

FOREWORD AND KEY HIGHLIGHTS

MISSING PERSPECTIVES:

SERVICEMEMBERS'
TRANSITION FROM
SERVICE TO CIVILIAN LIFE

DATA-DRIVEN RESEARCH TO
ENACT THE PROMISE OF THE
POST-9/11 GI BILL

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FOREWORD AND KEY HIGHLIGHTS

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In 2013, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University (IVMF) launched an ambitious research program, supported by a Google Global Impact Award, aimed to cultivate a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and wellness concerns of the newest generation of U.S. veterans. The research program's principal objective is to highlight the breadth and diversity of our transitioning servicemembers and veterans, in the context of their first-hand, lived experiences across multiple role identities including warfighter, family member, student, and community leader, among others.

To this end, the IVMF research team developed a comprehensive multi-phased research effort to capture these experiences and identities, with a keen interest on transitioning servicemembers and veterans considering or pursuing higher education. The first phase of this effort commenced with a robust survey, carefully designed and distributed through multiple partners in government, higher education, private sector, and the media. This effort resulted in what is arguably **one of the most sweeping datasets** to date representing the lived experiences of our latest generation of veterans and military families.

Specifically, more than 8,500 veterans, active duty

servicemembers, members of the National Guard and Reserves, and military-connected dependents gave their time to take to share their motivations to serve, and subsequently return to civilian life; their post-service academic plans, aspirations, and barriers; their academic experiences and perceptions; and their broader, yet related transition experiences. These insights are both rich and remarkable.

The data, moreover, comprise one of the **more representative** nonrandom samples of the latest generation of veterans, especially on important demographic factors such as branch of service, ratio of enlisted to officer, and gender. Despite familiar challenges in reaching a wide number of veterans, the team's diligence and collaboration with key partners in the Department of Veterans Affairs, Student Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the *Military Times*, among others, proved critical to capturing this diversity.

This initial report, aptly titled ***Missing Perspectives***, serves as the inaugural publication in what will be a continuing series of IVMF research papers and commentary over the next year, highlighting issues and opportunities related to veterans' transition broadly, and higher education specifically.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

To date, existing research related to veterans and higher education has focused on issues of persistence, attainment, and readjustment. The following report addresses what has been a critical gap in understanding the transition experience generally, particularly the transition from the military to higher education. That is, the report emphasizes the social and cultural barriers that affect the transition experience, narrated through the voices of veterans. Most importantly, it reveals veterans' first-hand experiences, their pre-, in-, and post-service motivations; their perceived strengths, skills, and shortcomings; their future educational and employment aspirations; and their enduring contributions to public service.

Overall, the survey suggests a strongly positive perception of the military experience and that military service was primarily motivated by education benefits (53%); a desire to serve the country (53%); and the opportunity for new experiences, adventures, or travel (49%). A strong majority of respondents (88%) reported that joining the military was a "good decision."

On higher education, the study suggests that experiences in the military motivate and promote a heightened interest in advanced education. An overwhelming majority (92%) agreed or agreed strongly that higher education is central to a successful transition from military to civilian life. This finding holds true regardless of gender, ethnicity and race, socio-economic background and geography, and military specialties and training.

At the same time, however, the study also highlights significant barriers to realizing the potential individual and societal gains from our country's massive investment in veterans' education. For example, while most veterans perceived that their military-learned skills and leadership would contribute positively to an educational setting (84%), a majority (53%) also voiced the belief that the colleges and universities they attend (or aspire to attend) do not recognize the value of these specific and military-learned skills. Further, veterans also cite inadequate financial resources or a financial burden (56%); conflict with personal or family obligations (28%); expiration of GI Bill benefits prior to degree completion (25%); issues related to wellness and/or disability (23%); and conflict between employment and school (22%) as barriers to educational persistence and attainment.

ADDITIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

WHAT DOES SERVICE MEAN?

What Motivates Military Service?

- Educational benefits (53%)
- Desire to serve my country (52%)
- Opportunity to pursue new experiences, adventures, or travel (49%)

Was Military Service Worth It?

- 88 percent reported ("moderately" or "completely") that joining the military was a good decision
- 82 percent indicate that that military service has positively impacted post-service outcomes

Skills and Attributes Strengthened by Military Service?

- Work ethic and discipline (87%)
- Teamwork (86%)
- Leadership (82%)
- Mental toughness (81%)
- Ability to Adapt (78%)

Why Did You Leave Military Service?

- Lost faith or trust in military and/or political leadership (36%)
- The desire to pursue education and training opportunities outside the military (32%)
- For family reasons or obligations (31%)

ON THE TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Most Significant Transition Challenges?

- Navigating VA programs, benefits, and services (60%)
- Finding a job (55%)
- Adjusting to civilian culture (41%)
- Addressing financial challenges (40%)
- Applying military-learned skills to civilian life (39%)

Military Influence on Post-Service Aspirations?

- 66% reported that military service prepared them for their civilian career, yet
- 55% indicate the desire to pursue a career *different* from their military specialty (MOS, AFSC, etc.)
- 47% indicate the desire to pursue a career *different* from their actual (in practice) military role



Service-Connected Disability Impact on Transition Experience?

- 58% reported a service-connected disability
- 79% of those indicating a service-connected disability, report their disability/disability-status as an obstacle in transition:
- In their personal life (87%)
- In holding a job (40%)
- In getting a job (38%)
- Completing their education (28%)
- Starting their education (12%)

ON THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Military Service Influence on Higher Education?

- 73% reported that the military service experience *promoted* their interest in education
- 71% reported that the military service experience *promoted* their interest in training, certification, or licensing programs
- 68% reported that the military service experience *prepared* them for education
- 43% indicated that their military specialization, job, or training was STEM related

Motivations to Pursue Higher Education?

- Career or job opportunities (86%)
- Self-improvement and personal growth (71%)
- Potential for improving economic status (69%)
- Professional advancement (56%)
- Leverage earned benefits (51%)
- A desire to “help people/society” (43%)
- Enhance technical skills (31%)

Barriers to Persist in Higher Education?

- Lack of financial resources/ financial burden (56%)
- Personal/family obligations (28%)
- GI Bill benefits expire before degree completion (25%)
- Issues related to wellness and/or disability (23%)
- Conflict between job and school (22%)

A CALL TO ACTION

Many recounted the post-WWII GI Bill's profound impact on American society as the impetus for enacting today's post-9/11 GI Bill. Notably, however, after WWII, our nation's veterans represented **half** of all college-age students in the U.S. The flood of veterans on campus were a natural incentive, if not necessity, for colleges and universities to develop programs, policies, and supportive services that enabled a smooth transition from military to college life.

But today veterans barely represent 3 percent of all U.S. college students. The natural incentive motivating institutional investment in supporting veterans' educational opportunity—particularly at our nation's best colleges and universities—is less evident, and (on the surface) less compelling.

So how has this played out in practice?

Consider, for example, that post-9/11 veterans make up barely 1 percent of the total undergraduate students enrolled at the U.S. News "Top 20 Colleges and Universities in America." Juxtapose that with the fact that, year over year, online for-profit colleges have received the greatest share of taxpayer-funded tuition under the post-9/11 GI Bill — **nearly 40 percent of all GI Bill tuition payments over the past five years**. On average, veterans attending these schools drop-out at exceedingly high rates, and if they do graduate, are often overwhelmed by student-loan debt and persistently struggle to find living-wage employment in a labor market that does not uniformly value their expensive online degrees.

Why does this situation persist?

In part, as highlighted by the insights gained from the *Missing Perspectives* study, many of the barriers that veterans face in traditional higher-education settings are rooted in the fact that veterans are, by definition, **non-traditional** students. That is, they are older than their non-veteran student peers, more likely to be married and have children, and therefore need to hold down a job while in school. Unfortunately, non-traditional students represent a growing, yet long marginalized, population of students at our best public and private educational institutions. Too few top schools offer degree programs that complement the lifestyle demands of the non-traditional student. However, the challenge goes beyond programs and process.

It's also the case that the prevailing rhetoric related to veterans and traditional higher-education remains one largely grounded in the notion of obligation—a responsibility to 'repay a debt' to those who have served. In other words, too many leaders in higher education have yet to come around to the 'business case' for meaningful investment in student veterans' educational success. As a result, they unwittingly contribute to a missed opportunity of

historic proportions—the opportunity to make our best academic institutions richer, more dynamic, more diverse, and ultimately better by purposefully integrating and empowering veterans across our campus communities.

After WWII, veterans flooded our nation's colleges and universities, arriving on campus with global experiences, broad diversity, and a commitment to service. In our classrooms, on our athletic fields, and in our student organizations they proved themselves adept at team building, resilient, resourceful, and entrepreneurial, and they exercised dynamic leadership abilities that had been previously tested and proven under the most grave, real world conditions imaginable. They made our best academic institutions better, and in turn, those institutions, through education, literally empowered them to change our society, our economy, and the world for more than a half a century.



NEXT STEPS

Beginning with this study, we intend to give voice to student veterans in a way that seeds a new line of actionable scholarship and thought leadership related to veterans and higher education. Over the next year, the IVMF will launch a new research series on veteran education, highlighting various aspects from this and subsequent data collection efforts focused on themes that include:

- **Student veterans and STEM education**
- **Navigation of benefits and services in education**
- **Leveraging veteran talent on campus**
- **Overcoming barriers to attainment (e.g., disability, financial, family)**
- **Dependent use of GI Bill benefits**
- **Under-use of GI Bill benefits**

- **Distance and adult learning**
- **Bridging the civilian-military divide in higher education**
- **Women veterans' post-service transition to, and experience in, higher education**
- **Debunking myths about veterans in higher education**

After President Bush signed the Post-9/11 GI Bill into law (June 2008), President Obama later said as the bill went into force (in August of 2009): “we do this because these men and women must now be prepared to lead our nation in the peaceful pursuit of economic leadership in the 21st century.” To that end, we aim to spark a new discourse on how our colleges and universities view and empower student veterans, a discourse that pushes higher education past the “veteran friendly” rhetoric to seize the long-term value of veteran students and alumni, and a discourse that makes real the intended promise of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, not only for our veterans, but for all Americans.

Higher Education Research Series: Future Themes

