

New Education Benefits for Veterans

What Works and What Doesn't

Phil O'Donnell

As the director of Veteran Services here at Anoka-Ramsey Community College, I have the privilege of working with veterans who want to pursue a college education. My job changed a lot last summer when the new GI Bill (also called Chapter 33) went into effect. All of a sudden, veterans and even their family members were lining up to apply for this new benefit that helped pay for their tuition and gave them money for housing and books.

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(See the Box on this page for more information about the new GI Bill.)

The Veterans' Administration (VA) seems to be truly attempting to make Chapter 33 a

more universal benefit program that will include National Guardsmen, reservists, and even dependents of veterans. The program is just getting started, but I have already seen how it can help some people and how it runs the risk of leaving others behind.

One summer afternoon, in late July after the VA had given the all-clear to veterans to begin applying for Chapter 33, a rather nervous-looking

dad and daughter peeked into my office door and asked to see me. Kevin was a twenty-year veteran of the Air Force and had a little over a year to go until retirement. His daughter, nineteen year

What is the GI Bill?



The new GI Bill, also known as Chapter 33, went into effect on 8-1-09. It offers these main benefits:

- The Veterans' Administration (VA) will pay up to 100% of veterans' tuition at any college. The amount that the VA will pay depends on various factors, including how long the veteran served. Also, the VA will not pay more than the most expensive *public* institution in the state.
- Veterans may also collect a housing allowance based on the zip code of the *college*.
- The VA also provides money for books and supplies at a rate of \$41.67 per credit hour up to \$1000.00 per academic year.
- Veterans can use the "housing allowance" and "books and supplies stipend" in any way they want.
- The Department of Defense and the VA are offering incentives for reenlistments by making the benefit program available to veterans' spouses and dependent children.

Find out more about the GI Bill at <www.military.com/money-for-school/gi-bill/new-gi-bill-overview>.



old Beth, was interested in beginning her college career here at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. Kevin asked me if I knew anything about the new GI Bill and if it was true that he could “donate” his

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education benefit entitlement to Beth.

I told him that that was my understanding, but that they would be my guinea pigs, as I

had not tried to do that for anybody thus far. Surprisingly, we proceeded through the VA application with very little trouble.

I mentioned to him that he could divide his benefit up between his other two dependent children if he wished. He said that he had considered that, but Beth was the “student” in his family and the others were not interested. Kevin told me how proud he was to be able to provide his deserving daughter with this legacy.

On another occasion a young woman, Sara, again an Air Force veteran of four years active duty, all post-9-11 service, came to discuss the new program with me. Sara had completed her two year program here with a straight “A” average and was considering whether to transfer to the new GI Bill and how it may impact her decision on where to complete her four year degree.

I pointed out the differences in dollar amounts between Chapter 30 (an older GI Bill) and Chapter 33 (the new GI Bill) and that it was certainly to her benefit to take advantage of the new program. We then talked about her choices for four year college. She had narrowed it down to two. Both were excel-

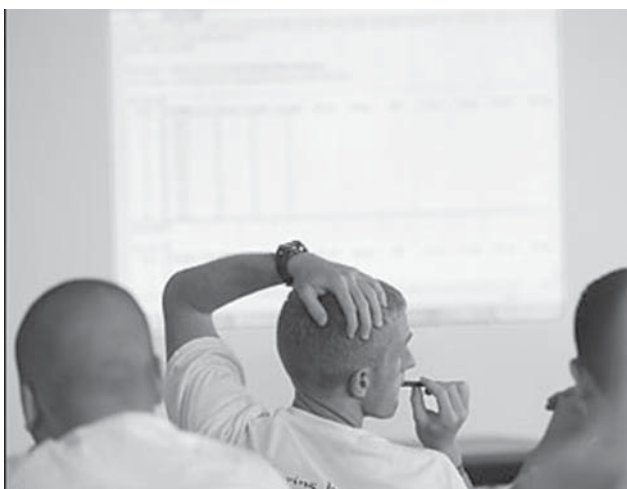
lent universities, but the cost-of-living difference between the two areas resulted in an astonishing \$500.00 per month difference in the amount of her potential housing allowance! I believe Sara had made up her mind on both questions by the time she left my office.

I offer these two examples to show that the Veterans’ Administration is doing its best to make this the best education benefit program ever. The problem is, as of this writing (December 2009), neither Kevin’s daughter nor Sara have received their tuition payments. The VA is faced with the inevitable snarls of federal red-tape, and many veterans are at risk of being penalized for not paying tuition. If the bugs can be worked out in a timely fashion and we do not lose potential veteran-students in the process, I have high hopes for the New GI Bill.

How to Create a Vet-Friendly Campus

So how can we help? As in the case of most non-traditional student populations, veteran-students make up a small but vocal percentage of the student body. Perhaps one unique trait for veteran-students is that word of mouth spreads very quickly. Veterans stay in touch. Sometimes that can be simply because lifetime friendships are maintained. In other cases, military obligations remain and units stay intact.

If your campus is considered “vet-friendly” the military community will know. Naturally, the opposite is true. Establishing a campus as “vet-friendly” involves two basic concepts. The first is to designate a place where veterans may congregate. This needs to be a welcoming atmosphere where veterans may drop in to study, relax, take a nap, or simply to discuss with fellow veterans the



issues only they understand. In a word, establish “community.”

The second thing is to have at least one person on staff who has knowledge of and commitment to veterans’ problems. This person must be capable of providing resource availability to veteran-students in need of help. Examples of excellent resources include locations of Vet Centers where professionals are on staff to help with mental health issues, primarily PTSD; VA Medical Centers, particularly, the OEF/OIF Programs; county veteran service officers; service organizations such as VFW, American legion, DAV, or Military Order of the Purple Heart.

When veterans can take advantage of the new GI Bill and the campuses involved are committed to retaining these men and women as successful students, everyone benefits.

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A key support for veterans transitioning back to college is Veterans Upward Bound, a federally funded pre-collegiate program which is free for qualified veterans. The program has 35 plus years experience in transitioning veterans back to academics. For more information, visit the national website at <<http://navub.org>>. Pictured above is the Veterans Upward Bound UMass Graduating class, Fall 2009. Marybeth O'Sullivan, the author of the article on PTSD on p. 25 of this issue, is on the end, 2nd row.

Are There Problems with the New GI Bill?



The GI Bill is an important benefit for veterans and their families. But it is not accessible to everyone. One challenge is completing all the paperwork and knowing how to navigate the enormous bureaucracy of the Veterans’ Administration. Some colleges have someone on staff who is knowledgeable about veterans’ affairs, but many do not. When colleges do not support students who are veterans, many of those veterans have a hard time getting access to benefits.

Many veterans face difficult issues that make it hard for them to stay in school. They might suffer from PTSD* or have physical injuries that need attention. Traumatic Brain injury (TBI) can result in cognitive deficits that inhibit learning, including memory loss, lack of concentration, and personality changes. In addition, veterans might need more time to reconnect with their families.

After serving in the military, they might not be accustomed to the college environment. Some of them might be redeployed, meaning the military could call them to go back to Iraq or Afghanistan. With all these distractions and challenges, it can be hard to stay in school. If a veteran is using the GI Bill to go to school, and he or she has to take a semester off or has to leave school for any reason, the veteran will then have to pay back all the money that the VA spent on tuition and housing.

* For more on PTSD, see pp. 22 and 25-27.