

# Supporting **Military Veterans** at College: A First Look

Many service members find it difficult to align the skills gained via military service to the civilian labor market. As the number of veterans is expected to increase over the next five years, it is essential to consider how recently separated service members can succeed in earning educational credentials that will help them gain employment and reintegrate into their communities.

In 2015, the Kisco Foundation awarded the Kohlberg Prize—a six-month planning grant to enhance services for veterans—to five community colleges considered leaders in their efforts to serve veteran students well. Based on a longer piece (see Karp & Klempin, 2016), this summary outlines the insights that CCRC researchers gained by reviewing the colleges' application proposals for the grant, and it offers suggestions for state and federal policymakers to facilitate better support for veterans attending community colleges.

## **Student Services for Veteran Students**

### **Insight 1: Student veterans need a variety of supports.**

Four out of the five community colleges indicated that veterans need greater academic support than the general student population. All the colleges also 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, family problems, and unemployment.

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

While acknowledging the challenges veterans face, all the colleges also underscored the strengths that veterans bring to college. The colleges emphasized that veterans generally have high levels of grit, discipline, and motivation, which may be valuable in helping veteran students overcome obstacles they encounter. They also noted that having veterans on campus contributes to the diversity of experience in the classroom.

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

The five grantee colleges currently offer a variety of support services that can be categorized into four areas: veteran benefits-focused services (typically through a leanly staffed office), academic policies and practices that support veterans (such as priority registration and credit for prior learning), campus-wide nonacademic services (such as mental health counseling, disability services, and emergency food assistance), and campus-wide career advising and support.

### **Insight 4: Veteran services at colleges are insufficiently coordinated.**

The grantee colleges noted that most veteran-specific staff focus on benefits compliance rather than broader support. Services such as academic advising are typically offered to veteran students via the same offices that are used by the general student population, and support services are generally not well integrated with one another.

## Policy Guidance for Holistic Support for Veteran Students

Rather than referring veteran students to campus-wide services for mental health counseling, academic advising, and career counseling, the grantee colleges want to be able to provide counselors and advisors who work solely with veterans. The colleges intend to use the Kohlberg Prize grant funding to hire more staff, open comprehensive resource centers, and improve career services and workforce connections for veterans.

Yet policy barriers at the state and federal level make it difficult to scale and sustain more coordinated and personalized support to veterans initiated through private funding such as the Kohlberg Prize grants. Modifying current policies could facilitate the integration of services and help to further develop and sustain approaches undertaken through foundation-sponsored initiatives.

**1. Support funding for additional staff.** Colleges could better serve veterans if they had the resources to hire more staff members specifically dedicated to veteran services. Policies that encourage the strategic use of work study funds or other existing funding streams to employ veteran students as staff or paid mentors in a college's 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.** Current veteran-specific 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.

**3. Integrate veteran students into emerging student support technology.** Technological student support systems such as iPASS (integrated planning and advising for student success) are increasingly used in colleges and state college systems to provide early alerts to students and advisors, academic program planning and tracking, and communication concerning student goals and progress across college offices. However, these systems do not take account of program planning needs stemming from veteran-benefit requirements and are indeed 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.** An increasingly common reform model to help students succeed at community colleges is called the guided pathways approach. Colleges redesign programs of study, simplify course selection, and use a variety of means to better help students understand their education and career options early on. The approach typically employs a "meta-major" option so that undecided students can explore their interests in a broad field (such as health sciences, business, or public safety). Yet the GI Bill requirement that veteran students enroll in an approved degree program may make this option infeasible among veterans. Colleges should consider engaging with Veterans Affairs officials to align their redesigned programs of study with federal and state approval requirements.

## Source

Karp, M. M., & Klempin, S. (2016). *Improving student services for military veterans*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

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*This summary was prepared by Melinda Mechur Karp and Serena Klempin, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Funding was provided by the Kisco Foundation.*

Suggested citation: Karp, M. M., & Klempin, S. (2016). *Supporting military veterans at college: A first look*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

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