CHEPP The Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice

SUPPORTING MILITARY-CONNECTED LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Military-connected learners represent a critical but under-supported population in American higher education. Approximately 820,000 undergraduate students, or about 5% of all undergraduates nationwide, are veterans, active-duty, reservists, or National Guard members; with veterans accounting for approximately 52% of this population (Melidona & Wright, 2023). Military-connected learners also include military spouses, dependents, and Gold Star families. These learners bring leadership, resilience, and workforce-ready skills to their colleges and communities. Yet, structural barriers—ranging from inconsistent credit recognition to complex benefit systems and basic needs insecurity—continue to impede persistence and degree completion. With coordinated institutional design and federal policy alignment, military-connected learners can enroll, persist, graduate, and thrive. This fact sheet summarizes both the barriers and strategies for higher education programs to better serve military-connected learners. Further details can be found in CHEPP's full report, Advancing Access and Success in Higher Education for Military-Connected Learners.

Fast Facts:

- 820,000 undergraduate students, or roughly 5% of all undergraduates nationwide, are veterans, active-duty military, reservists, or National Guard; with veterans accounting for 52% of this population (Melidona & Wright, 2023).
- 30% of veterans have a service-connected disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).
- 40% of military-connected learners are parents (Melidona & Wright, 2023).
- 64% of student veterans surveyed in a 2021 research project reported receiving some academic credit for military learning, with 62% sharing they received less credit than anticipated (Jiang et al., 2021).

Building a More Supportive Higher Education Experience for Military-Connected Learners

Military-connected learners face barriers to success across their higher education experience, including navigating the admission and enrollment process, throughout their academic and student experiences, and making connections to the workforce. Institutional strategies and federal policy reforms are necessary to improve these learners' outcomes. Systems must be in place to support all military-connected learners, including active-duty service members, disabled veterans, and military spouses balancing frequent relocations.

Admission and Enrollment

Barriers: Military-connected learners can struggle to find a college that is the "right fit," including recognizing their military experience and existing college credit, offering the flexibility they need when facing deployment, and understanding the full complexity of their military benefits including the GI Bill®.

Strategies: Colleges can have designated staff throughout the recruitment and enrollment process who understand the unique needs of military-connected learners, including recruitment specialists, financial aid experts, and staff who understand military experience. During the credit transfer process, it is important colleges have clear policies and informed reviewers who understand how military experience translates to college credit, including understanding the Joint Services Transcript (JST) (Kim et al., 2026).

Academic and Student Experience

Barriers: Once enrolled, military-connected learners face unique challenges finding belonging among their peers. Students who are active-duty or reservists, as well as their spouses, may have to pause their studies because of deployments and relocations. In addition, military-connected learners are often balancing caregiving responsibilities and have basic needs gaps. Veterans are also more likely to have a disability but may be hesitant to seek accommodations due to stigma.

Strategies: Colleges should consider having dedicated advisors, or targeted training to support military-connected learners across the student experience. Policies related to leaves of absence, attendance, and assignment deadlines should consider military-related deployments for both service members and their spouses. Colleges may also consider having designated spaces where military-connected learners can receive targeted supports and connect to each other.

Career Connectivity

Barriers: Military-connected learners can struggle to connect military experience and occupational specialties to civilian careers. Career services are not always designed to support veterans transitioning into new industries or translating military experience into civilian careers. Additionally, relocations can leave military spouses with gaps in their resume and faced with navigating occupational licensure requirements that vary by state.

Strategies: Career services should have dedicated staff or provide targeted training to best support military-connected learners. This can include helping learners communicate their experience appropriately on their resumes and during interviews, as well as connecting learners with military-friendly employers.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Admission and Enrollment

- Increase the Department of Defense (DoD) Tuition Assistance Program's reimbursement rate and annual cap to align with current college costs.
- Strengthen the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program through streamlined processes and increased counselor training to improve consistency and access to benefits.
- Expand eligibility of veterans education benefits to cover prior learning assessments and portfolio reviews to reduce time and cost to degree completion (e.g., such as proposed in the Military Learning for Credit Act).
- Support more streamlined credit transfer by prohibiting states, accreditors, and institutions from banning credit from being accepted for transfer solely on the basis of the modality or type of credit, without assessing the learning demonstrated.
- Ensure that veterans who are defrauded by their institution of higher education can recoup their federal education benefits (e.g., such as proposed in the Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act).

Academic and Student Experience

- Increase book reimbursement under the GI Bill® and provide regular cost-of-living adjustments (e.g., such as proposed in the Veteran Education Assistance Adjustment Act).
- Provide 100% housing allowance under the GI Bill® for online students who currently receive 50% (e.g., such as proposed in the Expanding Access for Online Veteran Students Act).
- Extend the GI Bill®'s Basic Housing Allowance (BHA) eligibility to cover break periods between academic terms, including summer months.
- Streamline access to accommodations by requiring institutions to accept certain documentation as evidence of a disability, including military service disability records (e.g., such as proposed in the RISE (Respond, Innovate, Succeed, and Empower) Act.
- Streamline Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) access for college students (e.g., such as proposed in the EATS Act).
- Support access to Competency-Based Education (CBE) programs by authorizing a CBE demonstration program that rigorously evaluates learner experiences and outcomes in a variety of models (e.g., such as proposed in the Empowering Learners Through Competency-Based Education Act).

Career Connectivity

- Improve the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Work Study program to support future career alignment, higher pay, and expanded eligibility for students enrolled half-time (e.g., such as proposed in the VA Work Study Improvement Act and the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act).

Sources

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