INTRODUCTION

The relationship between a student and a college or university can be complicated. This may be especially true for non-traditional students who bring with them atypical situations, such as transferring schools and transcript evaluations. While most student veterans and military connected students are considered non-traditional students, there is one trait that is unique to them alone—their connection to and service in the military.

Military service provides student veterans with both potential benefits and barriers to their academic careers, academic performance, and completion. The potential of awarding credit for military training is a possible benefit to the student veteran.

However, potential barriers could include unexpected changes to military orders or deployments, resulting in unplanned interruptions to their enrollment due to academic withdrawals or leaves of absence.

Much of the available research on student veteran transition focuses on the emotional and academic adjustment of veterans to a university setting, neglecting items such as awarding credits for military training and the effects of military connected interruptions in enrollment. This brief highlights some of these neglected areas and examines more common situations student veterans share with traditional and non-traditional students, such as GPA and transferring schools.
REVIEW

Academic Credits: Military Training and GPA

Academic credits are important to every college student whose goal is to earn a degree. They help measure students’ progress towards their degree and, along with Grade Point Average (GPA), measures academic success. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is the awarding of academic credit for activity done outside of the university or college setting, such as employment or military training. Much discussion continues as to the amount of credits schools should award and in what areas (subject specific versus electives), but much of the related data on the subject offers mixed results.

A 2012 report that surveyed and conducted focus groups of student veterans, found that of the close to 57 percent of survey respondents who reported attempting to transfer military credits to academic credits, only 47 percent of that group were satisfied with the result (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2012). In addition, the average number of credits they transferred was 18 units of credit. The report also found that school type and sector influenced the amount of academic credits awarded for military training. Those attending private institutions, on average, described more satisfaction with the credit transfer process than those attending public institutions. In addition, the public four-year institutions the authors visited for the focus groups reported inconsistencies in credit transfer rules among academic departments. Furthermore, among focus group participants, two types of students reported relatively few concerns with the credit transfer process: graduate students, and undergraduate students who did not see their military work as relevant to their degree plans.

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(Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2012)

A separate study found that students who had previous experience with the military were more likely to receive some prior learning academic credit (67%) compared to students who did not have any previous experience with the military (40%). However, the author notes that the data on PLA of student veterans and military connected students came from two
institutions whose rates for PLA were higher for all students compared to the average and should not be considered representative (Klein-Collins, 2010). The report also found mixed results when examining the effect PLA had on completion and progress. This may have been due to the small sample size and other factors connected to the individual students not measured in the study.

**Academic Performance**

Academic performance is closely connected to academic progress, specifically GPA. When the original GI Bill was introduced in 1944, several college and university presidents feared that enrolling student veterans would lower academic standards (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). These fears were short-lived as many college and university presidents who were initially apprehensive of enrolling student veterans in 1944 were praising student veterans as smart, dedicated students who contributed to their schools in diverse ways in 1945.

Studies examining today’s student veterans’ academic performance show student veterans earning high marks in their studies. Lemos, Jr and Lumandue (2013) found the average GPA for their sample of veterans was 3.43. This is on the cusp between a “B” and an “A” grade (Princeton Review, 2016). Another study at the University of California with a larger student veteran sample size found the average grade of a sample of student veterans lower, 3.03, but still in the “B” grade range (Durdella & Kim, 2012). However, to date, no study has examined student veterans’ academic performance on a large scale across several institutional levels or sectors. This limits the ability to generalize earlier research to a larger population.

Later this year, SVA’s National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) will shed new light on these areas.

**School Transfers**

Student transfers of credit occur when students attend more than one institution either sequentially or concurrently. A study by the National Center for Education Sciences examining post-secondary transcripts from a 2004 cohort found 35 percent of first-time undergraduate students transferred or co-enrolled at least once during the first six-year period of the study (Simone, 2014). A more detailed exploration of their findings
found that 21 percent transferred once and 11 percent transferred more than once. Over half of the transfers (56%) were from a 2-year college, with 37.2 percent of the total transfers being from a 2-year to a 4-year institution. A more recent study by the National Student Clearinghouse of a larger sample of post-secondary students starting college in 2008 found a transfer rate of 37.2 percent during the first six-year period (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). Of this group that transferred schools, 45 percent changed schools more than once.

Service members tend to be a highly transient group, moving to other locations or bases as needed. These moves are often unexpected and with little input by the service members. While not uncommon for college students to transfer schools during their academic careers, student veterans may have higher transfer rates and might be more likely to graduate from a different school than the one they started at, especially if they initially enrolled while still on active duty. However, it is largely unknown how many student veterans have transferred schools as identifying and tracking student veterans’ enrollment remains difficult.

**Military Connected Interruptions in Enrollment**

Having to withdraw or take a leave of absence from college is not unheard of for college students. However, unique to student veterans and military-connected students are withdrawing or needing a leave of absence due to a military deployment or change in duty orders. Deployments resulting in class withdrawals or leaves of absence, potentially more common among service members connected to reserve or National Guard units, are unplanned and can occur at any time during the academic term. This may lead to the loss of progress accumulated during the term, and they may have to wait until the next term after their deployment is over to progress towards their degree. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) explored the affects leaves of absence and re-enrollment difficulties have on student veterans and military connected students. Their sample reported that university infrastructure or policies complicated re-enrollment after deployment. While minor annoyances, such as closed e-mail accounts and access to facilities could be readily addressed and overcome, more serious problems such as cancellation of financial aid or disruptions to sequential courses, especially infrequently offered courses, required
more time to address and intervention by others on their behalf. Although this research helped provide information on the potential impact of military-connected-interruptions, there is little data available on the frequency of these interruptions and the length of these interruptions.

**SVA 2015 Census**

The SVA 2015 Census provides greater context and information to academic credits awarded for military training, academic performance measured by GPA, transfers, and leaves of absence. This brief provides data from student veterans and military connected students focusing on these topics. It is expected that credits awarded for military training will be low, but GPAs will be high. It is also expected that the sample will report high percentages of transfers and military connected leaves of absence.

**METHODOLOGY**

A more detailed methodology of the SVA 2015 Census is detailed in an earlier research brief (Cate & Davis, 2016). In summary, data was collected through the use of an online web survey. Participants were primarily selected through a database of Student Veterans of America chapter leaders (President, Vice President, etc.), chapter advisors, on-campus veteran center directors, and school VA certifying officials as well as through established SVA social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The survey was launched October 13, 2015 and closed on October 31, 2015 with reminder emails sent out at regular intervals.

A listwise method of data analysis was used to clean the data. Entire cases were deleted when essential data to verify student veteran status (e.g. branch of service, school rank, etc.) were missing. In addition, cases where conflicting or improbable...
responses, such as a 23 year old serving in the Korean War, were also removed from the sample and all analyses. The result was a sample size of 1,352 individuals, producing a margin of error of approximately 2.8% using Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill population data (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

**Academic Credits: Military Training and GPA**

Institutions of higher education have the option to award academic credit for student veterans’ and military connected students’ military training. While several guidelines have been established for decades, such as the American Council on Education (ACE) Military Guide (American Council on Education, 2016), awarding credit for military training varies based on school and academic department. To obtain a better understanding of the amount of credits schools award for military training, SVA 2015 Census asked respondents to report the number of academic credits their school awarded them from their military training.

With few exceptions, Grade Point Average (GPA) is a standardized measure of student academic performance. SVA 2015 Census asked respondents to report their cumulative GPA as part of the survey to gain insight into student veterans’ academic performance. The question was not mandatory and the respondent could skip the question if they desired. Summary statistics for both credits awarded for military training and GPA are reported and discussed.

**School Transfers**

SVA 2015 Census asked respondents not only if they transferred from one college to another, but reasons for their transfer. Respondents were asked to choose reasons for their transfer from a list that included personal, academic, and military-related reasons. This list was developed from conversations, interviews, and informal focus groups of student veterans held over several years with the researcher as well as other reports on college student transfers. The question was limited to respondents who reported an undergraduate school rank (freshman, sophomore, etc.) as graduate students are likely to attend a different school from their undergrad and may consider that a transfer of schools instead of a new enrollment in a different degree program. It should be noted that the specific question that captured the reasons for student veterans was a multiple response allowing the respondent to fully describe the reasons and motivations.
for transferring. This also means that the reported percentages may sum over 100 percent.

**Military Connected Interruptions in Enrollment**

SVA 2015 Census asked respondents if they ever had to withdraw from classes or take a leave of absence due to military service. For respondents that reported a withdrawal from classes due to military service, a follow-up question asked them how many months from their exit from school to their reenrollment for up to the first four withdrawals or leave of absences.

**RESULTS**

For detailed demographic data of this sample please refer back to the earlier brief in this series (Cate & Davis, 2016). In summary, 80.4 percent of the sample was over the age of 25, and over one-quarter (26.94%) reported being female. A minority (30.19%) of the sample reported being single and never married. A majority (70.86%) of the respondents reported their race/ethnicity as “White/Caucasian.”

**Academic Credits: Military Training and GPA**

As expected there was a wide range of responses to the amount of academic credits awarded by colleges and universities for military training (see Table 1). SVA 2015 Census found 483 (35.72%) respondents reported receiving at least one academic credit for their military training. The average number of academic credits awarded for military training for the sample was 11.23, nearly an entire term of credits. However, due to the wide range of responses and the potential effect of outliers on both ends of the range, the median is more appropriate to measure and evaluate the number of academic credits awarded. Using the median to measure the number of credits awarded, a significant drop is seen from 11.23 to 3.0 credits, or from a nearly complete term of credits to a single class of credits awarded for military training. In addition, the most frequent response was zero credits awarded to the student veteran by their school for military training.
The average reported GPA of the sample at 3.35, which translates to a “B+” grade (Princeton Review, 2016). The most frequent reported GPA was 3.00, translating to a “B” grade. While this is positive news for much of the student veteran population, not all student veterans reported above average grades. The minimum reported GPA was 1.5 which is below what most schools would consider good academic standing—a GPA of 2.0 or above. In addition, about five percent of the sample reported having GPAs in danger of dropping below a 2.0 GPA.

School Transfers

Nearly three out of five (58.21%) undergraduate respondents reported transferring to their current school from another school. The majority (72.67%) of the sample who reported a transfer were upperclassmen, Juniors or Seniors (see Table 2). This correlates with the most frequent reason for transferring (see Table 3) which was completion of requirements to transfer to a 4-year college or university to continue their education (39.68%). Other frequent reasons for transferring were personal reasons (27.51%), changed major or degree program (22.93%), and relocation due to military assignment (18.52%).

Nearly three out of five (58.21%) undergraduate respondents reported transferring to their current school from another school.
Military Connected Interruptions in Enrollment

Approximately one-in-five (19.51%) of the respondents reported having to withdraw from classes or take a leave of absence due to their military deployment or duty orders (see Table 4). The majority of respondents reported one or two military connected academic withdrawals or leaves of absence (see Table 3). To limit the effect of potential outliers, the median length of time is reported for the withdrawal or leave of absence as well as the number of respondents for each break in enrollment. If veterans have higher transfer rates, it is more important for them to make sure the credits they are earning will be transferrable to another institution.

The median number of months for each of the breaks in enrollment were 12 or 13 months, suggesting that for each break in enrollment due to military service generates a calendar year postponement of academic progress.

Table 1: Summary Statistics for Awarded Credits for Military Training and Cumulative GPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Credits¹</th>
<th>GPA²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>11.23</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N¹ = 884  
N² = 820
**Table 2: Reported Transfers to a Different College by Class Rank**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>7.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>30.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>42.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 567

**Table 3: Respondents’ Reported Reasons for Transferring Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed requirements to transfer to a 4-year college or university</td>
<td>39.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocated due to personal reasons</td>
<td>27.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed major or degree program</td>
<td>22.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocated due to military assignment</td>
<td>18.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to attend a more veteran friendly school</td>
<td>8.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not receiving the classes that I needed for my major</td>
<td>7.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not like the campus environment</td>
<td>5.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not receiving the on-campus services that I needed</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 567

**Table 4: Median Number of Months from Start of Leave of Absence to Re-Enrollment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Reported Break</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Reported Break</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Reported Break</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Reported Break</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The results from SVA 2015 Census survey confirms previous research findings and also provides insight into new areas of student veterans’ school experiences. SVA 2015 Census found a strong majority of student veterans earn above average GPAs, mostly in the “B” to “B+” grade range. This is similar to previous research that examined student veteran academic performance (Lemos, Jr & Lumandue, 2013; Durdella & Kim, 2012). This is positive news for stakeholders, policy makers, and the public as many student veterans use the GI Bill to pay for their college education, and these groups have evidence that student veterans are taking their studies seriously by earning high grades.

A slight discrepancy from previous research is the number of academic credits awarded to student veterans for their military service. Previous research found a higher rate of academic credits awarded to student veterans for military training as well as greater number of credits student veterans are currently taking compared to the SVA 2015 Census. This may be due to the different methodologies the different surveys deployed. The SVA 2015 Census used all responses, instead of focusing on only those that received credits, in its analysis, providing a measure for the entire sample and focusing on the median result to limit the influence of outliers on both sides of the range. The authors believe this method provides a more accurate measure of the amount and number of military credits awarded to student veterans for their military training.

It should be noted that the decision to award academic credits, regardless of their source—military versus non-military training, lies in the school’s academic senate and faculty, not the registrar or student affairs. Faculty members, not staff, review transfer transcripts and decide if credit should be awarded and how many credits. Much criticism in this area is often misplaced to ACE, who only provides guidelines and recommendations, not directives, and/or the registrar who has the duty of reporting back to the student veteran what the faculty members decided. Additionally, there may be inconsistencies between faculty members or across departments. Credit transfers are often determined after enrollment, and this may be a factor in college or university selection by the student.
As expected, student veterans in the SVA 2015 Census reported higher levels of transfers between schools compared to both the Department of Education and the National Student Clearinghouse data on civilians who never served (58% vs 35% vs 37%, respectively). The transfer rate from a 2-year to a 4-year school in the SVA 2015 Census was comparable to the Department of Education findings (39.7% to 37.2%). The discrepancy between the overall transfer rate (58.21%) and the 2-year to 4-year transfer rate (39.7%) in the SVA 2015 Census supports the theory that during their time in military service, student veterans are transient and a majority of them transfer schools at least once in their academic careers.

Since little data is publicly available on military interruptions of college enrollments for student veterans and military-connected-students, it is difficult to compare the SVA 2015 Census results, but some conclusions can be drawn from these findings. When student veterans or military connected students need to withdraw or take a leave of absence from school, they can plan on that break to be approximately 12 to 13 months. In addition, colleges and universities should plan and expect these students to re-enroll and help reduce barriers in that process. Policy and process to credit courses back to the deployed students or waive withdrawal deadlines could help with reasonable academic process assessments, eligibility length, and minimize the academic impact, though the lost time to degree completion would remain.

**CLOSING**

**Takeaway: The majority of student veterans will transfer at least once.** It is important for student veterans and military connected students to communicate their unique situations to their schools, so that the schools can best support them and update policies and procedures as needed.

As with previous findings of the SVA 2015 Census, student veterans add to the diversity at colleges and universities. In this brief, the diversity did not come from the student veteran demographics, but from the varied paths their college and university enrollment and academic progress takes. Their enrollment may be impacted by their military duties causing breaks or interruptions in their enrollment. While a majority of traditional students will remain at one school through their entire baccalaureate career, the reverse is true for student veterans. A majority of them will transfer at least once. They also bring with them prior learning experiences via their military training that may be applied to their college coursework, at the discretion of the school’s faculty. It is important for
student veterans and military connected students to communicate their unique situations to their schools, so that the schools can best support them, update policies and procedures as needed, and provide timely, and accurate guidance on credit.

REFERENCES


