CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Improving Student Services for Military Veterans

Education is a key component in the transition back to civilian life and employment for many new veterans. Enrollment in college allows veterans to upgrade existing skills or gain new skills in order to transition to a new career. And successful completion of college programs provides veterans with valuable credentials that may validate uncredentialed skills they gained in the military. The Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008 expanded previous tuition benefits for veterans in order to make college an accessible post-service option. The U.S. Veteran's Administration estimates that 1.4 million individuals used the Post-9/11 GI Bill between 2009 and 2015.[1]

Many service members find it difficult to align the skills and knowledge gained via military service to the civilian labor market, particularly if they separate while holding a relatively low rank, are classified as having a disability, come from a minority background, or served in service and support occupations in the military.[2] Half of Post-9/11 service members experience at least some period of unemployment upon separation from the military.[3] As the number of veterans is expected to increase over the next five years,[4] it is essential to consider how recently separated service members can enter college and succeed in obtaining educational credentials that will help them gain employment and reintegrate into their communities. This review explores strategies taken by five community colleges to better serve veteran students so that they feel more comfortable at college and are better able to persist and earn a credential.

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For a short summary of this review, see *Supporting Military Veterans at College: A First Look*, which can be found on the CCRC website.

The Kohlberg Prize: Improving the Educational Experience of Veteran Students

Approximately 40 percent of student veterans attend community colleges.[5] These local, publicly funded, open-access institutions are a good deal financially for veterans. Although the Post-9/11 GI Bill places a cap on tuition coverage for private universities, it covers the cost of public universities and community colleges in full.[6] In addition, community colleges are at the vanguard of initiatives such as competency-based education that could help veterans complete a certificate or degree faster (in part by enabling them to receive academic credit for military training), which in turn could help them connect to the labor market more quickly.[7]

Moreover, although student veterans tend to complete credential-bearing college programs at the same rate as the general U.S. population, they often face a variety of challenges on the way to completion.[8] Some of these are challenges that are common among other students, particularly low-income and older students. For example, 44 percent of student veterans report four or more risk factors associated with non-completion, such as part-time college enrollment, working full-time while enrolled in college, and supporting a family.[9] However, many veterans also confront additional challenges, in particular, difficulties in transitioning from a military to a civilian way of life, and physical and mental health issues resulting from their military experience.[10]

It is also true that community college completion rates around the country are low; indeed, higher education stakeholders are engaged in reform efforts and in a national conversation about the most effective ways to improve them.[11] In order for veterans to best realize the potential benefits of a community college education, the colleges need to focus both on meeting the unique needs of veteran students and on promoting successful outcomes for students generally. Community colleges are increasingly engaged in a wide range of reforms, including redesigning under-resourced and ineffective advising and student support systems and creating more curricular coherence in programs of study.[12] However, broad community college reform efforts such as these have been mostly undertaken independent of discussions about how best to serve veterans.

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To help bridge this divide—and to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of student veterans enrolled in community colleges—the Kisco Foundation in 2015 awarded five community colleges across the country the Kohlberg Prize, a six-month planning grant to enhance services for veterans by connecting them to broader college reform initiatives. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) was engaged as a knowledge development and strategic assistance partner in this endeavor.

The five grantees are "leading-edge" community colleges that have been committed to serving student veterans and that either are engaged in or are considering broader institutional reforms: Chabot College (in Hayward, California), Las Positas College (in Livermore, California), Suffolk County Community College (in Selden, New York), Community College of Baltimore County (in Baltimore, Maryland), and Chemeketa Community College (in Salem, Oregon). The experiences of these colleges to date, as well as their plans for using the grants, were described in their proposal narratives for funding. We analyzed these proposal narratives to understand the community colleges' perceptions of veteran students' strengths and challenges, their current delivery of supports and suggestions for improving support services, and the relationship between their veteran services and broader reform efforts. Through these analyses we gained insights into what community college personnel believe are the key ways to improve support for their veteran students. This review summarizes these insights.

All five grantee colleges reported that veterans constitute a small but significant population on their campuses. Total enrollment at the colleges ranged from 9,000–26,000, while the number of self-identified veteran students ranged from 240–750.[13] Beyond basic enrollment numbers, the kinds of demographic information and other background characteristics the colleges collect and monitor varied widely, but as a whole they indicated that veterans are far from a monolithic group. Veterans vary in their gender, race/ethnicity, age, service branch, and type of military service (active duty versus Reserves or National Guard), type of tuition benefit being used, and college enrollment intensity (full- or part-time).

Providing Effective Support for the Needs of Veteran Students

Insight 1: Student veterans need a variety of supports.

The colleges indicated that they see veterans as facing a number of academic and nonacademic challenges. Four out of the five colleges suggested that veterans are less academically prepared and need greater academic support than the general student population. Two of the colleges associated these academic challenges with those experienced by at-risk populations such as first-generation college students and economically disadvantaged students (and, indeed, veterans may be part of these populations).

All of the colleges identified a range of non-academic barriers confronting veterans, including difficulties in transitioning from military to civilian life, mental health issues, limited finances, housing instability, and family problems. One college summarized these challenges in their proposal in this way:

> It is well known that most veteran students will come to this college with one or more challenges which potentially impede their academic success . . . including mental health issues, limited financial resources, and difficulty making the transition from military to civilian life.

Two colleges also identified employment as a challenge, noting that many veterans are unemployed and in need of assistance in showing how their military experience may be relevant to professional job skills sought by employers. Finally, two of the colleges mentioned that veterans need assistance in learning how to access and use their education benefits. These concerns mirror national reports and surveys on the needs of veteran students.[14]

Insight 2: Student veterans possess strengths that can support learning and college success.

In contrast to much of the prominent literature on veterans in higher education, the proposals from the colleges focused on the *strengths* veteran students bring to college, in addition to the challenges they face. One of the colleges reported that veterans have stronger academic skills than the general student population, based on the proportion testing into college-level reading and math. On the whole, the colleges emphasized that veterans generally have high levels of grit, discipline, and motivation. They described them variously as disciplined, mature, persistent, driven, adaptive, goal-oriented, strong leaders, and good team players. For example, one college proposal noted:

> [Veterans] come to us with great leadership qualities as well as an overwhelming sense of discipline for their studies. …This population tends to be more mature than the average college student, so they also bring in a different worldview to the classroom and add great value to classroom discussions.

All of the colleges expressed a belief that veterans tend to have developed a number of positive personal qualities through their military experience that can aid them (and other students) in the classroom and beyond. The colleges indicated that these attributes—if leveraged—may be valuable both in adding to the diversity of experience in the student population generally and in helping veteran students overcome obstacles they encounter. The test for colleges is to be sensitive to the challenges veterans face while acknowledging and building upon the strengths that they bring to the campus.

Insight 3: Colleges provide four types of services to veteran students.

The five grantee colleges make strong efforts to support their veteran students, even as they face resource constraints. They offer an array of support services, which can be categorized into four areas: benefits-focused, academic, nonacademic, and career. Though these grantees may be more committed to supporting veterans than other colleges, the four categories of support reflect typical approaches to veteran student success found around the country.

For example, national statistics indicate that 94 percent of public two-year colleges have a designated office or point of contact for military-connected students.[15] According to their proposals, all five grantee colleges provide *benefits-focused* support in the form of an office or resource center specifically devoted to veterans, primarily for benefits assistance. These offices are leanly staffed, with either a single employee or a single full-time employee with part-time assistance.

Nearly all community colleges have a point of contact or an office for military-connected students, but it is typically leanly staffed.

In addition to benefits services, the grantee colleges have instituted a variety of *academic policies and practices* specifically for veterans, including priority registration for courses, academic credit for prior learning, residency waivers, and deployment and grade deferment policies. Four of the five colleges also tailor standard courses and academic services for veterans. Additionally, one college formed a committee to train faculty about working with veteran students. Many of these academic practices are unique to the leading-edge grantees. For example, only 10 percent of community colleges provide veteran-specific courses or sections of courses, and fewer than one-third provide training for faculty and staff on veterans' issues.[16]

Colleges also provide *nonacademic services* for veteran students. All the grantee colleges noted that such services are critical and emphasized that they make concerted efforts to connect veterans to campus-wide resources offered to all students, such as mental health counseling, disability services, and emergency food assistance. Four of the five colleges also highlighted the importance of providing social and emotional support through Student Veterans Association clubs, support groups, veterans' lounges, and activities and events to recognize veterans. Nationally, fewer than one-third of community colleges provide dedicated social space for student veterans, and fewer than 60 percent host a student veterans organization.[17]

Finally, in their proposals, three of the five colleges discussed efforts to provide *career support* for veterans. Two of these colleges do so by attempting to connect veterans to existing services for all students on campus. The third received two grants to support employment efforts for veterans—one that funded a career conference focused on teaching veterans how to apply their military skills in the workplace, and another that funded a small business center for veterans interested in started their own businesses. Nationally, only 27 percent of community colleges tailor career services for veterans.[18]

Insight 4: Veteran services at colleges are insufficiently coordinated.

The grantee colleges were proud of their efforts to serve student veterans. However, as colleges that are committed to serving this population effectively, they were unanimous about the need to enhance the services they provide. First, they noted that most veteran-specific staff *focus on benefits compliance rather than broader support*. This is due to staffing constraints as well as strict regulations regarding use of post-9/11 GI Bill funds. The staff are largely unable to leverage their understanding of veteran students' needs and strengths to provide them with holistic support. Veteran-specific services tend to focus on one aspect of veteran need (benefits and finances) rather than more cross-cutting issues such as academic planning.

Services such as academic advising are typically offered to veteran students via the same offices that are used by the general student population. Personnel in these offices are often unfamiliar with the unique needs of student veterans and the regulations they face in effectively using GI Bill funds. One college noted that general academic advisors have difficulty keeping up with the course requirements attached to veterans' education benefits and that it is not uncommon for these students to be advised to take courses that are not covered by their benefits.

What is more, the colleges stated clearly that individual support services (which are offered to the general student population as well as to veterans) are not well-integrated, either with each other or with the larger functioning of the college. For example, one college noted that even though it offers services such as counseling, tutoring, and assistance connected to employment, housing, and other social services, the fact that all of these services are housed in different offices "hinders their access and efficient delivery for student veterans." Similarly, another college stated that "the absence of a single point of contact on each campus for our student veterans [makes] it difficult for students to locate the existing specialized structure as well as to receive necessary supportive services that will assure academic success." Veterans, as well as other students, may receive assistance in one area but need to visit a separate office for additional support in another area. This presents another disadvantage. Services delivered by multiple offices means that veterans do not always get to know a single individual who can help them navigate multiple needs or who knows them well enough to identify their strengths and help them to develop strategies to build upon those strengths.

It is no surprise that the colleges' dislike of service fragmentation for veterans echoes the very similar concern that these and other colleges have about fragmentation of services for students generally. In fact, many colleges are now seeking ways to provide holistic or at least better coordinated long-term support to community college students. The field now recognizes that students would do best with a single point person who gets to know each student well over time and who can streamline access to services across multiple offices.

Grantee Colleges' Plans to Provide Holistic Support for Veteran Students

In their grant proposals, the leading edge colleges uniformly noted that, ideally, veteran services would be centralized through a "one-stop shop" combining benefits-focused, academic, non-academic, and career services using a more holistic service model. Rather than referring veteran students to general campus-wide services for mental health counseling, academic advising, and career counseling as is currently done, the colleges want to be able to provide counselors and advisors who work solely with veterans. Such a holistic model would enable them to take a more strengths-based approach by having accessible staff members with the time and professional background to get to know veterans as individuals, identify their strengths and needs, and provide necessary support that builds on strengths in a timely manner.

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Colleges' plans for their Kohlberg Prize grants reflect their vision for a holistic model of wrap-around support. All five of the colleges stated that they intend to use part of the grant money to hire more staff, such as veterans services coordinators and designated advisors and counselors, in an effort to create time and space for advising beyond benefits compliance. Two of the colleges are planning to open comprehensive resource centers. The colleges plan to connect with new veteran students earlier through strategies such as increased outreach and recruitment, student orientations and registration materials designed specifically for veterans, and improved

admission processes that make it easier for veterans to self-identify, apply for benefits, and connect with support services.

All of the colleges aim to improve academic support for veterans by tailoring services such as transfer advising, tutoring, and early-alert warning systems to meet their needs. They also plan to expand non-academic services through peer mentoring and specialized programming. Finally, four of the five are invested in improving career services and workforce connections for veterans. For example, one college is planning to host vet-friendly job fairs and to create a mentoring program that pairs veterans with successful business professionals.

The diagram below illustrates the expanded services and holistic approach being taken by one of the colleges. Importantly, veteran students need only visit a single location—the one-stop center—to access all the services represented in the diagram. Moreover, because the services will be staffed by veteran-focused professionals who will be afforded the time to get to know students on an individual basis, services will be tailored to students' needs and strengths, personalized for their goals, and delivered in an atmosphere where veteran students feel understood and valued.

Overall, what stands out most clearly from the colleges' plans for improving services for veterans is the need to "go beyond" benefits certification. Helping veterans manage their education benefits is a complex task with major financial implications and thus is an essential first order of business. However, because they are deeply invested in supporting student veterans, these five colleges are actively seeking ways to better integrate services within the larger college community, and to provide additional customized assistance. As all of the colleges emphasized, realizing this vision requires additional staff. But it also requires rethinking service delivery models and reconsidering how targeted services for veterans are related to institution-wide student success efforts.

Sample Grant Activities Included in One College's Plans for a More Holistic Model of Support

Supportive Policies That Colleges Need to Carry Out Their Plans

The assistance that the colleges are receiving through the Kohlberg Prize is an important first step in modifying their veteran supports as a means to improve college completion among veteran students. However, foundation support is not scalable or sustainable. Connecting these proof-of-concept projects to policies and programs that currently serve veterans, such as those associated with the federal Veterans Benefits Administration, can create broader and longer-term change in veterans services.

The grantee college proposals make it clear, however, that there are policy barriers at the state and federal level that make it difficult to sustain such holistic, coordinated, and personalized support to veterans outside of a private or foundation-funded structure. Despite the fact that the Kohlberg Prize grants were designed to foster greater collaboration between veteran services and college-wide reforms, overall the colleges have not made clear plans for connecting their efforts for veterans to broader institutional reforms, likely because policy barriers make such connections challenging. Community college reforms and veteran services reforms are thus occurring on parallel tracks, instead of in tandem and in ways that build upon one another.

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There is an important role for federal and state policymakers to play in supporting leading-edge colleges' attempts to further enhance their services for veterans. Modifying policies to (1) create staff time and space for holistic veteran supports and to (2) align best practices with other community college reforms could help integrate and scale-up the approaches initiated through the Kohlberg Prize. What is more, if successful, this approach could inform efforts by other colleges around the country.

We conclude by offering considerations for policy change in terms of federal regulations, college funding, and institutional change.

1. Support funding for additional staff. All five colleges indicated that they would be better able to serve veterans if they had the resources to hire more staff members specifically dedicated to veteran services. With a bare-bones staff, personnel necessarily focus on immediate needs and legal mandates—which leads to an overly strong focus on benefits compliance. More personnel would allow staff to get to know veterans individually, think more carefully about programming, and coordinate support activities with other offices throughout the college. Policies that enable or encourage strategic use of work study funds or other existing funding streams to employ veteran students as staff and/or paid mentors in the veteran services office is one strategy that could increase staffing levels while also providing employment for veteran students.

2. Reduce compliance demands to free up time. In absence of funds to hire new staff, current staff could spend more time on holistic support if paperwork and other compliance demands were reduced. Though it is important to ensure legal compliance, streamlining this function would enable more supportive practices with less investment of additional staff. It could also help college personnel who work with veterans reconceptualize their roles as support services staff rather than administrative and compliance staff. Such an approach would, however, necessitate a rethinking at the federal level of what types of compliance measures are truly needed.

3. Integrate veteran students into emerging student support technology. Community colleges are increasingly using technology to provide more holistic support for students in order to increase college completion rates. These systems, often referred to as integrated planning and

advising for student success (iPASS), support the types of activities Kohlberg Prize grantees seek to provide for their veterans, such as early alerts, academic program planning and tracking, and communication across offices.[19] However, these systems and related reforms are rarely used in veteran services. First, the systems often do not reflect the program planning needs of veteran students, particularly in terms of post-9/11 GI Bill requirements. Second, early alert systems are often unable to identify veteran students. Overcoming these two challenges could help colleges leverage existing reform efforts to improve veteran student success.

4. Connect GI Bill requirements with the guided pathways movement. One of the most prominent and comprehensive community college reform models in use today is the guided pathways approach, in which colleges redesign and streamline their curricular offerings to ensure that students select courses that will lead to a useful credential and in which college personnel monitor student progress to keep students on track to earn that credential.[20] Three of the colleges have begun to implement guided pathways reforms. Yet only one college indicated the need to connect these reforms to veteran services, and it did not propose concrete steps for doing so.

The guided pathways approach may be particularly useful for veterans because it emphasizes advising and assistance so that students understand the implications of their academic choices from the start, for both their education and employment goals. Currently, veteran students are asked to select a program to qualify for GI Bill benefits, but they are not provided with much guidance. By design, the guided pathways approach provides students with information about program and career choices early on. And it typically employs a "meta-major" option so that new students who are undecided about a program have the opportunity to explore their interests in a broad field (such as health sciences, business, or public safety) but can still formulate more specific program plans in a timely manner. This is intended to prevent students from switching programs after they have invested too much of their time and resources.

Such an approach could be highly valuable to veteran students, but the current GI Bill requirement that veteran students enroll in an approved degree program may make this approach infeasible for veteran students if meta-majors are not on the list of approved options. Colleges taking a guided pathways approach should consider engaging with Veterans Affairs officials to align their redesigned meta-majors and programs of study with federal and state approval requirements.

Endnotes

1. Worly (2015).
2. Carter & Miller (2015).
3. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015).
4. Ang & Molina (2014).
5. American Council on Education (2014).
6. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.).
7. Person, Goble, & Bruch (2014).
8. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015).
9. Molina & Morse (2015).
10. Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris (2011).
11. Fewer than 40 percent of community college students earn a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014).
12. Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins (2015).
13. One college reported a substantial discrepancy between the number of self-reported veterans on campus (348) and the number using benefits (242). Nationally, colleges report identifying student veterans via a variety of methods, which may lead to under- or over-reporting (Queen & Lewis, 2014).
14. Molina & Morse (2015); Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris (2011).
15. Queen & Lewis (2014).
16. Queen & Lewis (2014).
17. Queen & Lewis (2014).
18. Queen & Lewis (2014).
19. For more information on these systems, see CCRC's series of reports on iPASS implementation and adoption: http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/integrated-planning-and-advising-services.html
20. More information on the guided pathways approach can be found on CCRC's website (http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/what-we-know-about-guided-pathways-packet.html) or in Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins (2015).

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