

SUPPORTING STUDENT VETERAN SUCCESS

Institutional Responses to the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Influx of Student Veterans

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY BO MCCREADY

The Post-9/11 GI Bill of August 2009 represents the largest investment in veterans' education in more than 60 years. Colleges and universities across the nation are preparing for the challenges of an influx of student veterans, many of whom have unique characteristics and needs in comparison to traditional college students. Contributors from three postsecondary institutions in Madison, Wisconsin describe their institutions' responses and some promising solutions.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, represents the largest investment in veterans' education since the original GI Bill of 1944.¹ The bill pays tuition for a student veteran up to a cap based on public in-state undergraduate tuition and provides a monthly housing stipend, as well as money for books and educational supplies. Since its adoption in August 2009, the bill has made postsecondary education more affordable and accessible for many veterans.

Due to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the size of the United States military has increased. Many veterans of these wars will soon return to American soil, and the Post-9/11 GI Bill, along with other benefits, will help thousands attend colleges across the nation. There are now approximately two million veterans living in the United States who have served since September of 2001 and approximately 30,000 in Wisconsin.² To date, more than 500,000 veterans have applied for Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility, and student veterans have already received more than \$3 billion in benefits.³

Some reports suggest that these new students may be more likely to enroll full-time and year-round than previous student veterans, making

veterans a more visible and consistent presence on college campuses.⁴ Accordingly, universities across the nation are undertaking various measures to prepare for an influx of student veterans.

In comparison to traditional college students, who enroll in postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation, student veterans have unique characteristics and needs. They are generally older than their fellow students, and many are responsible for supporting their own families.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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Bo is coauthor of "New Approaches to Improving College Access, Persistence, and Success: Three Exemplary Postsecondary Opportunity Programs." This report, part of the *Promising Practices* series created by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), was jointly published by MHEC and WISCAPE in January 2010.

Student veterans often possess a higher level of maturity than the typical undergraduate, and many also bring a wealth of knowledge and experience into the classroom. However, student veterans often need additional support services to help them succeed in the college environment. Most veterans arrive at postsecondary institutions years removed from their last conventional classroom experiences. They may struggle to relate to their new classmates and have trouble establishing social networks. In addition, many suffer from physical or mental disabilities acquired in combat.

Postsecondary institutions face many challenges in supporting student veterans. They must assist these students in their transition not only into the academic world, but also back into civilian life. They must also help student veterans navigate an often complex benefits system to ensure that they are able to afford a postsecondary education. Many students experienced significant delays in the receipt of their educational benefits from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) during the fall of 2009. Fortunately, the rate of benefit processing has increased nearly fourfold since then, and the USDVA considers the backlog largely resolved.⁵

In Madison, Wisconsin, three postsecondary institutions situated in close proximity to one another offer very different educational experiences and options: the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the state’s flagship university; Edgewood College, a private liberal arts college; and Madison College, the largest public technical college in the state. The Wisconsin GI Bill Tuition Remission

Program also provides educational benefits beyond those afforded by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, encouraging veterans to stay in-state to pursue their postsecondary education. Given the variety of available educational options, many of Wisconsin’s returning veterans may flock to Madison to use their educational benefits.

In this Viewpoints, contributors representing the aforementioned institutions—staff and colleagues from the Madison College Veterans Services Office, Tami Koepsel of Edgewood College, and John Bechtol of the University of Wisconsin–Madison—describe their institutions’ responses to and preparations for the current and future influx of student veterans. Elizabeth O’Herrin of the American Council on Education (ACE) Department of Military Programs provides an overview of the national context surrounding student veterans in postsecondary education and concluding remarks.

This publication stems from a fall 2009 brown bag forum, sponsored by the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE), which focused on supporting student veteran success in postsecondary education. Its release this month coincides with the one-year anniversary of the adoption of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The authors call attention to a number of problems that institutions and student veterans face, as well as some promising potential solutions. Student veterans are a unique group, and the challenges colleges and universities face in encouraging postsecondary success for these students will only increase in importance as more veterans return from abroad.

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Table 1*Summary of Federal and Wisconsin GI Bills*

	Post-9/11 GI Bill (Federal)	Wisconsin GI Bill
Funding Provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition and fees up to the maximum in-state public rate • Includes the Yellow Ribbon Program, which helps reimburse the difference between GI Bill payments and costs at more expensive institutions that participate • Monthly housing allowance • Annual stipend up to \$1,000 for books and supplies, adjusted based on enrollment level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition and fees remission at University of Wisconsin System or Wisconsin Technical College System institutions
Benefits Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These benefits are available for a total of 36 months, the equivalent of four academic years • All benefits must be used within 15 years of discharge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These benefits are available for up to eight semesters or 128 credits earned • Any credits taken using the Post-9/11 GI Bill reduce a student veteran's eight semester or 128 credit allotment by an equivalent amount • Benefits do not expire
Transfer Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits may be transferred to spouses or children if certain service requirements are met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits may be transferred to spouses or children in the event of a veteran's death in the line of duty or service-connected disability of greater than 30%, as determined by the USDVA

Sources: United States Department of Veterans Affairs, http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/CH33/Post-911.htm; Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, http://dva.state.wi.us/Ben_education.asp

Madison College

Veterans Services Office and Colleagues

Context at Madison College

The volume of student veterans receiving education benefits at Madison College has increased by 218% from 2005-2006 through 2009-2010, from 225 to approximately 715 students. According to the State Approving Agency for the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), the college has received the third largest number of applications for tuition remissions under the Wisconsin GI Bill

among Wisconsin Technical College System and University of Wisconsin System institutions.

Madison College anticipates that the number of student veterans will continue to increase as more soldiers are released from active duty and return to Wisconsin seeking services for themselves and their families. More than 3,000 veterans returned from the deployment of the 32nd Brigade of the Wisconsin National Guard in January of this year, and Madison College expects a surge in veteran enrollment at Wisconsin's community colleges as a result. Therefore,



VIEWPOINTS

we continue to improve our existing services in preparation for the influx of student veterans that we expect to face.

Veteran Services at Madison College

In recent months, Madison College has faced several significant challenges in serving our student veteran population. Because of delayed monthly benefit payments, some students have reduced their course load, requested an advance payment that would reduce their future benefits, worked extra hours, or even postponed enrollment in school. These choices resulted in further problems, as those with decreased enrollment were no longer enrolled in the mandated number of credits necessary to receive benefits from the federal and state GI bills. Also, the complexities of recent benefit changes have caused confusion and anguish among much of the student veteran population, creating the need for individual counseling services.

Madison College has a specific role to fill in the complex lives of student veterans who face multiple stressors and unique circumstances that require a complex array of services. Colleges often lack the comprehensive resources necessary to address the full range of these challenges, but Madison College has taken some significant steps to help ameliorate these issues.

While Madison College student veterans waited to receive their education benefits, various individuals and departments at the college collaborated to ensure their continued enrollment and academic success. The Office of Student Financial Aid and certifying officials worked to ensure that students whose tuition had not yet been paid were allowed to register for classes.

Counselors met with individual students to assist with their needs associated with having insufficient resources to pay for rent, food, textbooks, and other educational expenses, referring these students to book loan programs and community resources.

Part of Madison College's proactive approach to dealing with current and incoming student veterans involved securing the ACE Wal-Mart

grant for Project SAVE (Success and Access for Veterans Education). The grant funds the college's Veterans Services Office (VSO), which assists student veterans in navigating the benefit application process and learning essential information for navigating through college. VSO staff are dedicated to meeting the unique and complex needs of the growing student veteran population through the following activities:

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- Assistance with the establishment of the Vets for Vets student club to promote and provide a peer-support network for student veterans
- A collaboration with Madison College's Learner Success office to customize a college success course for student veterans to aid in their transition from rucksack to backpack
- GI Bill workshops, one-to-one advising sessions (both walk-in and by appointment), and telephone services in an effort to inform and prepare veterans
- Comprehensive information, self-service resources, and answers to frequently asked questions on the Madison College website and Facebook page

The USDVA provides students with the certificate of eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, but not with eligibility certificates for their respective state bills. This has made it difficult for Madison College to not only process the Wisconsin GI Bill fee remission, but also to determine if a student is eligible for the newly required state stipend payment. In addition, a large number of students do not have a Verification of Continued Eligibility form—a new WDVA requirement as of January 2010—necessitating additional follow-up from Madison College. At this time, every available resource is dedicated to processing

and assisting the students who submitted the required documentation for both state and federal programs.

Attention must be paid to the mental and physical challenges our returning soldiers endure. One important way to do this is to evaluate student veteran preparedness for beginning their course of study prior to the start of classes. VSO staff, counselors, and Assessment Center staff assist students in these evaluations to ensure that students will be successful in their studies and receive the greatest possible value from their benefits.



Photo Courtesy of Edgewood College

Veterans were given the opportunity to learn about benefits and job opportunities as well as speak with local employers and representatives of federal and state government agencies at Edgewood College's recent Veterans Federal Job Fair.



Moving Forward at Madison College

Madison College has gathered feedback from student veterans through in-person meetings and online surveys, and this feedback has been largely positive. Student veterans have expressed their gratitude for access to college staff members who are knowledgeable about the required forms and can assist them in applying for educational benefits. Madison College also utilizes an advisory board consisting of internal and external partners including the WDVA, the USDVA, and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

Madison College faces the challenge of determining how best to prepare and educate faculty and staff to deal with some of the unique challenges faced by the student veteran population. The VSO, Marketing and Recruitment Services, Learner Success office, and Learner Development office continue to collaborate to provide services and resources to address these challenges and set our student veterans on the path to academic success.

Edgewood College

Tami Koepsel, Veteran Services Coordinator

Context at Edgewood College

At Edgewood College, the first step in determining how best to serve student veterans was to evaluate the campus resources and services currently available for this population. Our goal is to be viewed as a college of choice for veterans now and in the future. In order to fulfill that goal, we needed a plan for how to use our time and resources for the potential influx of veterans interested in pursuing their education at Edgewood College.

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Due to the large number of returning veterans and the inception of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, our institution expected that there would soon be many new veterans returning to the United States ready to attend college. The Post-9/11 GI Bill contained a provision introducing the Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program, a particularly significant development for private colleges like Edgewood. This program allows student veterans to receive funding for tuition expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition rate through a

combination of institutional funding and matching funds from the USDVA.

We were in a position to introduce the Edgewood College Eagle Grant which, in partnership with the Yellow Ribbon Program, would allow qualifying veterans the opportunity to attend Edgewood College tuition free. We believe one of the best ways to address the economic downturn is to continue to work to be an

important educational resource for Wisconsin and for the Midwest, and the Eagle Grant contributes to this goal.

Veteran Services at Edgewood College

To prepare for the expected increase in the number of veterans on Edgewood's campus, we organized a Veterans Affairs Committee and assigned an individual to serve as our veterans affairs coordinator. The committee and coordinator were responsible for reviewing our student resources and services as they relate to the needs of veterans. After much review, we have made improvements within our current structure.

New developments include a vision statement, a veterans peer group on campus, updated active duty policy and procedures, webinars featuring veteran issues, and attendance at conference sessions that relate to serving veterans. Edgewood also offers a webpage devoted to veterans, a new brochure for veterans, and an improved benefits process through our Registrar's Office. We also offer an accelerated program featuring night classes and custom degree completion plans that may be a better fit for veterans.

We are encouraging current faculty and staff to use the resources available to guide veterans as they progress through their programs. We are working hard to make Edgewood College a school of choice for veterans and an institution that is known as veteran-friendly and welcoming. In addition, we recently hosted a Veterans Federal Job Fair at our Deming Way campus where veterans were able to

- Visit with local federal agencies who may have opportunities for direct hiring
- Visit with local employers about job opportunities
- Leave their resume or job application with employers
- Have a short interview with employers about their job skills
- Apply for state and federal GI Bill benefits
- Receive information and talk with representatives about loans, health care, and education benefits
- Visit with Job Center of Wisconsin veteran staff, WDVA staff, and county veteran service officers

In response to the recent backlog of benefit processing through the USDVA, our business office has been able to identify and alleviate the

fear and frustration felt by our veterans by tagging student accounts that we know will be paid through veterans' benefits. Through this process, student veterans do not have to make payments to remain enrolled in classes.

Moving Forward at Edgewood College

The challenges that we face in the future include continuing to create a veteran-friendly campus where students feel welcome, comfortable, and empowered to make a difference. Our charge is to make sure that veterans are aware of our Eagle Grant, which is a wonderful opportunity for Edgewood to continue to increase the number of veterans on campus. Our core values of truth, justice, compassion, community, and partnership shape our relationship with all students. These values will be the guiding force behind triumphing over the challenges that we encounter as we move forward.

University of Wisconsin–Madison

John Bechtol, Assistant Dean of Students for Veterans

Context at UW–Madison

The veteran population at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has grown from 347 students in 2005 to more than 600 today. Although there has been an increase in veterans on campus, UW–Madison has not witnessed the large surge in veteran enrollment that has occurred at other schools following the introduction of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in August of 2009. This is mainly due to veterans opting to re-enter the academic arena at smaller schools with the intention of later transferring to UW–Madison. Therefore, UW–Madison can expect to see our bubble of veteran growth appear over the next two to three years as veterans transfer in from other campuses.





Photo by Jeff Miller, University of Wisconsin–Madison

The University of Wisconsin–Madison has a long association with military veterans. Here, statues of figures from the Civil War era stand on either side of the Camp Randall Arch in G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) Memorial Park. More than 70,000 soldiers trained at Camp Randall, beginning in 1862. The Grand Army of the Republic was a Civil War veterans organization.

Veteran Services at UW–Madison

Student veterans arriving at UW–Madison enjoy a triad of support from the Offices of the Dean of Students, Office of the Registrar, and the “Vets for Vets” student organization sponsored by the student government. The Offices of the Dean of Students (ODOS) contact incoming student veterans—both freshmen and transfer students. Veterans are supplied with information about both on- and off-campus resources and assisted with making those contacts. An assistant dean of students meets all veterans in person during Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration (SOAR). The assistant

dean ensures that they are proactively seeking all their entitlements and provides them with a benefits worksheet. Immediately following class registration, the students report to the certifying official in the Office of the Registrar, who fine-tunes their benefits and validates them in the USDVA database.

During the period between student orientation and the start of the semester, the incoming students are contacted by a member of Vets for Vets, who arranges to meet with them during the first two weeks of school to answer any follow-up questions, and to offer a peer perspective of being a student veteran on the UW–Madison campus. The Vets for Vets office in the Student Activities Center also serves as a gathering place and counseling and advisement center for veterans and non-veterans alike.

Additionally, many other agencies on campus have taken a proactive approach to meeting veterans’ needs. These agencies include the Office of Student Financial Aid, the Bursar’s Office, the Office of Admissions, University Health Services, the McBurney Disability Resource Center, and the Division of University Housing. The assistant dean of students serves as a conduit to ensure that student veterans are linked up with specific individuals within these agencies who have been designated as points-of-contact for veterans.

The nationwide delay in USDVA payments experienced during the first few months of the Post-9/11 GI Bill led to an example of various UW–Madison agencies working together to assist veterans. Anticipating a possible delay, UW–Madison’s offices of the registrar, bursar, financial aid, and ODOS worked together to postpone tuition due dates for veterans until the USDVA paid the bill. Also, to assist with delayed GI Bill living stipends, the financial aid office and ODOS both offered veterans a no-interest loan to carry them through until they received their stipends.

Moving Forward at UW–Madison

UW–Madison still has room for improvement. The Office of the Registrar and ODOS are working with all of the University’s graduate programs to standardize the veteran identifier used in the student database. The identifier will enable the ODOS to conduct outreach to all graduate-level incoming student veterans and offer them the same assistance as undergraduates. This may sound simple, but considering the wide variation in application processes among graduate schools, the willingness of these offices to accept this additional workload is admirable.

UW–Madison has set an example for other institutions by leaning forward in the foxhole to take care of the needs of incoming student veterans. The veteran population will continue to grow, and the payoff for the campus is the great diversity, enthusiasm, experience, and maturity the veterans bring to the student body as a whole.

American Council on Education

Elizabeth O’Herrin, Assistant Director for Outreach and Communications, Military Programs

National Context and the Role of ACE

The landmark Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, or the Post-9/11 GI Bill, provides a robust increase in education benefits not seen for more than 60 years. In preparation for an anticipated influx of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, institutions of higher education across the nation have been ramping up their veterans programs and services in an effort to help ensure access and success for this unique student population.

The American Council on Education (ACE), after participating in numerous conversations with current and prospective student veterans and campus administrators, released a number of recommendations for making an institution more “veteran-friendly.” The recommendations included the following:

- Give veterans a voice by hosting roundtables about veterans programs and services and making the veterans part of the conversation and decision-making process.
- Build a centralized, easy-to-find web page with veteran-specific information.
- Establish specific points of contact within campus offices for veterans.
- Expand housing options to allow incoming student veterans additional choices.
- Implement a tuition deferment plan when delays in education benefit payments occur.
- Publish concise information on transfer credit for military experiences.
- Collaborate with community organizations to provide comprehensive services.

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Response at Madison’s Institutions

As evidenced by the actions taken by the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Edgewood College, and Madison College, each of these institutions has embraced many of these recommendations in an effort to serve their prospective and current student veterans.





Photo by Lisa Helfert for the American Council on Education

At the ACE Veterans Summit held at Georgetown University in 2008, student veterans greet then-Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

In particular, each of these institutions took much-needed steps to ensure that veterans experiencing lengthy delays in education benefit payments were not barred from registration or dropped from classes. It is encouraging to see that veterans were not only assured that they would be able to attend classes, but that workshops, personal meetings, and checklists were created to help veterans better understand their education benefits and processing. It is likely that these steps went a long way toward ensuring that veterans felt familiar with their benefits and were able to spend more time concentrating on school work, rather than trying to interpret complex entitlements.

The actions undertaken by the three Madison institutions reflect a national trend of flexibility

and understanding during the first year of implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, but this was not an extra step taken by all colleges and universities. These institutions should be commended for working towards making sure that no veteran slipped through the cracks during the first year of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

These institutions are among many that have made veterans' success a priority. In a recent survey of more than 700 colleges and universities, more than half responded that they provided programs and services specifically for service members and veterans. A similar percentage agreed that providing programs and services for service members and veterans is part of their institution's long-term strategic plan.

Ongoing Efforts at ACE

In May 2010, ACE hosted a Veteran Success Jam, an unprecedented national online conversation centered on veterans in higher education. About 60% of the participants were college and university faculty and staff, reinforcing ACE's belief that institutional representatives are firmly committed to ensuring that veterans thrive in higher education.

A critical goal of the jam was to identify issues in student veteran education that have not previously risen to the surface. Many conversations during the jam focused on the need to create greater awareness of campus programs that already exist, as well as the potential problems associated with the ever-increasing use of the term "veteran-friendly." Both veterans and campus administrators stated that the term was used so frequently that its meaning was sometimes diluted, and that institutions should be careful to make sure that it is not just used as a marketing tactic. Emerging from the conversation was a suggestion by participants from higher education institutions, associations, and student veterans that a third party should work to define what "veteran-friendly" truly represents. As we begin the second year of Post-9/11 GI Bill implementation, ACE intends to devote attention to this issue and collaborate with others to develop a strategy to address it.

Moving Forward as a Nation

As reported by the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Edgewood College, and Madison College, the growing student veteran population affects all types of institutions. More than 518,300 veterans have applied for a Certificate of Eligibility from the USDVA since August 1, 2009. It has yet to be determined where the biggest influx of veterans will occur—public schools, private schools, or two- or four-year institutions. In 2007-2008, 43% of military undergraduates (both active duty and veterans) chose public two-year institutions, while 21% attended public four-year colleges. For-profit and non-profit private institutions each drew about one-eighth of all military undergraduates. In addition, a 2008 Congressional Budget Office report estimated that the Post-9/11 GI Bill would cause a 16% *decrease* in reenlistment rates, but would also lead to a 16% *increase* in recruitment.

Although many questions about educating student veterans must still be answered, one thing is clear: the Post-9/11 GI Bill is a very attractive benefit for veterans and service members, and we should anticipate that veteran populations on our campuses will only continue to expand over the next several years.

NOTES

¹ Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, "The Post 9/11 GI Bill," http://www.newgibill.org/post_911_gi_bill (accessed June 15, 2010).

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Veteran Status (2008)," http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_S2101&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&-redoLog=false&-CONTEXT=st (accessed June 20, 2010).

³ Keith Wilson, "The Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Chapter 33)," Presented at the American Council on Education Veteran Success Jam, online, May 3, 2010, <http://www2.acenet.edu/jam/schedule/index.cfm> (accessed May 10, 2010).

⁴ Alexandria W. Radford, *Military Service Members and Veterans in Higher Education: What the New GI Bill May Mean for Postsecondary Institutions* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, July 2009).

⁵ Libby Nelson, "Many Student Veterans Are Still Waiting for GI Bill Benefits, Colleges Tell Congress," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 2009, <http://chronicle.com/article/Many-Student-Veterans-Are-S/49339/> (accessed May 19, 2010).





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