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# BUSINESS OFFICER

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## Deliberate Dialogue

In a world of stark differences and harsh rhetoric,  
college campuses can promote civil discussion and  
active listening as paths to more positive interaction.



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# Forever USA

**Along with some strong existing support for veterans at institutions, the Forever GI Bill, signed into law in August, brings mostly favorable news to veterans, their families, and the institutions they choose to attend.**

By Margo Vanover Porter

**T**he Forever GI Bill signed into law in August brings mostly favorable news to veterans, their families, and the institutions they are choosing to attend.

"The Forever GI Bill expands the success our veterans have had with the GI Bill, providing opportunities that otherwise would not be possible," says David J. Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "In particular, it restores benefits to veterans who were impacted by school closures since 2015, and has special benefits for our reservists, surviving dependents, and Purple Heart recipients. This nation is stronger when our veterans are studying and working next to their civilian counterparts. Passage of this bill is a win for veterans and their families."

Keith A. Glindemann, current president of the National Association of Veteran Program Administrators (NAVPA), agrees. "I was proud to be able to work on that legislation with the Student Veterans of America, American Legion, VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), and other organizations," says Glindemann, who is also the

director of veterans services, Columbia College, Mo. "I see great things coming."

## Many Benefits

The bill, formally known as the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, eliminates the 15-year time limitation for using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for veterans who left active duty on or after Jan. 1, 2013, as well as their qualifying dependents.

"What's great about that is that many people may not be ready to go to school right away after they leave the service," Glindemann says. "They might be raising families, involved in careers, or decompressing from their time of service. To know that they are not racing against the clock until benefits run out will be extremely beneficial."

The bill also extends benefits for veterans pursuing certain STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) five-year degree programs. "STEM majors often require more credit hours and courses than a regular four-year degree, maybe 150 hours versus 120 hours,"

Glindemann explains. "With this language, there will be up to an additional nine months of benefits not to exceed \$30,000."

Another aspect of the bill brings a sigh of relief for those officials on campus involved in certifying GI Bill benefits: the authorization of \$30 million to improve the Veterans Benefits Administration's technology, described by many as behind the times.

"When a veteran walks into a campus and says, 'I want to use my benefits from the GI Bill,' his or her classes are certified by a school certifying official and sent to the VA for processing," Glindemann explains. "Some of the claims go through an automated pipeline, which can be fairly fast. Others get off-ramped to a VA claims examiner for manual processing. With the new technology, the hope is that more claims will be automated, which will allow for faster payment of benefits."

One of the few drawbacks to the bipartisan bill is a slight reduction in the living stipend for GI Bill benefits. The decrease, which takes effect Aug. 1, 2018, does not apply to students currently using the GI Bill.

In light of the recent legislation, *Business Officer* decided it was time to visit with the military-affiliated representatives of a few institutions and, more importantly, to salute the many veterans and their families who are attending colleges and universities across the country.

### **George Mason's Melting Pot**

Not many veterans were using the Montgomery GI Bill—Active Duty (Chapter 30), which provided a stipend, but didn't cover a lot of costs associated with higher education, says Ryan Barnett, assistant director, office of military services, George Mason University (GMU), Fairfax, Va.

He points out that when the Department of Veterans Affairs introduced the Post-9/11 GI Bill, "We started to see an increase in service members going back to school. Our numbers continue to climb in veterans coming back to school since 2009. We see an increase of about 100 to 200 veterans each year."

## **One of the few drawbacks to the bipartisan bill is a slight reduction in the living stipend for GI Bill benefits.**

He cites his own situation as an example. "I got out of the Marine Corps in 2006 and started going to Northern Virginia Community College using my Chapter 30 benefit. I was taking on debt, so I went back to just working full time. Luckily—I say luckily—I got recalled about two years later, when the Post-9/11 GI Bill had passed. Then I could seriously attend college because my tuition was covered and I got a small allowance to live on. It gave me a better chance to complete a degree, which I did."

Because of transferability of benefits—another benefit of the Post-9/11 GI Bill—he has seen a surge in dependent enrollments. "I wouldn't be surprised to see a trend of more dependents coming back to school than veterans," Barnett says.

While the ability to transfer benefits to dependents has been a boon to some, it has posed problems for other active-duty members. "Transferring the benefit can be a friction point if the active-duty members have already gotten out of the military or are about ready to retire," Barnett says. "Then they find out the hard way that there are lots of details they needed to work out earlier. Transferring the benefit incurs an additional service obligation, and each service gets to stipulate how much time the service member must serve after they make the transfer."

In order to transfer the benefit, military members must have already served 10 years. "If they have never used any education benefits, members will have 36 months that

they can divide among their dependents. We always recommend that they give each one of their dependents at least one month, even if they don't think that person will use it, to establish eligibility."

For the 2016–17 academic year, GMU had 23,671 students and close to 3,500 military-affiliated students, a fact Barnett knows mainly because of billing. "Veterans are not likely to identify themselves as a veteran," he explains. "When a student applies to George Mason, they can check a box on the application that indicates, 'Hey, I'm a veteran.' Most don't check that box. It becomes a logistical nightmare to track folks who don't want to be tracked. The only time they self-identify is when they're using their benefits."

Barnett describes the veteran population as right around 24 years old, married with a family, either working at a part-time or full-time job, and pursuing a degree to move to the next level. At GMU, the veteran population is almost split down the middle between male and female, with males being just slightly higher.

"Our military is truly the melting pot of America," Barnett says. "We literally get folks from every corner of this great nation, from every socioeconomic background, from the suburbs to the city to the mountains. We have folks that speak many languages and have different religions. Their diversity is huge. Most are the first in the families to go to college. We are truly hitting all the marks in diversity when it comes to service members coming back to school."

### **A Holistic Approach at Colorado State**

About 10 percent of the 30,000 students attending Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins are military connected, reports Marc Barker, director of adult learner and veteran services.

"We saw a dramatic increase in student veterans after the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill back in 2009," says Barker, who is the immediate past president of NAVPA. "We've seen a steady increase since then. The largest increase has been in the dependent population due to the value of the transferability of

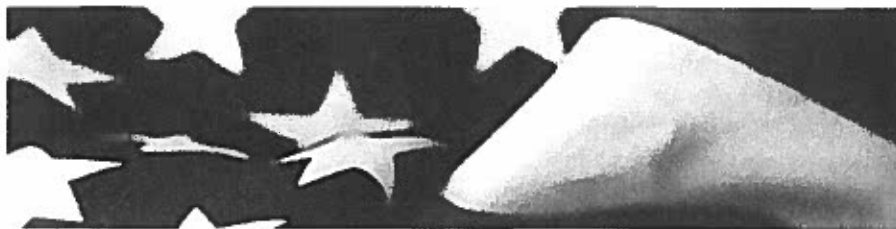
the Post-9/11 GI Bill." About 500 dependents are using GI benefits at CSU.

Back in 2009, when the higher education community realized that there would be a huge influx of veterans on campuses, one of the best practices was to set up veteran centers. "While that need existed then, we have since found out that we have more success when we integrate our student veterans into the entire campus culture and do not isolate them in a one-stop shop," Barker says. "The reality is the more engagement our student veterans have with the campus population as a whole, the more likely they will be successful in the long run."

While he recognizes that veterans still need to connect with other veterans, Barker advocates against isolation. "Our student veterans have worked with traditional-age fraternities and sororities on service projects, and with faculty and staff on mental health projects. We try to provide a holistic experience for them, knowing that when they make the next transition, that's exactly what corporate America will look like. In corporate America, there is not a veterans-only break room."

Advisors ensure that veterans understand that the traditional 18-year-old student, whom they may perceive to be a challenge right now, will be their new cohort upon leaving CSU. "We tell veterans, 'You will be re-entering the workforce with the same credential, and—yes, a few more years and more gray hairs—but he or she will be your new peer. Let's figure out here in this co-curricular environment a way to communicate and build relationships with your new peer group.'"

As the past president of NAVPA, Barker insists that the single most critical element of any veteran program on any campus is the timely and accurate processing of the GI Bill benefit. "School certifying officials on campus are the critical link to the student veteran being on campus," he says. "Frankly, we can develop all the best programming in the country, but if the benefit piece is broken because the school doesn't do it well, nothing else can be successful." ➤



## Once and For All

If officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs need any help in allocating the way their new \$30 million in technology funding is spent, business officers will be glad to provide direction.

"Years ago, we were told that the VA-ONCE system was going to be scrapped and replaced by something that resembles 21st-century technology," says Loretta Chrzan-Williams, director of student accounts, Monroe Community College, Rochester, N.Y. "However, the funding never materialized."

VA-ONCE is the Internet-based application that institutions use to submit Forms 22-1999, 22-1999b, and 22-6553c to the VA.

"I am certain that every school certifying official across the United States would agree that the No. 1 priority for those technology funds should be replacing VA-ONCE," Chrzan-Williams continues. "It is so dysfunctional that it cannot even accept a file upload of data. Instead, everything we are required to report must be manually entered. That is inefficient and prone to error. In addition, it slows the process down, which means vets wait longer for their benefits."

## Keep the Lines of Communication Open

While she agrees that VA-ONCE must be the spending priority, Darlene Pike adds that throwing money at technology upgrades will not solve all the problems without constituent input. "Communication between the schools and VA in determining how to best utilize those technology dollars is important," says the bursar, financial services department, Florida State College at Jacksonville.

"In this day and age, who has even heard of a system that cannot accept a file upload?" asks Pike, who also gives low marks to the VA's deposit and return and refund processes. "The college's bank statement is pages and pages long because we receive one deposit for every student for every session they are enrolled, instead of one deposit for all students for the day."

For example, she says, imagine that you are taking a group of 100 out to dinner and planning to pay for everyone at the table. "Instead of receiving one check for all and paying with your credit card once, you require the restaurant to provide a separate bill for each diner and to process each bill separately, resulting in 100 credit card charges. That is what we deal with on a daily basis with VA."

Patrick Quinn points out that business officers have consistently requested technology-interface improvements since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

"These improvements, such as batch loading registration and financial information, would support efficient certification processes and greatly improve service to veterans," says Quinn, the director of student fiscal services, George Mason University, Fairfax, Va. "From a student-veteran service provider perspective, we would like to see some of the Forever GI Bill technology resources allocated to improve the VA-ONCE interface, with the end result being veterans receive accurate benefit amounts earlier each semester."

Referencing a study published by the Student Veterans of America, Barker indicates that veterans, when compared to traditional students or adult learners, are outperforming every other cohort in GPA, retention, and graduation rates. "Without a doubt, veterans are thriving in the higher education landscape."

### Earn While You Learn at FSCJ

Chris Johnson believes that the Forever GI Bill is a good thing for military veterans across the country, although he wishes that the "forever" part applied to his situation. "After serving on active duty, I ended up getting the Post-9/11 GI Bill," says the program coordinator and associate director, military and veteran service center, Florida State College at Jacksonville. "I retired in 2005. I have until this time next year to finish up my education benefit or lose it. It would be *very* nice not to have an expiration date."

FSCJ, with about 50,000 students, has about 3,500 military-affiliated students, some of whom are still involved in military careers. "Over the years, we've had a strong, active-duty population, in addition to the students who are receiving benefits," explains Darlene Pike, bursar, who adds that Jacksonville is located near a submarine base, both an Air Force and National Guard armory, and two large Navy bases, where both Coast Guard and Marines serve.

According to Johnson, campus veterans have a focused mindset. "They've served in the military, got out, and know what direction they want to go," he says. "They are more inclined to succeed. They are mission-driven. Veterans understand that they are working on a time schedule, and they want to achieve certain goals before those benefits run out."

Danyell Mack, VA enrollment services lead processor, always encourages military-affiliated students who are denied benefits to reapply. She recalls a student who was not receiving VA education benefits, although he had a certificate of eligibility. "I later found out why. He was 17 years old. VA has a rule that unless you're 18, they can't pay



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you out. I found that what we needed to prove was that he graduated from high school. Once I took that information to the VA, they paid him retroactively."

Another student came to her saying, "I don't know why I am being denied." Mack did some legwork, contacting her representative at VA. She was eventually able to prove her case, and that student was back paid for about four years, receiving more than \$10,000.

Like many other institutions, FSCJ participates in the VA's Earn While You Learn work-study program in which veterans are paid to answer other veterans' questions about areas such as certification, stipends, or registering and dropping classes. "We

believe that veteran students are more likely to talk to other veterans," Pike says. "Our VA work-study students are very helpful because they know what classes veterans need to take and the timelines they need to adhere to get benefits."

Mack explains that veterans who qualify for the work-study program must be full-time or 3/4-time students in a college degree, vocational, or professional program, have earned the education benefit, and do VA-related work. In return, they are paid a minimum wage, which is not taxed. "We're always looking for more veterans because they graduate and move on to permanent jobs," she says.

### Two Trends at Monroe CC

Two trends are showing up at Monroe Community College, Rochester, N.Y., which in fall 2016 enrolled almost 13,600 students, a total that included more than 750 veterans, and 70 dependents, according to Mike Bates, coordinator of veteran services.

"We're seeing a lot more students entering STEM-related academic degree and certificate programs," Bates says. "That's a really good thing because we have a strong transfer program. We're helping students realize what to do with their benefits. If they have 36 months of benefits and they're going to school full time, that's nine full-time semesters of benefits. If they do a bachelor's degree and use eight full-time semesters, they have an extra semester for prerequisites, or to start a masters program."

When they plan to pursue "hot spots," which Bates classifies as computer science, IT, and engineering, he helps the students see how their benefits will play out through their entire degree. Many decide, "Maybe I'm not ready for engineering right now. I may have some remedial course-work to do, so I'll use that extra semester to get caught back up."

To give veterans who have been away from academics for years a jump start, MCC has initiated a tutoring program, Go VETS (veteran educational tutoring



services). "We offer tutoring mostly in math because it is what a lot of students need help with," Bates says. "They haven't taken math in a while, and especially if they're going into the STEM program, they need the extra support. We have a tutor in our office where students can sign in for up to one hour, four or five days a week. It's really helped students progress through their programs."

Another trend Bates has spotted is an interest in noncredit programs in areas such as welding and fabrication, Microsoft, and Cisco training, which their benefits cover. "More veteran students are looking for instant hands-on training where they can get a certification in four months and then jump right into the workforce. In the past, we've had around four to five veterans in noncredit programs. I'm currently working on a list with 15 to 20 for this year."

To make it easy for them to enroll, veterans simply bring in proof that they are eligible for benefits, such as a certificate of eligibility, or a statement showing the benefit they are eligible for, and the number of months and days they have remaining. For example, he says, a student can register with a DD (Discharge From Active Duty) Form 214 and an application confirmation.

"Once a student registers, a bill with a due date is generated," Bates explains. "We'll defer the students' bill while we wait for the benefit eligibility to come through or their application to be processed. The deferment takes off that upfront financial burden. We'll defer the bill as long as we need to with no penalty or cost to the student. We've created a great relationship with our student accounts office, so we work back and forth, department to department, to take care of those students."

Eric Wheeler, interim director of veteran services, emphasizes that veterans "are more similar to other students than they are different" and span a wide age range.

"We have student veterans on campus who are as young as 18, who are guard and reserve members," says Wheeler, who is a 20-year Army/Navy veteran and a military instructor of the global war on terrorism. "We have one decorated Vietnam veteran who's in his early 70s and taking courses because it was something he always wanted to do. A Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient, he's an American hero who served our country honorably and a great student."

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