterans were less represented in certain schools (i.e. CCSF only had one female-identifying veteran in the focus groups).

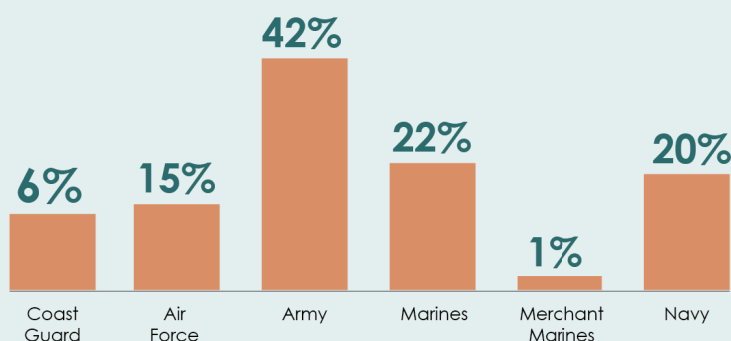
Twenty percent of the veteran sample identified

as unstably housed or homeless, with some living temporarily with friends or family, some residing in a hotel or SRO (single room occupancy), and one living in their car. Almost all veterans were discharged honorably, compared with 75 percent of the general veteran population. We had hoped to have more representation from veterans with less than honorable discharges who are precluded from receiving G.I. Bill benefits.

Veterans differ from traditional students in important ways: they are older, may be married, may have minor dependents, and are predominantly the head of household. Indeed, the focus group participants were much older than traditional students, and only three members were under 25 years old. Many are married, divorced, or in relationships. Two-thirds identified as the head of household, and 30 percent had dependent children.

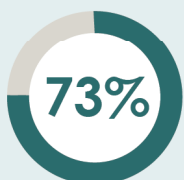
We did not seek demographic information of the staff we interviewed for this study.

# 75 Focus Group Participants

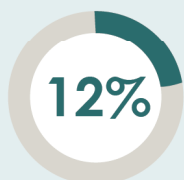


 **84%**

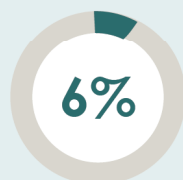
of participants have applied for the **G.I. Bill**



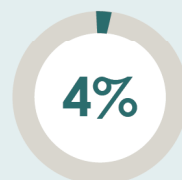
Full-time 4-year university



Full-time 2-year college

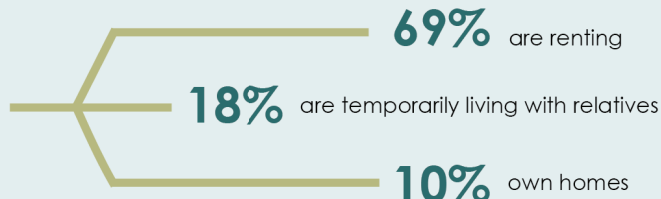


Part-time 2-year college



Part-time 4-year university

**68%**  
are head of household



**73%**

of participants applied for **service-connected disability benefits**



**63%**

waited 6 or more months to receive a rating



**58%**  
of participants are **unemployed**



**24%**

of participants found their **campus career centers ineffective**



# Findings

## Transition is a Lifelong Process, and Transition to School is Challenging

*"Re-integrating is exactly like getting out of prison. It's not close or similar, but people look at you the same. They say, 'We're happy to have our freedom, but we don't want to think about the bad things you must have done to be able to sit in that room.' They treat us like that even if you cooked eggs for 20 years in the military. And so eventually, that's your environment, that's how people view you and treat you. So you feel like that, and it can cause a lot of problems when you are trying to re-integrate." – CCSF Student Veteran*

The transition to college for veterans is often two-fold, with separation from the military to their communities and a transition into higher education. According to those we interviewed, military to civilian transition is often a lifelong process, and elements of military separation are compounded by the challenges some have in transitioning to college. Identity, culture, authority (from commander to professor), and interpersonal relationships were common themes among those we interviewed. A veteran from SFSU stated: "When I left active duty I took my anchors off. I had my girlfriend say, 'I am not your recruit, you are not my chief.' It was like for the first time in my life, I had a first name. I joined the military at 19, I'd been senior enlisted for seven years, and here I was. The last time I'd even had a name, it was just Chief. And then it was like all of a sudden, I couldn't even go to the farmers' market. I didn't know what to do with this... what to do with my life."

The public often misunderstands this transition to college, assuming the majority of veterans go to school soon after military separation.\* The journey to school was varied for the focus group participants, much like the greater student veteran community, and while many entered school soon after exiting the military, others had been separated for many years. Community colleges are a frequent path for veterans, and most had gone to a community college before transferring to university. A common denominator among all student veterans was the loss of identity in their separation, and the challenge to fill that void continued well into their college life. One USF veteran stated: "You kind of tie your sense of identity to the service, and there is a vacuum. And once you leave, you've got to figure out something to fill it. For me, that was kind of a journey."

Our findings suggest there is a cultural disconnect among veterans and nonveterans in their lived experiences, and this affects veterans' relationships with other students, faculty, and college staff. This otherness impacts their perceived levels of support and how they engage with various college services. For those we interviewed, these problems manifest as struggles with financial aid, college administrative processes, support services, and integrating into the student community when they feel information is misrepresented or their experiences aren't understood.

Similar to patterns of healthcare access, veterans may be more apt to repeatedly access supportive services on campus if they had a good initial experience. First impressions are the most important, and veterans in the focus groups tended to feel much more supported by administration overall when they had a satisfactory experience with campus staff as they were beginning college. Some stated that staff and faculty should have a baseline knowledge of veteran education benefits, and also a cultural understanding of their experiences.

Conversely, if veterans have problems processing their education benefit claims or accommodations from disability services, they may become unwilling to interact with these and other departments in the future. Some veterans cite veteran resource centers as a means to help them assimilate and cut through red tape that student veterans deal with. A UCB student stated he chose the school because of their reputation for supporting veterans, and their veteran resource center: "I chose my junior college because they had a phenomenal veteran organization; I never worried about a thing. I had to remember to bring in my DD214<sup>†</sup> and that was about it. Signed up and classes were there. They had counselors who helped you find your classes, to fast-track to

\*Separation is the official term used when a member of the military leaves service

† The DD Form 214, Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, generally referred to as a "DD214."

university. It was very cut and dry and I chose that school specifically for that. Cal was the same way. I looked for a comfortable veterans program and a good university, and there wasn't really much of a choice for me... it was very, very clear."

## Recommendations: Transition to College

1. Provide ongoing and regular cultural competency training for campus staff and faculty to ensure they are culturally informed of veteran experiences, potential issues resulting from military service, and approaches to care.
2. Provide a veteran-specific orientation for incoming students. One school we studied already provides veteran orientations, and it offered a way to centralize information, further coordinate efforts for education benefits, and provide an opportunity for informal peer mentorship. All veterans we spoke with who didn't attend a veteran orientation stated they would have benefited greatly from one, and that it would have alleviated much of the barriers they experienced as they entered college.

## The G.I. Bill Isn't Enough

When campus administration examines educational benefits for student veterans, they should also consider their unique circumstances and the impact of cost of living in the Bay Area, which can greatly affect a veteran's financial stability. As mentioned, veterans differ from traditional students in important ways: they are older, may be married, may have minor dependents, and are predominantly the head of household. Many of these veterans struggle financially despite the assistance of their educational benefits.

The most visible challenge students who use the G.I. Bill face is once they begin spending their benefits, they have only 36 school months to use them. This is not a challenge unique to the schools we studied, as most university degrees require coursework which takes much longer than what the G.I. Bill provides for. At schools such as UCB and SFSU, high demand for and limited supply of core classes as well as degree requirements can make it impossible to complete a degree in four years. Student veterans pursue degrees with varying unit requirements, many requiring six years of coursework, and the 36-month limit isn't sufficient. Community college is a very common route for veterans who are entering school. So many of the CCSF veteran participants exhausted their G.I. Bill long before they were able to transfer to a university. One mentioned, "I went back to school full-time on the Montgomery G.I.

## How to Provide a Veteran-Specific Orientation

We asked student veterans what they want in a veteran-specific orientation:

1. Include alumni or upper division student veterans as part of the presentations. Match mentors with incoming students to alleviate some of the burdens of transition.
2. Show students how to take advantage of priority enrollment.
3. Create a welcome packet for students that provides answers to frequent questions about their VA benefits and other resources.
4. Partner with outside veteran service organizations and ask them to present.
5. If your school has a veteran club or resource center, invite them to participate and provide an invitation to join. Include the VRC as part of your tour and show the students where the VA Certifying Official can be found.



Bill, but that's about to be exhausted. So in a minute, I'm going to be in that situation where I need to find a job."

Most notably those with medical and engineering majors, of which there were many who participated in the focus groups, stressed they felt dissuaded from pursuing such a degree in the first place. Many participants indicated they must often take out additional loans to cover the costs or are forced to pursue a different degree with fewer requirements. This is a major hindrance for universities if they wish to attract veterans to these programs. As a UCB participant mentioned: "If I didn't have my employer pay for the first part of my junior college, I wouldn't have been able to get an engineering degree with it. It doesn't cover an engineering degree at all with all the courses you have to take. I would have had to take 140 units under the G.I. Bill and you can't take that in 36 months." This issue will be partially alleviated by recent changes to the G.I. Bill (see inset). A provision to become effective in August 2019 will allow for a nine-month extension up to \$30,000 for students in STEM field majors who meet eligibility requirements. For current students, this time constraint remains a problem.

Some veterans attempt the seemingly impossible task of completing their degree in 36 school months, taking much more than the typical full-time course load. This places a huge burden on veterans when they are already dealing with stresses that most traditional students do not face.

Many veterans we talked to mentioned the struggle of saving enough of their G.I. Bill funds to cover the gap months when school is not in session. In the Bay Area, where housing prices are astronomical, covering rent and bills is near impossible, and getting a job for one month to cover the cost is an unreasonable expectation.

As one veteran stressed: "The idea of cutting G.I. Bill, Voc Rehab, and BAH rate down because school is not in session for half a month, and then expecting people with high rents to somehow survive that month with half a paycheck...it's not like the landlord is saying, 'Oh, I'm only going to school for half a month, so half a month's rent, that'll be cool with me.' It doesn't work like that in the real world. If Congress could come on board with the rest of society, that would be great." Another CCSF student stated: "Especially in the summer when you don't really have income from GI Benefits, it can be stressful, financially, and it can really do some damage."

In August 2017, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, also known as the "Forever G.I. Bill," was signed into law, which will bring significant improvements to G.I. Bill benefits. Some new provisions that go into effect immediately include:[i]

- The 15-year time limitation for using Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits is eliminated for veterans who left active duty on or after January 1, 2013, and qualifying dependents (children using Fry scholarships who became eligible on or after January 1, 2013 and all Fry scholarship spouses).
- Reservists who had eligibility under the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) and lost it due to the program sunset provision will have that service credited toward the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill program.
- Certain work-study is permanently authorized; previously it had to be reapproved by Congress every few years.
- VA will help veterans to more clearly identify schools that offer them priority enrollment.

A provision to become effective in August 2019 will allow for a nine-month extension of up to \$30,000 for students in STEM field majors who meet eligibility requirements.

[i] <https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/forevergibill.asp>

## Recommendations: G.I. Bill

1. Educate academic advisors on the unique circumstances of G.I. Bill recipients, and when recommending courses, advisors should forecast major and other coursework to fit as closely as possible within the 36-month window while informing students of high demand and limited supply of courses. Flag veterans in the system and reach out to them early in their coursework to ensure they're on the right track.

2. Ensure veterans who are facing a larger-than-typical course load have access to mental health/wellness counselors as this causes undue stress.

3. Academic advisors, veteran services staff, and mentors should educate veterans on grants and scholarships available to help assuage the cost of education.

4. Offer priority enrollment to veterans in high demand and low supply classes. Partner with the VA to ensure veterans understand if your school offers priority enrollment.

5. Offer degree flexibility in course load for veterans receiving G.I. Bill benefits by making similar courses that are more regularly offered or easier to access apply to their course load.

6. Offer credit for military experience beyond the standard Physical Education credits that are typically offered, especially to those in nursing or similar degrees where a veteran has received the same training during military service.

## Faculty Provide Mixed Levels of Support

Results varied on perceptions of consideration and support from faculty. While many veterans described faculty as fairly understanding, most also described them as not able to relate to experiences in military service which impact their interactions in classes. A certifying official noted: "A lot of professors actually like having student veterans in their classes because they bring life experience into the classroom." While this appears to be true, many veterans felt uncomfortable being called on specifically to speak to their service or their political beliefs based on their experiences.

Some described themselves as extroverted and forthcoming about their experiences, but others didn't like being the "spokesperson" for veterans. Most often, veterans did not want to participate in discussions related to their experience. Most stated they don't wish to self-disclose that they are a veteran specifically for fear of being forced to participate in such discussions.

While many note the changing tide of our society's ability to separate feelings about the war from support of veterans, some veterans perceived faculty as intolerant of veterans because faculty may be against the war. Whether or not this is simply perceived by the veteran or explicitly stated by faculty was not always clear. But one incident was particularly upsetting for a veteran, who was called a "killer" by his professor during class, and was forced to continue in the class while filing a grievance against the teacher.

One professor we spoke with cited the challenge of juggling the huge amount of paperwork associated with requests for accommodation. This presents a real struggle for professors who not only must comply, but also wish to provide individualized support to each student. And in many cases, there appeared to be a clear lack of support from disability services to assist them. They would simply receive an accommodation request from disability services but receive no resources to help implement the processes for each student. This wasn't the case at every school, in fact, one school's disability office frequently reached out to faculty and acted as a liaison between instructors and students in order to make the process as harmonious as possible. It was clear, however, that this was not standard

practice across all schools. We were not able to speak to each school's disability office as some were not responsive. Therefore, we are unable to gain insight from these offices on their methods of outreach to professors.

When asked about requests for accommodations, veteran responses varied with regard to compliance. National Guard and Reservists we interviewed have found instructors to be very accommodating with their service-related absences. Faculty was also willing to adjust testing schedules, such as midterms, around military schedules.

Alarming, students at three of the four schools we studied mentioned there are instructors who have not complied with their requests for accommodation in classes. At one school, all students who had a request for accommodation had difficulties with their professors complying. A student at this school said: "I keep shoving my accommodation form at him, and he just brushes it off. He doesn't even bother or care to accommodate me and I'm like okay, I know where I stand with you." Veterans feel they have no recourse and are reluctant to report this to disability services or the administration for fear it will affect their grade in the course. Again, because we were unable to speak to the instructors involved in these incidents or the disability offices, we are unable to verify these claims. However, according to the veterans involved, they feel mistreated and disregarded by the instructors.

## Recommendations: Faculty

1. Ensure faculty and graduate student instructors have regular and ongoing trainings in veteran cultural competency. These trainings should be incorporated into university strategic plans. Swords to Plowshares has a Combat to Community™ cultural competency training program.
2. Establish communication channels between disability services and faculty to make certain that faculty adhere to accommodation requests and to ensure that appropriate recourse is followed when instructors don't comply.
3. Disability services must assist faculty with accommodation requests beyond merely sending an email and should provide faculty with resources for implementing accommodations.

## Can Faculty Refuse a Request for Accommodation?

If an instructor refuses, they would need to prove that the requested accommodation represents an "undue hardship" financially or administratively or "fundamentally alters" the academic course.

If the instructor provides a case that the accommodation may fundamentally alter the course or is an undue hardship, the university may reverse their decision. The student's only option is to file an internal and/or external grievance with an appropriate party\*. If the school affirms their decision that the accommodations are reasonable, the professor is likely in violation of both ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

This being said, if a student has already been approved by the disability office, the university has already determined that the accommodations are reasonable. A refusal to meet these accommodations are again considered a violation.

\*Internal Grievance/Mediation will vary by school and institution. Mediation most often occurs between the disability office, faculty, and student.

Definitions for "undue hardship" in ADA (Revised 2008 Sec. 12301.(A/B i-iv):

[www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm#12101](http://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm#12101)

[www.disabilityrightsca.org/pubs/530901.pdf](http://www.disabilityrightsca.org/pubs/530901.pdf)

[www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html)

## There is a Disconnect with Nonveteran Students

Student veterans overwhelmingly felt there is a clear disconnect and little common ground with nonveteran students. The typical age of university students is much younger than most student veterans. They are also less likely than veterans to be married, divorced, or have children. Age, life experience, and cultural differences have created an ostracizing sense of “otherness” for student veterans, establishing a divide between them and the nonveteran students. A USF veteran stated: “I think a lot of these vets went into the military young, and it’s literally all they know. We’re a lot older than a lot of the students here on campus. We’ve experienced different things. We kind of said goodbye to our family at a certain age and relied on each other through a lot. Some of our best friends come from the military, and people have a hard time finding a common ground with civilians among us.”

Curiosity among nonveteran students sometimes results in inappropriate questions, such as asking if the veteran had ever killed someone or asking if they have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These invasive questions upset the veterans we interviewed and have deepened their sense of alienation. However, sometimes the conversations and interest were viewed as constructive. For example, one UCB veteran noted an instance where they were invited out for coffee by a younger student and interviewed about their military experience. While unusual, the nonveteran student’s genuine interest created the opportunity to pose questions to overcome their disconnection and to create a dialogue around it. A student veteran describes this kind of interaction as “a good opportunity to educate people so, that way, they are a little more understanding about the experience.”

Individual interactions with nonveteran peers were not the only concern student veterans faced. SFSU and UCB have a history of anti-war protests and are often regarded as more liberal minded in their politics. This reputation has isolated veterans who are still processing the totality of their military experience. Some student veterans had been confronted by protestors and felt less inclined to self-disclose their veteran status to nonveteran students as a result.

Despite stereotypes and a university’s history with the

anti-war movement, it is important to consider that activists may not necessarily be anti-military and that student veterans may not be conservative. The mixed ideologies of military service members mirror the complexity of other citizens. However, the distinction must be made that if veterans feel an otherness or ambivalence from the campus community, it is best to address the concern before it becomes a larger problem.

### Recommendations: Interactions with Nonveteran Students

1. Create opportunities for student veterans to interact with other groups with unique circumstances, such as LGBTQ+ or parent groups, to create intersectional dialogue and advocacy.
2. Provide open forums to encourage constructive conversations and allow different groups to engage. Set up veteran panels with a Q and A. Allow for curiosity but inform nonveteran students of appropriate vs. inappropriate questions.

## Veteran Resource Centers and Staff are Crucial

*“When you come here, it makes you feel like you have a home. You have a home base and a touchstone... that means everything to me.”*

*- UCB Student Veteran*

Veteran resource centers are the basic foundation of veteran-friendly practice. Transition issues can be extremely sensitive, and veterans need a physical space to connect to resources and to one another. The institutions studied differed with regard to VRCs. Cal Veteran Services Center (CVSC) at UCB stands out as a model that is able to address the needs of its students. VRCs at both SFSU and CCSF do provide supports to their student veteran populations but are not as well-resourced as UCB’s CVSC. USF has promised a temporary space to a developing VRC, but as of our publication has yet to grant it.

Veterans who used the VRC saw it as a place to connect to veteran benefits and other financial aid, receive guidance on coursework and degrees, access mental health services (when housed within a VRC), connect to disability services, have a quiet space to study away from the chaos of college, and connect with a community of peers in an otherwise isolating school environment. Most of the veterans we spoke with who access VRCs credit the centers as keeping them well-prepared and in school. A VA Vet Center Counselor reinforced the focus group observation, stating: “A lot of the students we’ve talked with from other schools have said that the people that are really in their corner are in the Veteran Resource Center, and they have someone that’s working with them all the time. That means a lot, and that encourages them to continue with school. If they’re having a hard time, they can go and reach out to that person and tell them, ‘Hey, I’m having a hard time,’ and they can give them some guidance and tell them how to figure it out. And if that’s available to them, they are more likely to graduate.”

## Early Calls Make for Greater Outreach and Outcomes

Staff at UCB’s CVSC begin their outreach with potential students by offering guidance to prospective student veterans who wish to transfer to UCB but who need resources or advice. They call each and every student veteran who applies to UCB and discuss the various programs available to them. Upon acceptance, veterans receive a welcome package with contacts for staff and advocates, a welcome presentation, and webinar outlining resources. Reaching this population early has proven to work, as their student veteran body has increased exponentially, from 151 to 460 in the past ten years.

Student veterans commented that UCB CVSC’s outreach and the student veteran community were significant incentives to attend the institution. Some veterans explained that they didn’t self-identify on their paperwork, but sought out the CVSC once on campus.

While the benefit of VRCs go beyond peer support, the value of connecting with other veterans in such a space cannot be overstated. One veteran from USF, which again does not have a VRC but does have a club, mentioned: “Just having a place to go and sit down, to feel that togetherness and comfort in that group is needed. Honestly some of the veterans here, I had no idea are veterans. Sometimes you don’t know unless you have a chance to meet and talk. So, having a gathering, having a place, just like the LGBTQ+ room gives them comfort and support, knowing there’s no one else in there but people who understand their situation.”

Students reported struggles and missed opportunities at schools without a dedicated VRC, or which have a VRC but lack either staff or dedicated support. Student veterans at multiple institutions faced instances where they reached out to nonveteran-specific officials about an issue related to their mental health, VA access, financial aid or veteran benefit paperwork, realized staff could offer limited assistance and had to self-advocate with mixed success.

Knowledgeable VRC staff and the institutional memory that comes with dedicated resources are essential. VRC staff are the conduit to both veteran and nonveteran-specific services, promoting campus and community engagement and supporting the academic and professional goals of student veterans. But it is important to note that even the concept of a VRC is almost universally the result of student advocacy, the efforts of a faculty champion, and independent fundraising.

**VRCs are Underfunded:** Funding veteran resource centers is no easy undertaking. Philanthropy is a valuable resource but also places pressure on staff to spend their time fundraising rather than directly addressing student need. UCB’s CVSC is fortunate to have student government resources and other funders, but it is an outlier compared to other schools. Granted, UCB’s veteran population is growing dramatically, and veterans worry services will be stretched thin if the VRC does not expand their staff. All schools studied would benefit from additional staff.

One veteran from USF emphasized the importance of a VRC when bureaucratic, social and financial pressures threaten degree completion: “Retention. You can scare people right out of the classroom if you don’t have any connections. I came to the school with a veteran from a different school in 2014. We saw nothing but walls when we first got here



and it felt very scary with the tuition going over the cap, not really understanding about the Yellow Ribbon Program, no other VA representatives having experience. Anyway, that veteran's not in the school anymore, and that alone is scary. People just told me to deal with it."

**VRCs Need to Conduct Specific Outreach:** VRCs are encouraged to engage in positive outreach, as it begins the academic career on a welcoming note. Depending on resources and staff allocated to VRCs, their outreach varies dramatically from campus to campus. In many instances, student veterans weren't aware of VRCs on their campus or simply stumbled upon them. UCB's CVSC, on the other hand, engages in proactive outreach, calling and introducing themselves to veterans prior to their arrival on campus. The administration screens for veteran status on application materials, then gives the CVSC a list of students who have self-identified as veterans. The screening includes all veterans, not just those who have eligibility for G.I. Bill benefits. Other schools may only track veteran education benefits recipients, which excludes a large number of veterans.

We note that outreach to subgroups is a challenge for all schools, as fewer women and LGBTQ+ veterans appear to engage, and few chose to engage in the student veterans focus groups. Those who attended also noted that outreach was critical, but there may be barriers to attending which traditional outreach models cannot solve. We can speculate that this may be due to a lack of awareness, scheduling difficulties, a lack of physical space, or a lack of services to compel student veterans to participate. But it may also be trauma related, and they may feel unwelcomed or feel like they do not belong in pre-existing spaces.

## Recommendations: Veteran Resource Centers

1. Providing a space for a Veteran Resource Center is the crucial first step in demonstrating support for veteran students. While real estate is difficult to come by, students at all schools we studied stressed the significance of such a space.
2. Universities should provide permanent, stable funding for VRCs to ensure that

the public promise to pay for veteran education may fulfill its potential. Supporting veteran students not only demonstrates an institutional commitment but also should be a standard for those institutions receiving G.I. Bill dollars.

3. Provide training and support to VRC staff to ensure services to veterans are consistent and dedicated, and develop programming with student and staff input.

4. Partner with outside organizations who can directly address the needs of student veterans or eliminate gaps in services. VA work study students, for example, can help staff resource centers or process financial aid for veterans. Veteran service organizations can provide academic, career, or personal counseling.

5. Institutions with VRCs should disclose graduation rates to prospective student veterans in order to demonstrate the added benefits of a VRC and to prove that they support veterans in education.

6. Survey student veterans on campus who don't access veteran-specific resources and find out why they don't attend meetings, use their veteran resource centers, or use existing support services. Inquire how the resource center can provide additional supports, connections, or solutions to challenges to assist in outreach. It is important to recognize all veterans, regardless of discharge status or how they identify to the administration.



## Mental Health Shows a Greater Need for Counseling & Wellness

While there have been advances in the provision of mental healthcare, mental health needs remain a key threat to student success. A 2017 study at community colleges, for example, found psychological trauma impacts veterans' academic success and campus integration.<sup>‡</sup> Researchers claimed this puts student veterans at higher risk for dropping out of institutions that fail to provide them with supportive services. The study states that crowded situations, classroom discussion topics, and other on-campus stressors can trigger and distress veterans.

During the focus group discussion, veterans shared their struggles with mental health and how they managed to persevere. They also shared their concern for peers who may not follow through with treatment. Suicide is a very real concern. The groups keep an eye on one another and respectfully offer help to those who appear to have trouble. Having a place to connect at VRCs is vital, and indeed in separate discussions regarding housing, veterans suggested that communal living could prevent veteran suicide.

While we didn't specifically ask whether veterans access mental health services, veterans who did disclose this information most often sought mental health services through off-campus VA facilities and Vet Center counselors, or through on-campus, nonveteran-specific services. At schools without veteran-specific mental health services, student veterans look for assistance primarily outside of the institution, making it difficult for both the veteran who has to travel to the VA or other mental health centers, and for the institution who can't properly provide services to students under one roof.

UCB and CCSF have agreements with the San Francisco VA to provide veteran mental health counselor hours on campus. This ideal arrangement houses VA therapists at or in close proximity to the VRC space. This is not only convenient for busy students, but also reduces stigma, increases accessibility, and normalizes mental health treatment. It also has the additional benefit of creating an in-house network where mental health services work in coordination with the school's VRC.

Many veterans discussed the benefit of having such a

space on campus as crises arise. One mentioned that any time they get triggered or experience anxiety, they know they can immediately access mental health services on campus. Another participant expressed why this was appreciated, stating: "The staff listened to veterans and asked what we needed, and brought the VA community to us."

### Recommendations: Mental Health

1. Create partnerships with the VA and Vet Centers whenever possible to bring in counselors for regular office hours. Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) with mental health services can also provide this resource or serve as a referral.
2. Provide training to mental health providers to work with veterans in crisis and provide training on how to deal with crisis.
3. Assign peer counselors to be a point of contact for veterans in crisis and provide training on how to deal with crisis.
4. Provide staff who can inform people of their VA care and how to sign up for it. Make sure VA staff can come to VRCs to discuss eligibility and access to VA services and benefits.

## VA Healthcare and Service-Connected Disability Benefits Require Coordination

A majority of participants (81%) are enrolled in VA healthcare, but it's unclear how much they actually access the VA, and many cited that wait times, difficulty scheduling appointments around their classes, and geographic distance to the VA impacts whether or not they seek services. This is not a surprising finding, given these same barriers exist among other veteran populations, but it's particularly worrisome for some of these participants who reported complex medical and psychological needs.

Note that veterans are now eligible for one year of VA mental healthcare, and recently separated combat

<sup>‡</sup> Medley, J., Cheney, A. M., Grubbs, K., Abraham, T., Hunt, J., Fortney, J., Lu, L., & Curran, G. (2017). The Impact of the Psychological Sequela of Trauma on Veterans Seeking Higher Education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 30(2).

veterans are eligible for five years of free VA healthcare. After that time, in order to retain VA, care they must have submitted a claim with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and received a service-connected disability rating.

Almost all participants have applied for and received a disability rating (73%), with 18 participants still waiting to receive their initial rating. Average wait time for a disability rating was reported to be six months, which is over the average wait time of 125 days for all veterans. A small number of participants are in appeals, and many mentioned waiting over a year so far for their rating. It's important to keep these veterans in mind as appeal ratings decisions may take years, which impacts all other aspects of the veteran's life while they wait. Most are rated for a combination of physical and psychological disabilities, and most of the participants are rated in the 50-60% range which can negatively impact their ability to do well in school.

## Examples of service-connected disabilities among veteran participants

"Shoulder injury, hypothyroidism"

"Sleep apnea, knee surgery, nerve damage"

"Lower back pain and shoulder pain"

"Hearing loss, and depression sleep disorder"

"Ear and knees"

"Physical disabilities, psychological conditions, and service-related skin cancer diagnosis"

"Anxiety/headaches related to anxiety"

"PTSD and tinnitus"

"Mental health"

"PTSD"

"TBI, PTSD, tinnitus, bilateral patellofemoral pain syndrome"

While a high number of participants were enrolled in VA healthcare and receiving service-connected disability compensation, it's unclear whether this is true overall for all veterans at the schools we studied. The VA Vet Center psychologist at UCB we interviewed stated: "A lot of the vets that I see have been out for years, and they don't even know that they get free healthcare for five years post-separation, and they don't have a clue about how to sign up for healthcare." The interviewee then stated there needs to be more outreach from the VA to cover signing up for VA care, including aspects of the enrollment process and connecting with veteran service organizations to apply for service-connected disability. While VA staff do come to schools to conduct outreach, the VA, in many cases, seems reliant on VRC staff to provide this education.

We were able to observe many of the presentations that the VA provides to veterans on campuses. Presentations to UCB and CCSF veteran resource centers tended to be an overview of VA services with very general information on access, enrollment process and applying for disability benefits. While these events were well attended, veterans tended to have more complex needs that the VA couldn't answer in a general session. Some veterans (and we as well) felt that the presentations were not specific enough for veterans to understand the nuances of eligibility and access. Having VA staff come to the centers to table, rather than provide a quick presentation of services, seemed to be more successful in other schools and allowed the VA to provide one-on-one guidance, especially in sensitive cases where veterans wished to discuss mental health.

## Recommendations: Accessing VA Healthcare

1. Formalize partnerships with the VA to coordinate VA outreach for healthcare enrollment and disability benefits.
2. Work with the VA to provide a more individualized approach to VA workshops.
3. Connect veterans who are applying for a disability rating with VSOs who offer assistance with claims.

## Vocational Rehabilitation Benefits are Underutilized

Participants were asked about vocational rehabilitation benefits, often referred to as Voc Rehab. The benefit was largely unknown, and many participants weren't aware they could receive such benefits. If a veteran has a service-connected disability rating of at least 10%, they may be eligible for additional educational support including rehabilitation services such as case management, counseling and medical referrals, job placement assistance, an extension of time in school, and other benefits. For student veterans with disabilities, this program is a lifeline to academic, career, transitional, and life success. Given that Voc Rehab benefits are difficult to understand, assistance should be provided. The complexities of the application process make certifying officials best suited to provide this information and liaise with VRC staff to share information.

Some school staff we interviewed mentioned, however, that Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) case managers had provided contradictory or incorrect information to students regarding this benefit. Some students, for example, had inconsistent experiences with regard to the VBA allowing on-campus student health fees to be covered by Voc Rehab when, historically, it had never been an issue. VBA began consistently denying payment of the fees for on-campus student health services, without due notice to veterans, and left veterans to pay the bill. VRC staff at these schools spent considerable time seeking out answers from the VBA, but at the time of publication, no recourse was given. This experience further demonstrates the need to support adequate staff to cut through veteran benefit bureaucracy.

### Recommendations: Rehabilitation Benefits

1. Ensure certifying officials educate veterans on vocational rehabilitation benefits and that they have information readily available to them.
2. Inform Student Health Services of potential billing issues with the VBA so that they may flag and speak with veterans who may be affected.

## Certifying Officials are Overburdened and Undertrained

Certifying officials are responsible for approving and verifying classes veterans take as part of the process of student veterans receiving benefits. Registrar office personnel are rarely assigned these duties full-time, instead, this function is added as additional duties. There also appears to be high turnover in these positions. Many veterans described difficulties in getting their education benefits processed and approved, suggesting that these staff are undertrained and/or overworked.

The administrative process is one of the earliest barriers students face when using their G.I. Bill. One veteran said they had “disconnects with the administration. A lot of times I’ve gone in for things, and they don’t even keep track of if you’re certified to receive benefits.” Another noticed the turnover of staff: “A veteran advisor at the school that’s specific to veterans, what I have discovered, is a part-time job for somebody who’s newly trained. It keeps switching out. Since I’ve been here for one semester, they’ve switched around twice.” This position often handles a huge caseload of VA benefits as well as veteran resource issues beyond education benefits. The certifying officials we interviewed all stated that they often cannot handle the caseload effectively and they need more resources. Veterans mentioned they are often unable to access information, and noted how overburdened people in these positions typically are. A student stated: “In the registrar’s office that I worked with, there was a single individual. She was so nice and really helpful, but I felt like

I was bothering her. I'd show up at the door and be like, 'I know I'm not the only person you're worried about.' I was trying to get everything done because the clock was ticking. I think that's where it would be nice to have a resource office instead of one individual trying to keep up with all this stuff."

Others find certifying officials unresponsive. One student stated, "I had a problem getting my Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for my G.I. Bill. I went up to the registrar today, and they had no idea it was a problem. I told them about it, and they just said, 'Why don't you call the VA?' So, I was going to do that anyway, but that's not the point. They're a liaison to the veterans! Not that I'm entitled to a more active role on behalf of the school, but I figured there would be at least some goodwill extended."

Conversely, some certifying officials, most notably those in schools without Veteran Resource Center staff, were found to go above and beyond their job descriptions and act as advocates for veterans. While certifying officials didn't specifically state this, it was observed that institutions appear less inclined to provide additional staff to support veterans when they already have certifying officials who offer extra help to veterans.

Certifying officials we interviewed noted VA training is "vague and hard to apply to real-life situations." Some veterans were concerned about certifying officials being able to understand the particulars of their benefits and needs. Certifying officials who are veterans themselves were perceived as more knowledgeable about the nuances of education benefits and more eager to advocate for veterans. While we didn't quiz the certifying officials we interviewed on their capabilities, we found there to be no difference between the dedication of those who are or aren't veterans.

While some colleges performed better than others in this area, sufficient investment in adequate staffing, consistent training, and better information systems will support students, certifying officials, and ultimately the university.

## Recommendations: Certifying Officials

1. Train employees who work with veterans in order to familiarize them with military culture and veteran needs, as well as to understand the complexities of veteran benefits.
2. While the VA needs to provide a more detailed and standardized set of training materials for certifying officials, schools should ensure there are sufficient self-help materials for students applying for educational benefits.
3. Provide additional staff, even student veterans on VA work study, to help alleviate some of the burden placed on current certifying officials.

## Career Counseling is Underwhelming

Alarmingly, almost all 75 students we interviewed, even those who were close to completing their degrees, stated they don't feel they have a clear plan for employment beyond graduation. A large portion have interacted with career resource centers on campus but don't think that the centers understand the minutiae of military skills and how to translate their military experience in their resumes or job interviews.

Resume writing is noted as one of the most beneficial services provided, but there is little actual job placement or meaningful conversation about careers. Students largely felt that job fairs are lackluster, but they attend out of desperation.

## Recommendations: Career Counseling

1. Familiarize career counselors with military training and skills for occupations to direct them to proper career fields. Provide staff with cultural competency training so they will better understand student veterans.
2. Partner with veteran service organizations providing employment preparation services such as Swords to Plowshares. These organizations can visit VRCs to help veterans with resumes, skills building opportunities, and job brokering.
3. Establish connections with veteran-friendly employers to create post-graduation and internship hiring opportunities. More targeted assistance, such as help with federal/government jobs, new partnerships with employers, internships, alumni networks or department-specific job connections that are directly related to degree programs produce more results.
4. Establish a veterans' alumni network (i.e. on LinkedIn or other school-related social networks) where veterans can connect with others in their related career fields.
5. Ensure the Veteran Resource Center and Career Resource Center are interfacing to prepare veterans for employment. Encourage career centers to strengthen connections with VRCs by making regular visits to talk about services.

## Academic Advisors Need to Create Solid Plans

Focus group participants had little to say regarding academic advising. Students were more concerned about immediate needs like housing and finances. While most viewed academic advising as vital for incoming students, they felt that it was either underutilized or that it was too difficult to access. Some students may not feel guidance is necessary, but coursework and career planning are interlinked. A solid plan created with knowledgeable advisors will help make academic life less of a challenge.

Cultural competency among academic advisors at all schools varied according to veterans. Some students described advisors as understanding how to translate military experience to college courses and credits, while other veterans had difficulty explaining their military experience so that a civilian advisor could understand. Academic advisors are in a crucial position to point veterans toward the right academic path, and they typically serve veterans at a key point in their schooling and transition. Advisors who are well-versed in military culture and experiences can better understand how to apply skills to coursework and transferrable credits. Additionally, these students also may need additional guidance as they are not accustomed to academic life and may even be the first in their family to attend college. Advisors who have a firm understanding of the G.I. Bill's 36-month window are able to organize coursework with the student veteran so that they can make the most of their benefits.

At the very least, advisors should be aware of military credits and how they apply to academic plans. Many students reported that military credits and prior classes were not applied to their academic transcripts. As a result, students took classes they did not need, a significant hardship given the time constraints of the G.I. Bill. Problems with administering credits cause students to lose not only time, but also money from their G.I. Bill funds. Losses in credits or benefits can adversely affect their ability to complete their degree programs. It also has the effect of diminishing trust between students and staff. The role of an academic advisor is not to administer credits, but they should work in concert with, and make referrals to, staff that evaluate credit discrepancies.



## Recommendations: Academic Advising

1. Campus leadership should require academic advisors to attend cultural competency training sessions along with other staff to send a message that the university values the experiences of veterans.
2. Provide academic advisors with information on military credits for training and skills for occupations so they can provide transferable credit whenever possible.
3. Ensure academic advisors meet with incoming veteran students, especially those receiving G.I. Bill benefits, to confirm that they take the correct steps in their coursework.

## Peer Mentorship Prevents Many from Fallout and Crisis

As we have stressed, there is a consistent disconnect between student veterans and the larger student population as reported by the focus groups. Student veterans who have the opportunity to connect with one another comment that it is vital for their success. One USF veteran explained: “It was really rough for me, mainly because I felt like I didn’t have a group of people I could go and be with and introduce myself to who could relate to me, with my service, and everything. Little things. It was a little difficult to adapt. I felt like I was out of place, having not known any veterans at the school.”

In addition to military service, veterans are commonly older than most students. One UCB veteran illustrates the dichotomy by explaining, “I’m talking now because I’m with my veteran community. I don’t talk outside. I’m 60 years old, I ain’t got nothing in common with these 18-22 year-old kids. This feels like a place where I can belong.”

Peer mentorship is difficult to quantify in terms of outcomes, but from the perspectives of those we interviewed, it allows them to better holistically

understand their institutions and their personal academic careers. Student veterans can be categorized as non-traditional students for a variety of reasons, from having family, age, or working full-time. Peer support from student veterans also allows them to support each other through potential traumatic memories or military-related stressors.

**Veteran Clubs Should Be Encouraged:** Unlike VRCs, veteran clubs are purely student-led, and students engage to connect with their comrades rather than seek information. Clubs provide a venue for peer mentorship, and in our findings, they can amplify the strength of VRCs. Members also said that clubs provide support for those who have difficulties with mental health as they provide informal wellness checks and can direct peers to support services on or off campus.

Peer mentorship may be more difficult to come by for student veterans who feel at odds with nonveteran students, and a club provides an official group to gather student veterans for healthy social connection. A USF student veteran noted: “Some of our best friends come from the military, and people have a hard time finding a common ground with civilians among us. When you meet another veteran, it’s an instant connection, instant camaraderie, and it’s a home away from home. A lot of these veterans just feel alone.”

Most importantly, peer mentorship at veteran clubs provides informal mental health support to veterans who are unwilling to receive more formalized care. A UCB student veteran stated: “One thing that I suggested at a club meeting is try to make a friend. Or if you notice a vet who is kind of an isolator, at least go up to him and feel him out. Learn their moods.” Clubs can provide a reliable source of support, can reach out to veterans when they are in distress, and peers can route veterans to formalized services in the event of a crisis.

Participants noted that club activities and meetings that include alcohol or take place in bars exclude certain members. This is not to say that these types of events should be prohibited, only that alternative events should make up a significant portion of all events so all feel welcome. Women veterans, LGBTQ+, older veterans, and veterans prone to isolation were reported as less likely to engage with clubs even when aware of club activities.



## Recommendations: Peer Mentoring and Veteran Clubs

1. Create liaison positions for experienced student veterans to mentor incoming student veterans. This can be done informally by having liaisons attend veteran orientations or conduct VRC/club meetings. Whenever possible, have liaisons conduct outreach to new students to familiarize them with the school and veteran-specific services. Creating an alumni association of mentors is also an option.
2. Track membership and attendance closely, and take regular feedback on what the club feels would increase membership. Continue to use new strategies to recruit members in underrepresented populations.
3. Consider having veterans attend the events of other clubs, since they may have veteran members and encourage those veterans to attend club meetings or engage in veteran services.

bear. Others mentioned the stress of managing parenting and family relationships while also managing their course load. Many veterans experience absences from their families and children to attend university because of time constraints and financial challenges. A USF participant said, “My son is 15 and he’s going to be, like, fending for himself, and I’m going to be in school every day. And the commute is so long. I’m not looking forward to it whatsoever.”

## Recommendations: Families

1. Include families in orientations and meetings with veterans about education benefits as families are often the ones who help veterans understand the complexities of paperwork and processes.
2. Provide scholarships for veterans with families, especially for veterans who are head of household and must provide for their family while attending school.
3. Provide adequate childcare on campus for veterans with families, and ensure they have access to childcare during appointments.

## Families are the Conduit to Care and Benefits

Families were discussed throughout the focus groups. Veteran spouses and partners play an active role in veteran transition to school and are a conduit to care and benefits. They very often are the ones who shepherd veterans to college and help them navigate the benefits process. While the majority (70%) of veterans in our focus groups were without children, those with children described the added pressure of finding adequate housing while receiving the same housing benefits as those without children. (See section on Family Housing Issues.) Many stated they must work to support their families while in school, and as they are very often the head of household (70% of participants who reported having a family), this is a heavy burden to

## Housing Support is Essential and Lacking

Housing was identified as a key problem among student veterans. Finding housing in the Bay Area is difficult, and finding affordable housing is near impossible. General student housing was often seen as inappropriate for veterans who may be significantly older and have families. In addition, students do not receive their living stipend until school actually begins, when it is even more difficult to secure limited housing. Especially since the schools we studied are in urban areas, some of the students we interviewed must live a considerable distance from school, adding long commutes and associated expenses to their daily burden. In the most severe cases, student veterans became homeless after moving to the San Francisco Bay Area to attend school.

The institutions we studied offer some resources to find housing, but often it is still unaffordable for student veterans. And there are additional barriers to maintaining housing. The G.I. Bill's monthly stipend is suspended between academic sessions, thus putting their housing at risk. Landlords may not recognize the G.I. Bill living stipend as income for rental application purposes. If school officials file G.I. Bill paperwork late or improperly, this could mean late rental payments or potentially eviction.

### **Family Housing is Especially Difficult to Secure:**

Veterans with families have an additional financial and housing challenge. When developing housing resources for students, institutions do not significantly factor students with families, and if they are taken into consideration, student veterans note that the options for family housing are subpar. One university, for example, does provide an option for family housing, renting out apartments through the university for significantly below market rates. However, this option does not work for everyone; one veteran explained that he was disappointed with the quality and size of the properties which led him to move his family out of the development.

### **Veteran-Specific Housing Resources are Not**

**Well Understood:** When asked about veteran-specific housing resources, veteran responses were limited. One substantive criticism was that the VA and most other veteran housing services require veterans to be homeless to receive assistance, which is not correct. Veterans do not,

in fact, have to be homeless in order to qualify.

"The best thing about the VA," a CCSF student stated, "is there's help if you become homeless, but you have to become homeless first, and so by that point, your credit is ruined and so you wouldn't be able to qualify to get another apartment." This demonstrates a lack of understanding about eligibility and availability of housing resources for veterans. The student is largely correct regarding HUD-VASH programs, which is intended for chronically homeless veterans. Other programs like Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF) and even Section 8 have provisions to help veterans who are not homeless.

## Recommendations: Housing

1. Admissions must ask students about their housing plans and coordinate resources for new students.
2. Consider the possibilities of veteran-specific housing on campus, such as the residence hall's "themed" floors, or an allocated number of houses specifically for veterans with families.
3. Foster relationships with veteran-friendly housing and neighboring landlords. Develop options to collectively house student veterans whenever possible.
4. Educate students and staff on housing resources to include the SSVF program.
5. Create partnerships with community organizations to meet housing needs of student veterans that can't be solved by campus programs.
6. Create a student relief program or fund for student veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. This has been done at many schools, including one we studied. Assist in housing between academic sessions.

## Awareness of Grants and Scholarships is Low

Most veterans we spoke with were not aware of veteran-specific scholarships or grants, and many stated such an award would greatly increase their financial stability. Some were upset that they weren't made aware of this resource. Among those who applied, many stated the application process was clear and it was relatively easy to be awarded a scholarship. Some stated the award process should consider their military experience, service-connected issues, and personal hardship and that this alone should qualify them for an award.

Not all veterans are eligible for educational benefits and the benefits may not cover the full costs of tuition, fees, and other expenses. Student veterans rely on financial aid alternatives to veterans' benefits, but many are unsure of eligibility due to their veteran status. Student veterans are often financially independent or may rely on spousal support. Forty-two percent of the students we studied held jobs in addition to being in school to supplement their G.I. Bill, grants, and scholarship income.

### Recommendations: Grants and Scholarships

1. Ensure veterans are aware of grants and scholarships available to them in their meetings with academic advisors, veteran services staff, etc., and ensure information is posted in VRCs.
2. Talk with grantors whenever possible about eligibility criteria and award process, and regardless of whether you may influence criteria, inform the grantor about barriers some veterans face in the application process.
3. Inform veterans of their financial aid eligibility status, and coordinate financial advising so veterans can cover expenses between academic sessions.

## Minority Student Veterans are an Underserved Population

Women, LGBTQ+, and racial and ethnic minority veterans were not significantly discussed during the focus groups. One of the questions asked directly concerned the level of inclusion women and LGBTQ+ veterans feel in veteran clubs and resource centers, but the topic failed to receive more than passing attention for various possible reasons.

**Women Veterans May Feel Unwelcomed in Veteran Spaces:** It's important to note that there were mixed responses among the women veterans who did participate in the focus groups, and who participate in VRCs and veteran clubs, as to whether or not they provide a welcoming environment to women veterans. This is a common obstacle in veteran spaces, as the typical male-dominated culture of the military extends to traditional veteran services as well. Female-identifying veterans were represented in our sample (n=10; 13% of our sample compared with 9.4% of the overall U.S. veteran population) but this is still a small representation in a room full of men. Also, certain schools had more women engaged in our focus groups than others. City College of San Francisco, for example, had only one female-identifying veteran in the focus group. San Francisco State University's first focus group had no female-identifying women in the room, but the second had three.

In one-on-one conversations with women veterans who opted-out of the focus groups and who don't participate in VRCs or clubs, some stated that they did not attend club meetings or use the VRC due to an all-male presence which, in their opinion, failed to provide camaraderie with other women. Some women also recalled language which they found offensive that discouraged them from attending clubs. Some also explained that while there aren't specific events that occurred leading them to feel uncomfortable, they simply prefer to engage with their women veteran peers but don't have the opportunity to in the traditional veteran space. Women veterans would be more likely to join if they made efforts to include people of various backgrounds. That said, even schools and clubs that made an effort to do outreach specifically to women did not see an increase in their participation. We plan to conduct individual interviews with female-identifying veterans who do not participate in VRCs or veteran clubs to augment our research.

### **LGBTQ+ Veterans Nearly Absent Among the Ranks of Veteran Clubs:**

Much like women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans were difficult to find or recruit for the study. The study did not specifically ask for LGBTQ+ veterans to participate. Instead, we visited LGBTQ+ club gatherings looking for participants and met with staff in the Multicultural Center and Diversity Center to provide this information to students via emails and flyers. We did not ask for individual status in the survey or during focus groups out of respect for the privacy of participants. One professor reported that student veterans in the trans community are increasingly isolated, which makes outreach to this particular group critical. When prompted to discuss the inclusiveness of LGBTQ+ veterans in veteran resource centers and clubs, a couple of veterans voluntarily disclosed their LGBTQ+ status. These were veterans who had positive experiences with VRCs and clubs. It's difficult to say how many other LGBTQ+ veterans had similar feelings, or had feelings of isolation, since few chose to disclose this information in the study.

### **Racial and Ethnic Minority Veterans Still Underrepresented Despite an Increase in Military Service:**

African American and Latinx identifying veterans were represented in the sample, but in some specific focus groups were underrepresented, and overall racial and ethnic minority veterans were understudied. Most of the participants in our focus groups tended to be white males. This is at odds with the military demographic, given the consistent growth of minority veterans over the last two decades. In fact, The Pew Research Center reported "racial and ethnic minority groups made up 40% of Defense Department active-duty military in 2015, up from 25% in 1990. (In 2015, 44% of all Americans ages 18 to 44 were racial or ethnic minorities.)"<sup>§</sup> It's unclear whether racial and ethnic minority veterans are, in fact, present on campus but not engaged in veteran-specific resources, as most schools don't disclose this information about their student veterans.

## **Schools Should Have Specific "Veteran-Friendly" Criteria**

Institutions will claim to be veteran-friendly on their website, but student veterans we interviewed don't know what this entails or what they offer for veterans. Or, they feel the school is stating they're veteran-friendly without any criteria to adhere to or without any real tangible support provided to veterans.

### **Recommendations: Veteran-Friendly Schools**

1. Schools claiming to be "veteran-friendly" on their websites need to support that claim with specific resource information.
2. Veteran-friendly schools need to be championed by advocates, education professionals and veteran service organizations.

<sup>§</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/6-facts-about-the-u-s-military-and-its-changing-demographics>

## Checklist for a Veteran-Friendly School

- ☐ Include student veterans in the institution's strategic plans.
- ☐ Provide transition assistance to the college environment.
- ☐ Recognize prior military experience for college credits beyond the standard Physical Education credit.
- ☐ Provide strong mental health services and support.
- ☐ Provide accessible, high-quality G.I. Bill benefits assistance.
- ☐ Make disability services for student veterans a priority.
- ☐ Provide dedicated space where student veterans can study, build a support network, and learn about resources specific to their needs from trained staff.
- ☐ Establish a peer mentor program.
- ☐ Train all staff and educators in cultural competency.
- ☐ Educate academic and career advisors on military occupational specialties (MOS) and transferrable skills.
- ☐ Include a list of veteran services your institution provides in welcome packets to incoming students.
- ☐ Create a committee of staff and administrators to establish clear goals for each school year related to supporting student veterans.
- ☐ Programming, literature, and website information must be clear and consistent so veterans know why the university is committed to serving veterans.
- ☐ Speak directly to veterans for guidance rather than creating veteran programs without input.
- ☐ Partner with organizations that can help veterans and invite them to your campus regularly to provide additional support.

## Limitations of Our Study

Further exploration of LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic minority, and women veteran student populations will be made in our future research as these are significant communities within the larger veteran population. We plan to target and interview student veterans of these populations individually instead of in a group setting to allow emphasis on their identity and perceptions of both inclusion and support.

Further, almost all of our sample received an honorable discharge from the military, and while this allowed us to speak extensively about G.I. Bill benefits, we received minimal information from veterans with less than honorable discharges who are precluded from education benefits. These veterans tend to be isolated and excluded from care systems, and thus may not seek veteran-specific

supports at school. Further research on these veterans is needed.

While the colleges and universities we studied are Bay Area specific, their experiences are not unique. However, rural areas have far more limited resources, and this likely impacts the higher education outcomes of rural veteran students.

While we made thorough attempts to reach campus staff from veteran resource centers, certifying officials, disability offices, financial aid personnel, and faculty, not all staff were responsive or open to an interview. We plan to engage in further discussion with campus officials and staff and continue to bring resources to each campus.

## Discussion of Our Findings

It is clear across the universities that having dedicated support staff and a dedicated center can do great things for the student veteran community. Well-staffed VRCs are one of the most significant ways to help student veterans. The presence of VRCs alone will not solve all challenges on campuses. Rather, the VRC must be recognized as a fundamental element which can work with campus student services and community resources to ensure that veteran students may thrive.

Student veterans at colleges without a VRC have more difficulty resolving academic and other challenges and these students display less community cohesion than other student demographics. Colleges that have dedicated centers with experienced staff show more ability to address barriers and, most significantly, build a student veteran community that serves as its own support network. When considering a college, prospective veteran students take note of these centers and staff as reasons to attend.

Our research found that student veterans face common challenges which may hinder their ability to do well in school. Some are tightly connected to military service, such as PTSD and physical disabilities. Others are related to veterans as a population. For example, many are the

first in their families to attend college, are older than traditional-aged students, and are more likely to have dependent children. Other issues impact both veteran and nonveteran students, such as housing and finances, but military experience and transitional issues create unique challenges in these areas. That said, there are specific resources available to veterans to address their needs, but little understanding of those resources in nonveteran systems of care.

Many of the challenges we described among various college services are clear; either they lack dedicated staff knowledgeable in veterans' issues and resources or they lack cultural competency to appropriately interact with veterans. These issues can be solved by investing in resources, recruiting quality staff and through the delivery of regular cultural competency training. There are examples of quality support, often times due to exemplary employees, but it is not a standardized or common experience according to the focus groups. Even at those schools with active VRCs, resources were stretched beyond capacity, or proactive staff go above and beyond reasonable expectations to serve veterans. This is not sustainable for the institutions, and is viewed by those we interviewed as a disservice to veteran students.



Investments in VRCs and veteran resources is far from universal. Where VRCs exist, they have often come about through self-advocacy by students or a staff champion. Funding is tight, and those staff champions are tasked with raising private funds in addition to responding to the critical needs of students. Staff who are left to fundraise for their positions and for veteran resources may experience added stress and burnout. We recognize that budget constraints impact almost every area of higher education but because schools benefit from and seek out G.I. Bill income, directing funds to the success and wellness of students is more than warranted. Veterans observe when their university is not invested in their students, and universities who receive G.I. Bill dollars are viewed as responsible for returning that investment. In short, stable funding makes for predictable planning and support for veterans in school.

Universities and colleges must make intentional steps to create a veteran-friendly campus. None of these steps are terribly difficult or expensive, but require cultural competency training and practices as well as investment in space and staff directly engaged for this population. These efforts include:

- targeted outreach to potential veteran students;
- opportunities for veterans to engage with their peers and create connection with other student groups;

- adequate staff devoted to veteran education benefits certification;
- a staffed location for a Veteran Resource Center;
- cultural competency education for staff and faculty;
- partnerships with the VA and veteran service organizations to bring in more resources;
- partnerships with veteran alumni, housing providers and other community members; and
- recognition of veterans as a unique contribution to overall school diversity.

These support services are vital. Inexperienced or overworked academic advisors and certifying officials can bring students' academic careers to a standstill, causing lasting damage to their financial stability and wellness. Student services personnel who are unfamiliar with veterans' nontraditional background may exacerbate student veteran challenges. Faculty who do not understand the unique experiences of veterans may come across as disrespectful or unsupportive. Nonveteran students can further the disconnect and isolation that veterans often feel on campuses. Incorporating supportive practices will improve wellness, decrease isolation, and improve the academic outcomes of student veterans.

## Conclusion

Universities have opportunities to invest more in establishing veteran-friendly practices and services. In addition, all staff who impact student wellness from academic advisors, disability offices, career services and others can improve interactions through cultural competency training and interaction with local veteran service providers.

Universities should provide permanent, stable funding for veteran resources to ensure that the public promise to pay for veteran education may fulfill its potential. Relying on the goodwill of donors will not sustain programs, and supporting veteran students not only demonstrates an

institutional commitment, but also should be a standard for those institutions receiving also G.I. Bill dollars.

Support for veterans in school is particularly pressing as the number of student veterans is growing, and we all benefit from rich diversity on campus. In addition, it delivers on the promise of an education and a path to a civilian career that we, as a society, have made to these student veterans when they signed the contract to serve.



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