

# APPRECIATING MILITARY SERVICE REALITIES:

## Higher learning institution policies regarding deployment and GI Bill benefits

### SUMMARY OF OPERATION DIPLOMA AWARD INSTITUTIONS' REPORTS

Thousands of military members leave service every year, and due to the benefits made available by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, military downsizing and a challenging economy, many recent veterans are choosing to pursue higher education. What are student service members and veterans looking for in higher education? Are colleges and universities equipped to integrate them? How do postsecondary schools address the complex nature and demands of military life? Do they recognize specialized training and service? Are support systems in place to handle their unique situations and issues? Those are some of the questions the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University sought to answer through its *Landscape in Higher Education* series.

#### Who are military and veteran students and what challenges do they face?

The unique skills and experiences that student service members and veterans acquire over their military career distinguish them from other students, and higher education institutions vary in their readiness for this population. Concerns of student military members and veterans as they return to campus include the following (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; NSSE, 2010; Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010):

- » access to educational benefits;
- » acknowledgment of extensive mastery-based training;
- » recognition of multiple commitments and obligations;
- » appreciation of the realities of military service; and
- » availability of support for hidden and visible disability.

Student veterans are more likely to be male, older than 24, first generation college students, enrolled part-time, transfer students, distance learners, married with children, and work full- or part-time than other students (NSSE, 2010). One in five also has at least one service-related disability (iCasualties, 2012).

## The purpose of this report series

During the past five years, MFRI has assisted almost 100 colleges and universities as they worked to support military personnel and veterans enrolled at their institutions. Our education initiative, called Operation Diploma, provided a variety of forms of assistance, including grants, to two- and four-year public and private institutions. These grants, and their proceeds, improved the lives of more than 6,000 student service members and veterans. As institutions designed and implemented new policies, programs and practices, we monitored their progress and learned from their experiences. This report documents results from our studies of institutions' progress regarding specific actions on behalf of student service members and veterans.

Armed with input from members of both military and civilian communities, available research, and student veterans themselves, we created a set of questions to ask both staff and administrators that focused on areas of the institution that affect student service members and veterans. The goals of the *Landscape in Higher Education* series were to:

- » collect information for benchmarking and program improvement;
- » assess awareness of the student veteran population in colleges and universities;
- » determine what supports and services existed;
- » increase awareness of the needs of this group of students; and
- » identify promising practices.

## Who we contacted

Given our location at Purdue University, we focused our project on Indiana, contacting all of Indiana's postsecondary institutions. Similar to many states across the country, Indiana has no active duty military bases and few active duty service members, but is home to several higher learning institutions and large contingents of National Guard and Reserve members. The data reported below come from 75 institutions (80 percent of the total) that were diverse in size, sector (public/private), category (not-for-profit/for-profit), and degrees offered (undergraduate/graduate). We also contacted 25 benchmark institutions from the list "Best for Vets" institutions published by the Military Times Edge (2011) that were particularly friendly to student service members and veterans — these schools also were diverse in terms of size, focus, public or private, and profit or nonprofit status. Data reported here were collected in 2010 and 2012.

## How we did it

We used a "secret shopper" method, whereby calls were made by student service members or veterans to frontline university staff. To compare responses from staff and administrators, the information obtained for each institution was compiled and mailed to a senior administrator at each college or university for confirmation or correction.

We also collected information about the number and duration of calls, how many times callers were transferred, and how helpful schools were when responding to inquiries about military programs. On average, callers made a total of two 11 minute inquiries to obtain information about all interview questions, and were transferred three times during each of the two calls. The student callers rated their agreement with the statement "I believed there was a genuine attempt to provide the requested information" on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The average rating improved from 3.06 in 2010 to 4.14 in 2012.



In this report we focus on how the schools handled service-related absence and tuition, asking schools:

- » Do you waive tuition deadlines if the service member is using the GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation?
- » If deployed, will a student veteran have to reapply upon return from deployment?
- » If the service member is deployed midsemester, do you credit or reimburse tuition already paid?
- » If the service member is deployed midsemester, will he/she be given an incomplete and given the opportunity to make up the coursework upon return?
- » If the student veteran is a graduate student, is he/she given an extension to complete the course requirements based on how long he/she was deployed?

## What we learned

### *Waiving tuition deadlines for use of GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation*

Tuition deadlines are a potential problem for students who rely on GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation benefits for tuition. Such payments do not always arrive in time, particularly at the beginning of semesters. Missing such deadlines can result in late penalties that add to the cost of education and/or being dropped from classes, potentially delaying degree completion. Universities can remove this obstacle by waiving the tuition deadline for students who are using GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation benefits.

In 2010, only 32 percent of staff and just over half of administrators said they would waive the deadline for tuition. In addition, 57 percent of staff and 28 percent of administrators did not know their policy regarding tuition waivers. These numbers shifted drastically in 2012, where 83 percent of both staff and administration indicated that their institution would waive the tuition deadline if the student was using the GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation. In addition, the percentage of both staff and administrators uncertain about this question dropped dramatically in 2012 relative to 2010.

### *Deployment reapplication*

Active duty, Reserve and National Guard students face additional uncertainties in their pursuit of higher education because they may be deployed at any time, thus interrupting their educational careers. Once deployed, veterans need clarification on how current enrollments will be handled, and whether they will need to reapply to the institution when their active service ends.

In 2010, 19 percent of staff members and 12 percent of administrators reported that military students **would** have to reapply for admission after a deployment. In 2012, over three-fourths (75 percent) of both staff and administrators indicated that student service members would not be required to reapply for admission following deployments. The percentage of both staff and administrators responding with “don’t know” dropped by two-thirds (66 percent) from 2010 to 2012 (staff: 32 to 10 percent; administrators: 23 to 8 percent), indicating improvement in information gaps at some institutions regarding reapplication processes for military students.



### *Credit and tuition reimbursement due to midsemester deployment*

Students who have military obligations also face the possibility of lost tuition for courses underway at the time of deployment. Tuition reimbursement for midterm deployments preserves education benefits during involuntary deployments. Without a refund or some type of credit, these benefits could be lost to the student for future use, resulting in a dual penalty for deployment.

The percentage of staff and administrators indicating that they would give credit to or reimburse students deployed midsemester increased from 45 percent and 67 percent in 2010 to 68 percent and 75 percent in 2012. Almost half (50 percent) of staff members and one-quarter (25 percent) of administrators did not know the policy regarding midsemester deployment and tuition in 2010, but that number dropped for both groups in 2012 to 15 percent and 8 percent indicating a better understanding of this process. Higher learning institutions who indicated that they would not give credit remained at less than 10 percent in both years for the two groups.

### *Course evaluation and makeup process after a midsemester deployment*

In addition to the possibility of lost tuition for courses underway at the time of deployment, student service members and veterans called away to serve their country may also be penalized by having to repeat coursework or forfeit credit for work already performed. University faculty members often have the ultimate say about the decision to grant credit for early withdrawal. A number of factors, including the proportion of the course completed and the student's academic standing at the time of withdrawal are typically taken into consideration.

In 2010, almost 43 percent of staff members and 27 percent of administrators did not know the options for students who were deployed midsemester. That number decreased to approximately one in ten members (10 percent) of each group in 2012. The percentage of both staff members and administrators who said students would not be given an incomplete or the opportunity to make up missed coursework increased slightly from 2010 to 2012 (staff: 4 to 6 percent; administrators: 3 to 11 percent).

In both 2010 and 2012, more than half of staff members and administrators said student service members would be given an incomplete and an opportunity to make up coursework upon return from their deployment. Administrators in 2010 were significantly more positive about opportunities given to students who are deployed midsemester when the answer to "maybe" was added to affirmative responses (71 versus 53 percent). By 2012, it is encouraging to note that approximately 80 percent of respondents in each group indicated opportunities were or might be available.

### *Graduate program extensions due to deployment*

Graduate students may face additional penalties when their academic work is interrupted. They not only face the risk of having to repeat coursework, but as a result of program length restrictions, they may also lack sufficient time to complete their graduate studies when they have been deployed.

Administrator and staff responses at campuses with graduate programs were similar to responses from undergraduate programs when asked whether student service members or veterans who are graduate students would or might be given an extension to complete course requirements. When combining "yes" and "maybe" responses, 54 percent of staff and 70 percent of administrators would give extensions in 2010, and that number increased to 80 percent for both groups in 2012.



## Higher learning institution differences in veteran support

When we looked at differences in types of higher learning institutions and their support for student service members, we found:

- » No significant differences between public and private institutions in reports about any of the policies considered in this report.
- » No significant differences for staff members or administrators between small (less than 10,000 students) and large institutions (greater than 10,000 students).
- » Significantly more support for service-related absences and tuition reimbursement offered by schools with graduate and special focus (e.g., engineering) programs.

## Staff versus administration gap

Though the situation has been improving since our original study in 2008, we still see a knowledge and information gap both among and between administrators and staff. One of the most promising shifts from the 2010 to the 2012 data is a decrease in the percentage of staff and administrators who answer “don’t know” to our questions.

## Benchmark institutions

Staff responses for benchmark institutions were significantly higher than Indiana schools for tuition reimbursement if a service member is deployed (88 versus 68 percent). Administrators at benchmark schools also responded significantly higher for tuition reimbursement after a deployment (92 versus 75 percent).

It is important to remember that these schools were viewed as being institutions that offered notably high levels of support to student service members and veterans. The 2012 “Soldier to Student II” report found that there is “great diversity in how institutions serve veterans, the variety of services and programs offered, and where services and programs are housed within the administrative infrastructure” (American Council on Education, 2012, p. 8). For example, while 92 percent of the benchmark institutions have an established policy regarding tuition refunds for military activations and deployments, only 82 percent of the institutions in the “Soldier to Student II” study have such a policy.

## Why appreciation of military service matters

The number of student service members and veterans taking advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities is expected to increase substantially in the coming years as troops return from Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S. reduces the size of the military force (American Council on Education, 2012). Veterans are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill which provides cost-of-living and other benefits in addition to 36 months of tuition at two- and four-year colleges and universities, trade and vocational schools, licensing and on-the-job training programs. The Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration has conducted an aggressive marketing campaign promoting GI Bill educational benefits.





GI Bill payments do not always arrive in time to meet payment deadlines, particularly at the start of each semester. Missing such deadlines can result in late penalties that add to the cost of education and/or being dropped from courses which potentially delays the fulfillment of degree requirements. Although some institutions offer tuition and fee deferment options, student service members and veterans who do not have these options risk being dropped from classes or subject to late fees. Losing a seat in a high demand or infrequently offered course can be problematic given the multiple time demands often faced by students who are veterans or service members. Universities can remove this obstacle by waiving the tuition deadline for students who are using GI Bill or vocational rehabilitation benefits.

For these students and the institutions they attend, the possibility of deployment and its effect on educational progress is an additional concern. This has been especially true during the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan which have resulted in the activation of many Guard members and Reservists (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Active duty, Guard members and Reservists differ from veterans in that they can be deployed with advance notice ranging from months to only minutes. In recent years, typical deployments have lasted nine months (McIlvane, 2011). Guard members may also be called upon to assist with major emergencies and natural disasters; deployments of this type usually last from 15 to 60 days (U.S. Army National Guard, 2012).

Most postsecondary institutions have policies about tuition credit and reimbursement, as well as opportunities to make up coursework, for students called away to fulfill military obligations. Unfortunately, student service members often report the policies to be difficult to interpret and inconsistently applied. Clear understanding and communication among faculty, staff and administration will aid in the support of these students, and enable them to complete their degree in a timely manner without loss of benefits.

The requirement to reapply following involuntary service to one's country is also perceived as unnecessarily burdensome (Steele, Salcedo & Cooley, 2010). Removing the reapplication barrier for students who are involuntarily absent due to military obligations encourages them to return promptly following deployment and signals that the institution recognizes the student's unique service-related absence.

Deployment schedules may also leave a student service member unable to complete a semester once it has begun. Progress toward educational goals is interrupted and they are in jeopardy of losing some of the 36 months of benefits to which they are entitled. A university can minimize the financial burden in the event of deployment by offering tuition reimbursement or credit for courses in progress.

Service members called away to serve their country may be additionally penalized by having to repeat coursework or forfeit credit for work already performed. Decisions about coursework are based on a number of factors, including the proportion of the course completed and the student's academic standing at the time of withdrawal. These factors would typically be taken into consideration by faculty, who has ultimate authority about these types of decisions. A clear and consistent policy for both undergraduate and graduate programs on course evaluation and makeup options is important to communicate to both faculty and student veterans. The challenges of military service can be mitigated by allowing student service members to complete degree requirements when they return from a deployment, which also minimizes delays in academic progression. Those institutions that acknowledge the issues student service members and veterans face, and that work to facilitate their academic transition will be more likely to attract and retain this growing student demographic.

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