A Review of Topics Affecting Student Veterans

Student Veterans of America
Analysis of Policy Townhall Program and Conversation
February 2016
Foreword

Student Veterans of America (SVA) hosted its eighth annual National Conference on January 7th -10th, 2016 at Disney World, in Orlando, FL. The annual conference brings together thousands of student veterans, stakeholders and key thought leaders. Over the four days of the conference, members engaged in networking opportunities, learned about leading practices in veterans’ success on campus, and developed skills to bring back to their campuses.

Since 2008, Student Veterans of America’s National Conference has been the premier gathering of service members and veterans in higher education from across the country. Facilitating these critical connections between thought leaders, stakeholders and veteran advocates, the conference has proven to be an unforgettable experience for student veterans and veteran supporters alike. In 2016, the National Conference was about more than supporting student veterans; it was about supporting their families and communities, and preparing them for a future of success.

In the changing landscape of today’s world, we recognize the need to prepare student veterans and their networks with current and timely information about ongoing discussions in policy. This year, SVA’s Government Affairs Department hosted a Policy Townhall at the conference, giving student veterans and their families the opportunity to engage with individuals working on key national policy initiatives. Five of these experts engaged with the Vice President of Government Affairs using an audience survey to drive the conversation on a wide variety of topics. This report synthesizes the insights and data from that event.

The mission of SVA’s Government Affairs Department is to shape policy proposals and regulations on behalf of veteran students in pursuit of career advancement through higher education. Our team works closely with Congress and the federal government to promote forward-looking policies that will help veterans get the education they need to thrive in the modern workforce. My work focuses on a myriad of issues, and we prepare analyses of a wide variety of proposals concerning matters that affect veterans in higher education. As subject matter experts on higher education and veterans policy, Congress and senior government officials frequently call on our team to deliver testimony regarding topics facing student veterans. Our primary focus is the success of student veterans; we achieve a high level of influence through consistent liaison with Congress, relevant organizations and associations, industry, and others concerned with proposed and pending policies. We hope you find this report insightful, and look forward to your feedback on these important issues.

In the 2016 National Conference Policy Townhall, we looked at a wide variety of issues. The panel considered four categories of issues including ‘stopping bad actors’, ‘protecting the GI Bill’, ‘targeted education investments’, and ‘long-term change’. These issues represent a broad set of issues that student veterans face in higher education, and set the foundation for policy discussions for the coming year. As the Post-9/11 GI Bill enters the eighth academic year of its life, predatory schools and “bad actors” continue to take advantage of this generous education benefit. While this group of bad actors is composed of a small number of questionable schools, the impact they have on individual student veterans is significant. Further, if left unchecked, these schools threaten the long-term viability of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which we should measure based on its return on investment to the country’s economy. Today we face issues such as the 90/10 loophole, several flight programs with exorbitant interest rates, and increased consumer awareness through the VA’s GI Bill Comparison Tool caution flags.

There are many groups, which strive to maintain the long-term success of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and continue fighting hard to protect its integrity. Of note, the veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the American Legion have frequently been a partner with SVA in this fight to protect the benefit. We addressed several of these issues including the dangers of the GI Bill, an education benefit, as a funding source for non-education pursuits; the importance of emphasizing the return on investment to the country’s economy; the value of research on this unique population of non-traditional students; and the role of the StateApproving Agencies.

When discussing veteran education benefits in higher education, it becomes clear that targeted investments may present a higher return on investment. Examples such as the GI Bill STEM Extension Act of 2015 present thoughtful and forward-leaning policies for the future of the GI Bill. In some cases, traditional liberal arts degrees are not providing the same opportunity as they once did, demonstrating the importance of selecting high-growth and high-demand degrees. It is clear that the future of higher education should be adapting to the new needs of the economy to maintain sustainable growth for student veterans.

Lastly, the group addressed the role student veterans have to play in the future of policy-making related to veterans and higher education, as well as all issues facing our country today. Indeed, this generation of veterans is actively engaging their communities, and the national conversation on the direction of policy. One of the groups of “bad actors” is concerned with the growing demand for an increased presence of veterans on Capitol Hill, and throughout the administration of our country’s laws; the group, HVB, is taking an innovative approach to addressing this increasing need for more veterans to have a voice in the process.

We hope you find this report to be useful at all levels, whether you are a policy-maker, current or prospective student veteran, or someone interested in relevant issues facing this unique population of non-traditional students today. In these school’s fiscal times, it is up to all of us to make difficult and thoughtful decisions with the best interests of student veterans in mind.

Meet the Editors

William Hubbard
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William Hubbard is on the professional staff of Student Veterans of America, serving as their Vice President of Government Affairs. His focus is on legislative action and executive branch policy across all issues that affect student veterans in higher education. William is frequently called before congress as a subject matter expert to testify on a variety of issues, and often advises executive officials in the administration and higher education veterans policy issues. William is a graduate of American University, where he studied International Relations. He currently resides in Arlington, VA with his wife and longhaired dachshund.

Derek Fronabarger
Student Veterans of America

Derek Fronabarger serves on the professional staff of Student Veterans of America as the Director of Policy. Prior to SVA, Derek worked in the White House on the Joining Forces Initiative in the Office of the First Lady. Prior to receiving his education, Derek served in the United States Army as an Air Defense Intelligence Tactical Operator where he served overseas in Germany, Israel, and Afghanistan. Derek graduated from the College of Charleston with a B.A. in Philosophy and received an M.B.A with a concentration in International Business from the Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina.

Stopping Bad Actors

What is a Bad Actor? The short answer is that a Bad Actor is just the opposite of a reputable school. Employers respect a reputable school, which will always provide truthful information. Reputable schools always answer your questions in a forthcoming, easy to understand manner; never have you sign an enrollment agreement until you understand your financial situation, and how the school obtains income. Give you time to think about whether or not to enroll and won’t harass you; and let you sit in on a class, so you can make a decision if the learning environment suits you.

In contrast, Bad Actors engage in misleading recruiting, encourage unnecessary borrowing, and provide a poor quality education. Examples of misleading recruiting include the use of official looking websites (GIBill.com) to get your contact information, followed by harassing phone calls and emails; failure to address your questions about cost even though they are more expensive than other alternatives; telling you that your credits will transfer to less expensive alternatives when they won’t; saying they are accredited but then it turns out that graduates aren’t eligible for state license or certification; misleading promises of high job placement rates and failure to provide the advertised services to help graduates find jobs.

Bad Actors encourage unnecessary borrowing by urging you to take out federal student loans that you don’t need —just in case. They even take out loans in your name without your understanding or permission. They encourage you to falsify information on the free application for federal student aid and offer to take care of all of the loan paperwork for you— all you have to do is sign on the dotted line. They mislead you about how much you are actually borrowing by telling you that you are receiving grants, not loans. Rather than encouraging you to maximize the benefits of federal student loans, they sign you up for private student loans that are much more expensive than federal loans and that start to accrue interest upon origination.

Finally, Bad Actors don’t deliver on their promise of providing a quality education. In fact, they spend so much money on recruiting and executive salaries that little is left over for instruction. Frequently, teachers are part-time, inexperienced, frequently changing, and don’t show up for class. You will notice that you work hard but everyone
Even though over a dozen such settlements have been reached in the past several years, VA caution flags do not but should include settlements with state Attorneys General over misleading and deceptive recruiting and advertising.

If you enrolled in a Bad Actor, what steps can you take to protect yourself and your GI Bill benefits? First, speak up and let others know about the problems you encountered. You can file a complaint online with VA and Veterans Education Success can offer you free help in filling the complaint or in trying to rebut a school’s response to your complaint. Veterans Education Success is a non-profit committed to protecting the integrity and promise of the GI Bill. [3] You can also lodge a complaint with state approving agency for the state where your school is located. State Approving Agencies authorize programs of study for participation in the GI Bill and inspect schools periodically to ensure that they continue to meet statutory and regulatory requirements. Finally, you should contact your U.S. Senators and Representatives.

Second, document your problems. You should collect any relevant documents that help support your complaint because if it’s not in writing, it didn’t happen. Third, cut your losses early—the sooner you stop attending a Bad Actor, the less you stand to lose. It may be difficult to admit you made a mistake but if you waste your hard-earned benefits at a Bad Actor school, they are gone forever. Consider transferring to a community college or state public school, even if your credits don’t transfer, and be sure to ask about credit for military training. Finally, many public and non-profit schools now offer online programs, so there are high quality online alternatives to the programs offered by Bad Actors.

As a result, inclusion of a school on the Comparison Tool is not an endorsement. It’s each veteran’s responsibility to carefully review the information generated by a ‘search’ because it contains insights about how likely veterans are to succeed at a particular school and about the outcomes of other students who attended that school. Here are some Comparison Tool data points that should tell prospective veteran students, (5) too many students drop out after their freshman year, (2) graduation rates are low, (3) most students end up with student loans, (4) post-graduation earnings are low compared with what recruiters told prospective veteran students, (5) too many students are unable to repay their federal student loans, and (6) lots of veterans have filed complaints about the school. If much of this data is missing, that should also raise a red flag. In response to a live poll question, 43 percent of the students who attended the Town Hall had started out at a Bad Actor, switched to a public or non-profit school because of their subpar experience. [1]

Most Town Hall attendees said that they were familiar with or had used the GI Bill College Comparison Tool. The goal of the Comparison Tool is to provide relevant, fact-based, and unbiased data to help veterans make informed choices when using their GI Bill benefits. Just because a school is eligible to participate in the GI Bill doesn’t mean it’s a good choice.

Bad Actors participate in the GI Bill and federal student aid because of the failure of government to hold them accountable for their predatory and fraudulent behavior. As a result, inclusion of a school on the Comparison Tool is not an endorsement. It’s each veteran’s responsibility to carefully review the information generated by a ‘search’ because it contains insights about how likely veterans are to succeed at a particular school and about the outcomes of other students who attended that school.

While in the military, service members learn that accurate and actionable intelligence is key to the success of any operation. On Capitol Hill, policy-makers similarly rely on quality information to make responsible decisions. This is why bad data and incomplete data are so harmful when it comes to decision-making on veterans in higher education.

In 2012, a University of Colorado report indicated that 88 percent of student veterans would drop out of college after their first semester and only three percent would graduate. [4] Much like the “22 a day” statistic on veterans’ suicide, some tried to rally around this number as a call-to-action for colleges to better serve student veterans. However, others used the data to serve their interests in either overhauling the program or scrapping the program altogether.

Real-time numbers on veteran graduation are still not readily available, but Student Veterans of America was the first organization to take a data-driven look at how veterans fare in higher education. Based on SVAs longitudinal analysis of student veterans from 2001 to 2011, SVA determined that veterans were more likely to earn their degree than to drop out — the path just looked a little different than what was traditionally tracked by the higher education community. [5] Through projects like SVAs Million Records Project, the veterans’ community can identify persistent gaps in serving the unique needs of the veterans’ community and advocate for positive change. For example, by understanding the challenges facing student veterans, advocates can push for additional benefits for science and technology programs, or encourage legislators to reauthorize grants to support student veteran resource centers.

Demonstrating return on investment for the Post-9/11 GI Bill is critical to the program’s future viability. This is why Student Veterans of America is continuing its work of the Million Records Project (MRP) through its partnership with the VA on the National Veterans Education Success Tracker (NVEST). It is also why VA has taken a hard look at its own data sets to build veteran-specific performance metrics.

Moreover, building safeguards against fraud, waste, and abuse are also paramount in preserving the program. When the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee raised concerns over bad actors preying on student veterans, groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, and SVA worked to commission quality consumer protection resources like the GI Bill Comparison Tool and the GI Bill Complaint System. [6]
Bad data either leads to bad solutions or bad ideas on how to change programs.”

**Targeting Education Investments**

The pursuit of a college education is an endeavor that requires a significant amount of time, resources, and sacrifice. One way an individual can best capitalize on higher education is to take time prior to submitting admissions applications to ask specific questions that will help choose a degree path that leads to the highest return on investment. This holds true for military veterans and other military-connected individuals (i.e., active duty, reserve, and National Guard members).

In order to make the most of the time, effort, and resources placed towards attaining a degree, military-connected individuals need to do the necessary preparation prior to enrollment, including identifying long-term career and employment goals that lead to a viable field of work with significant opportunity for professional growth and financial sustainability. While there are a number of labor market opportunities with this type of potential, the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) field is one that oftentimes is overlooked, yet, is one that holds great promise for upward social mobility and increased lifelong earnings.

Over the years, science and technology have experienced significant growth and advancement. With this continued development come an increased number of career opportunities for those within a STEM field. Between 2010 and 2020, for example, the U.S. Department of Education projects a 16 to 63 percent increase in STEM jobs and only a 14 percent increase in other occupations. [7] Despite the increasing demand for professionals within the STEM field, there is a significant gap in the number of individuals trained and equipped to fill those needs. Based on these recent statistics, it appears that the gap between STEM workforce needs and the available pool is far from being closed.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that approximately 14 percent of all students enrolled in higher education are pursuing a degree within the STEM field. [8] Remarkably, anecdotal evidence suggests that the same percentage of military-connected students are majoring in STEM. For example, during the Student Veterans’ of America’s (SVA) Policy Townhall meeting held at the 2016 annual conference, roughly 14 percent of polled respondents were enrolled as a STEM major. Similarly, in a recent report published by the American Council on Education (ACE) and Project and Veterans Upward Bound, in Higher Education, the average share of military-connected students enrolled in a STEM field was 15 percent. [9] Despite the modest proportion of military-connected students pursuing STEM majors, veterans and other military-connected individuals are well positioned to meet the growing STEM industry needs in the 21st century.

In addition to often being neglected, hard workers who find a way to get any job done, veterans are competitive in the STEM field based on the significant experience many have gained through their military service. This experience and training, in conjunction with a college education, can open many opportunities for veterans to meet the needs of the nation’s workforce. Unfortunately, despite available opportunities, many service members and veterans are not pursuing a higher education in STEM related fields of study and workforce occupations. For reasons not yet empirically identified, it seems that for many of our nation’s veterans there is a lack of interest and for others perceived barriers that keep them from pursuing a higher education and career in STEM. For student veterans, a central barrier to entering STEM fields of study rests on the number of prerequisites required before starting a college program. These prerequisites could increase time-to-completion and, as a result, inadvertently prohibit military-connected students from considering a STEM major. While this is something to consider, many institutions of higher learning have worked to create degree paths specific for service members and veterans seeking to pursue a STEM degree.

Many colleges and universities use ACE credit recommendations and their students’ JST transcripts to meet specific degree or major requirements. Not only do a significant number of institutions accept and apply these credits towards degree programs, they have also created pathways, based on ACE credit recommendations and the experience of specific career fields, to decrease time to completion. Licensing Community-Colleges for example, created the Military Medics to Paramedics Program, which uses ACE credit recommendations and experience from both the Army and Navy military medic occupations to cut degree time-to-completion from 18 to 9 months. Lansing Community College has also created articulation agreements with other institutions to help graduate of their program seamlessly transfer to a four-year institution, where they can pursue advanced degrees to become a Physician’s Assistant or a Registered Nurse.

Another barrier that may prohibit service members or veterans from pursuing degrees in the STEM field is their academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is a unifying experiences and the right education, these individuals have the skillsets necessary to help the STEM industry continue to thrive. In addition, while the thought of pursuing a STEM degree might be daunting, with the right amount of advice, opportunity, and resources, military-connected students are ideally situated to contribute greatly to STEM-related efforts across the nation and can simultaneously enhance their economic vitality.
Making Strategic Change

Improving national policy is daunting as a task as it is an admirable goal. As Congress continues to face low record approval rating and the widespread perception that they are “out of touch” with the American people, changing policy for the better has become more difficult than ever. In light of the current political climate, the challenge for veterans policy community is figuring out a long-term strategy to preserve the Post-9/11 GI Bill and to advance our other policy needs. That strategy is this: we need veterans to serve again.

For any policy to become law, we need more veterans to serve in key government roles and to pursue, and attain, elected office. Today, less than 20% of members of Congress are veterans themselves. Among Congressional staffers, those who write legislation and do most of the behind the scenes work of making a bill into law, less than 3% have served in the military. In addition, that’s exactly the problem HillVets is focused on solving. By easing the transition from student veteran to public servant through networking, employment, and educational opportunities, HillVets is working to rebuild the military brain trust in government and politics while helping the next generation of veteran leaders excel.

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Our mission to transform the power and presence of veterans in government, policy, and politics is based on the knowledge that veterans overwhelmingly want to serve again in some capacity, as this recent Civic Enterprises shows us. In fact, an impressive 40% of SVA Policy Town Hall respondents indicated that yes, they plan to run for office someday. However, they’re often not seen as diverse in their experience. Voters often want to see well-rounded people, and it’s important to show that you’re not only a veteran, as silly as that may sound. Having a mix of professional, volunteer, and political experience will really help round out the story you can tell voters about yourself.

There are all kinds of local organizations you could become active in to help build a political network, including the local political party and its subgroups, local commissions, boards, clubs, school associations, and so on. Getting involved locally introduces you to the political movers and shakers you’ll need on your side when you run for office.

If you’re more focused on the national scene and/or pursuing the staff track, try our HillVets House Congressional Fellowship program: You’ll learn firsthand how the national policy process works and begin building a network in the halls of Congress. This experience will be invaluable should you ultimately make the decision to run for office one day.

Whether as a staffer, intern, or volunteer, campaigns are a great place to start. You’ll learn what to do and what not to do when you run for office. Key lessons about field, fundraising, campaign finance, outreach, and communications are all right there for the taking. At campaigns need help. Be the dependable, reliable person in the office — which should be SOP for most vets — and you’ll get more and more opportunities to learn and contribute. You will also meet like-minded people; the people most likely to get involved on future campaigns are those who’ve done it before.

“You can learn a lot on a campaign whether you win or lose.”

You can learn a lot on a campaign whether you win or lose. To have a productive experience, it doesn’t really matter if the campaign ultimately wins or loses — though winning is of course more fun. Find a candidate or cause you believe in and get to work!

Networking really is everything. Getting involved locally and joining a campaign will do a lot towards building your political network, but the truth is you’ll need more than a political network.

Since you will need to fundraise seriously to be a serious candidate, it’s important to start building a financial network. Meet with and get to know everybody you can, especially local business owners and executives. The owners of local small businesses can make for powerful allies financially and politically; they have money, loyal customers, friends, colleagues, and space to host events. You can lay the foundation for future campaigns by building out your base of support before you ever declare candidacy.

Do whatever you need to do to learn the specifics of what it takes to be a candidate. There’s a number of good books and articles about running for office, including some specifically for veteran candidates; and there’s classes and trainings you can take. Universities, political parties, and some veterans organizations, like Veterans Campaign, offer candidate trainings. Check out HillVets articles on our experiences and lessons from running for office, including “How to Lose an Election in Less than 90 Days!”

Veterans are determined, focused, collaborative, and leaders. But they’re often not seen as diverse in their experience. Voters often want to see well-rounded people, and it’s important to show that you’re not only a veteran, as silly as that may sound. Having a mix of professional, volunteer, and political experience will really help round out the story you can tell voters about yourself.

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Fortunately, ‘entry-level’ political office is a part time job in most states. Though it is not necessarily easy to do, you will have to find a balance between your professional career and your new job as an elected official. Campaigning, however, is an entirely different beast. When that time comes, be ready to take serious time off work (if not full-time leave), if you want to be successful.

For a veteran, this is the probably the most difficult task of any on this list. Servicemembers learn to follow and lead, often doing so without thanks or taking credit. As a candidate for office, you need to persuade voters and donors that you’re worth their support. You have to sell yourself.

To be a successful and convincing candidate, you’ll have to learn how to brag about yourself. It might feel dirty or wrong at first, but in campaigning, it’s simply part of the process. Find a balance of clearly articulating your accomplishments and your vision without making yourself (or others) squeamish. As a candidate, you may be able to enlist some surrogates — your spouse, close friends, colleagues, supporters, and campaign manager — to speak on your behalf, but you have to be your own top salesperson. So, go forward. Get started today. You’re on your way to future success, and when the time comes, run hard and run clean.
Conclusion

For almost 70 years, State Approving Agencies and their national organization, the National Association of State Approving Agencies, have been at the forefront of protecting the GI Bill, by making sure that veterans have access to quality educational and training programs. Established by Congress as state agencies, funded by a federal contract administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs, they have served as a bridge between the federal government and local education institutions, ensuring that veterans have access to the educational and training opportunities they deserve.

As we consider targeted educational investments such as the GI Bill, we must not lose sight of the important historical focus of the GI Bill which is to provide quality education and training that results in jobs. Recent moves to allow veterans to use their GI Bill dollars for business startup grants and unaccredited on-line certificate training could result in harming the integrity and sustainability of the GI Bill.

Likewise, when we consider long-term changes, and programs such as VAS Vet Success on Campus, we must be mindful that these programs mainly serve large populations of veterans found on large universities or colleges. It might be time to seek ways to serve veterans on a broader scope, such as increasing the certification fees paid to approved institutions by VA and mandating that these fees only be used to provide services for veterans, such as better equipping resource centers or providing training for school officials on campus serving veterans populations.

The strong interest displayed by the standing room-only audience at the SVA Town Hall presentation bode well for the continued growth and viability of the GI Bill. As more veterans become educated about and involved in education possibilities, we must continue to work together with our VA and VA partners to ensure that veterans are given the best schools to help them meet their educational and training goals.

In the area of protecting the GI Bill, this year NASAA is working with its VA and VSO partners to determine how approval requirements can be enhanced and improved. Examples include requiring approved institutions to state clearly and up-front in their published materials their accreditation or lack thereof. And VA and the VA should continue to broaden their oversight of recruiting and enrollment policies and procedures.

As we consider targeted educational investments such as increasing benefits for STEM degrees, we should consider the impact of such policies on other fields. Even as we properly increase benefits for STEM degrees, we should consider the impact of such policies on other fields. We must not decrease access or the available horizon to veteran educational possibilities. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the important historical focus of the GI Bill which is to provide quality education and training that results in jobs.

The actions of Bad Actors in the education arena must be curtailed at every opportunity. All panel members agree that a powerful weapon in this struggle is education itself, providing to veteran students adequate and accurate information so they can make informed decisions about the best schools to help them meet their educational and training goals (VA Comparison Tool) and an opportunity to report incidents of misbehavior to appropriate authorities (VA Complaint System). These newly designed protections, designed by the VA with input from NASAA and VSOs, have gone far to improve matters but more needs to be done.

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Cited Sources


Of the 89 the Town Hall participants, only 37 indicated that they were veteran students.

[6] The live poll did not capture the proportion of student veterans who believed graduation rates were the most important indicator.


