

Supporting Military Veteran Students: **Early Lessons From Kohlberg Prize Recipients**

The Post-9/11 GI Bill of 2008 has increased postsecondary education participation rates of military service members and veterans.¹ Such participation is critical for military-connected individuals as they transition to civilian life. Postsecondary education enables military-connected individuals to upgrade their existing skills, gain new skills, or earn a credential that helps translate their skills into nonmilitary occupations. However, federal statistics indicate that while the Post-9/11 GI Bill has increased higher education participation rates overall, a higher percentage of veterans have entered for-profit colleges than have entered public institutions. In 2007–2008, 14 percent of veterans enrolled in college were at for-profit institutions, and 42 percent were at community colleges; by 2011–2012, these proportions had shifted to 24 percent and 37 percent, respectively.²

Although some private for-profit colleges provide excellent career-focused education in a format and location convenient for nontraditional students such as veterans, the sector as a whole has come under increasing criticism for low job-placement rates, misleading advertising, and misuse of federal funds.³ The sector has also come under scrutiny for misuse of federal Post-9/11 GI Bill funds.⁴

In contrast, community colleges are low-cost, convenient alternatives to private colleges. These local, publicly funded, open-access institutions are a good deal financially for veterans. Although the Post-9/11 GI Bill places a cap on tuition coverage for private universities, it covers the cost of public universities and community colleges in full.⁵ In addition, community colleges are at the vanguard of initiatives such as competency-based education that could help veterans complete a certificate or degree faster (in part by enabling them to receive academic credit for their military training), which in turn could help them connect to the labor market more quickly.⁶ Furthermore, community colleges are designed to meet the academic and non-academic needs of nontraditional students, offering flexible schedules, remedial or developmental education, and an array of support services.

Thus, the increase in private college enrollment and decrease in community college enrollment among military veterans creates challenges for public policy (Are federal funds being used most effectively?) as well for individual veterans (Are military veterans getting the most out of their education benefits?). To address these intertwined challenges, the Kisco Foundation established

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the Kohlberg Prize, a competitive grant awarded in 2015 and 2016 aimed at making community colleges more welcoming and better able to meet the needs of veteran students. Prize recipients were provided with financial support to enhance their veteran services in order to (a) better serve those veterans already enrolled, (b) encourage new veteran students to enroll, and (c) provide a model for other community colleges on how best to support military veterans. Moreover, the experiences of the prizewinners could illuminate the policy challenges faced by colleges with large proportions of military veteran students, thus providing policymakers with suggestions for improved federal and state support. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, was engaged as a knowledge-development and strategic-assistance partner in this endeavor.

A [short CCRC review](#) previously reported on the 2015 prize recipients' perceptions of the challenges facing military veteran students and their plans to address those challenges.⁷ In particular, these colleges—Chabot College (in Hayward, California), Las Positas College (in Livermore, California), Suffolk County Community College (in Selden, New York), the Community College of Baltimore County (in Baltimore, Maryland), and Chemeketa Community College (in Salem, Oregon)—noted the need to provide holistic support to military veterans that goes beyond benefits compliance to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of veterans while reducing the complexity of service delivery via a one-stop model.

The current piece examines the early experiences of the 2015 prizewinners. Based on an analysis of narrative reports submitted after their first semester of planning enhanced veteran services, we identify challenges to creating one-stop centers and other enhanced services for military veteran students. We also consider the relationship between efforts to create veteran-specific services and spaces and the broader community college reform trend of streamlining and integrating services across the entire college. Finally, we provide suggestions for practitioners and policymakers looking to improve supports for student veterans.

Creating a One-Stop Veterans Center

The prizewinners' narratives confirmed their initial sense that the needs of military veteran students would be well met by a single location on the community college campus that serves multiple needs and provides a variety of services. CCRC's earlier piece on this topic identified four types of services provided by community colleges for military veterans: benefits-focused services, academic policies and practices, nonacademic services, and career services.⁸

The Kohlberg Prize winners worked to refine these service types as part of their grant activities. For example, Las Positas College hired part-time benefits assistants to streamline its benefits process, and both the Community College of Baltimore County and Suffolk County Community College developed College 101 courses or first-year seminars targeted toward military veteran students.

But the bulk of the colleges' efforts focused on building out additional and better-coordinated services in order to create more holistic support for their military veteran students. In doing so, they sought to create a single space or point of contact to provide academic, peer, career, and nonacademic services. Their intent was to meet all veteran students where they are and provide the services they need when they need them.

In other words, military veteran students would not need to visit one office to receive their benefits, another to register for classes, and a third to find nonacademic support or tutoring. Rather,

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they could come to a single location and receive all of these things. Chemeketa Community College described this one-stop approach as a way to consolidate resources and help military veterans “see the path” from admission to completion.

The Kohlberg Prize winners all took slightly different approaches to their one-stop centers, in keeping with their colleges’ cultures, existing resources, and capacities. Las Positas Community College, for example, already had a veterans center but added staff and services to enhance its ability to provide comprehensive support for its most at-risk military veteran students. Suffolk County Community College created a veterans center on each of its three campuses, working to ensure that military veteran students were provided a single point of contact from college entry onward. This individual assists students with acclimatization to the college culture, benefits, academic planning, access to supplemental resources, and information sharing.

Chabot College developed an entirely new center for veteran students that included study space, a lounge, a computer lab with free printing services, and even free coffee and snacks. Housed in the center are benefits specialists, academic advisors, and mental health specialists.⁹ A Veterans Affairs career counselor is also colocated in the center. A coordinator and student employees funded through veterans’ work-study also work at the center in order to manage day-to-day operations.

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Challenges to Implementing a One-Stop Veterans Center

Prizewinners expressed continued enthusiasm for the one-stop concept, providing strong anecdotal evidence that military veteran students appreciate, use, and benefit from streamlined and veteran-focused services. However, their narratives also highlighted challenges to making one-stop centers a reality. We identified four areas that required particular effort for colleges to provide more holistic services for their military veteran students.

Logistics

The mere logistics of developing a one-stop center are complicated. Many community colleges are space-starved, and identifying a room of adequate size in an amenable location is not always easy. At least one college needed to dislocate another office in order to build out its veterans center; such a move is difficult to execute without causing tension between departments. In addition, creating a space that is functional and welcoming and that meets the needs of veterans (including ensuring broad accessibility) requires coordination across many offices within a college.

Outreach to Student Veterans

The presence of a veterans center does not guarantee that students will use it. College personnel spent substantial time developing outreach and communications strategies in order to recruit new military veteran students and to connect with currently enrolled student veterans. These strategies focused on ensuring that military veterans knew about the veterans centers and on helping them learn about other services available on campus. In addition, prizewinners spent time developing targeted outreach strategies to engage specific groups of student veterans, most notably female veterans. For example, Chabot College made a point of including female veterans in its veterans center staff, and of prominently featuring female veterans in a promotional video about the center.

Culture Change

Prizewinners indicated that it is critical to communicate about the centers—and about military veteran students in general—to those outside of the military-connected community, including faculty, other students, and residents of the local community. By doing so, the colleges intended both to increase awareness about available services for military veterans and to create a more welcoming college culture by increasing sensitivity toward the issues faced by military-connected students. Prizewinners used a range of strategies to inform their broad college communities about veterans' issues and services, including videos, radio shows, newsletters, and staff training. These efforts took substantial time on the part of veterans center staff, which meant that they had less time to devote to other activities, such as program coordination or direct work with students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Colleges expressed concerns that their systems for identifying military veteran students were inadequate. For example, identifying students based on their benefit use omits all students who, for a variety of reasons, may not be using military benefits to pay for school but still are military-connected. It also omits applicants or potential students—those for whom targeted outreach may be most important. Without adequate data, colleges are unable to reach out to students who may benefit from their services; they are also unable to adequately survey students about the types of services they need, their opinions about available services or campus climate, or their suggestions to improve offerings. To improve their ability to identify military veteran students, the Community College of Baltimore County and Suffolk County Community College worked with various college departments, including information technology and enrollment services, to devise new systems for students to report their military status and to share this information across the services provided at their institutions.

The Relationship Between Integrated and Targeted Services

Community colleges around the country are deeply engaged in institutional reform, rethinking how they are organized and how they deliver services. A guiding principle of these reforms is a desire to streamline curricula and programs, thereby reducing the complexity faced by *all* community college students, not just military veteran students. These reforms include guided pathways reforms, in which curricular offerings are redesigned to be more streamlined, coherent, and connected to the labor market in order to help students get on and stay on track to graduation; advising and counseling reforms that ensure that students receive sustained, holistic, and personalized academic and nonacademic support; developmental education reforms that reduce the time students spend in noncredit remedial coursework; and accelerated time-to-degree approaches, including compressed semesters and credit for prior learning.

These reforms address many of the same issues identified by Kohlberg Prize winners as important for supporting military veteran students. The guided pathways approach may be particularly useful for veterans because it emphasizes advising and assistance so that students understand the implications of their academic choices from the start for both their education and their employment goals—which is critical for students using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, who must enroll in an approved program of study in order to qualify for these benefits. Yet the reforms Kohlberg Prize

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winners were implementing for their military veteran students were occurring parallel to but separate from these larger institutional reforms.

Kohlberg Prize winners have made a strong case for separate veteran-focused services. First, they have noted, and other CCRC research has found, that some institutional reforms are not designed with the needs of military veterans in mind. For example, program plans that are created through guided pathways reforms may get students to graduation but not meet the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' requirements for the use of GI Bill funding.

Second, the Kohlberg Prize winners have indicated that it is extremely important for veteran students to be served by professionals who know them and their unique situations, and to be around peers for whom military service is a familiar experience. Having a single location staffed by veteran-focused professionals is critical, especially for new students, who may be hesitant to even be on a college campus. Veteran-specific services help ensure that supports are tailored to students' needs and strengths, personalized for their goals, and delivered in an atmosphere where veteran students feel understood and valued.

On the other hand, integrating the two types of reforms could enable economies of scale, such as when an academic advising tool purchased for the college is used for benefits compliance. An integrated approach could also help ensure that a new form of fragmentation, between veteran services and everything else, is not created. And while veterans need support from a community of their peers, it is important that they also be able to engage with the broader community. There is a tension, then, between meeting the unique needs of veteran students and ensuring that veteran services do not exist in a vacuum.

As leading-edge colleges, the Kohlberg Prize winners have begun to think about ways to confront this challenge, by creating veteran-focused spaces that address military veteran students' need for belonging and understanding while leveraging and intersecting with broader institutional reforms. At the Community College of Baltimore County, for instance, a broader "pathways-to-completion" reform effort is being explicitly connected to veteran services. Resources for and about veterans are going to be integrated into other pathways resources via the college's Blackboard platform. The college is also using articulation agreements with partner colleges and experimenting with prior-learning assessment strategies for awarding credit for skills learned via military service. It is also experimenting with transcript supplements to share information about students' skills and work experience.

Chabot College is launching a degree-audit tool as part of an initiative to improve students' academic planning. The college will pilot the tool with its veterans center in order to evaluate (a) if it is useful for military veteran students and (b) if it is adequately accessible for students with physical and learning differences.

Both Las Positas College and Suffolk County Community College are working to develop strategies for using their veterans centers as gateways to broader college services. At Las Positas, center staff are working to make the center itself warm and welcoming; center staff can then help students engage with offices such as financial aid or college counseling. At Suffolk, college-wide professional development activities were leveraged to provide representatives from the registrar's office, financial aid office, counseling, and advising with information about military culture, the role of the veterans center, and veterans' benefits. This work connects the veterans center with other student services on campus and helps to ensure that veteran students receive accurate and sensitively provided information when they visit those offices.

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In their applications, the new group of prizewinners tended to focus more explicitly on connecting improved services for military veteran students with broader institutional reforms. Optimizing the relationship between these efforts is therefore on the mind of all Kohlberg Prize winners. We expect to explore this theme in more detail as the colleges progress with their work.

Implications

The experiences of the Kohlberg Prize winners so far have implications for policy and practice. It is challenging to provide military veteran students holistic supports that meet their needs *and* connect them to the many reforms happening elsewhere on their community college campuses. However, there are policy changes and practical strategies that could help colleges more easily make these connections.

- 1. Increase funding for military veteran services.** It takes a substantial amount of time for colleges to provide personalized advising, create a welcoming environment, and coordinate multiple services and types of activities. Critically, Kohlberg Prize winners indicated that developing the types of relationships necessary to effectively draw in and support military veteran students requires face-to-face interaction, which is, of course, staff-intensive and time-consuming. All current prizewinners indicated that they would be better able to serve veterans if they had the resources to hire more staff. This is a targeted request for resources, not a generic call for more money. The colleges have a clear idea of what types of goals additional staff could help them accomplish, such as providing more timely interventions for students, or developing additional relationship-building activities.
- 2. Create incentives to build connections between veteran services and broader college reform efforts.** Current college-wide reforms do not incentivize efforts to meet the needs of veteran students. For example, the leaders of guided pathways reforms have typically not been given the opportunity to learn about GI Bill requirements. Representatives from veterans centers and organizations are not always involved in college reform discussions or initiatives, which means that their needs and constraints (such as GI Bill compliance) are not incorporated into reforms, nor are the innovations already in place in veterans centers being built upon. Finding ways to engage institutional reformers with veteran services offices, and vice versa, could help staff in both roles understand how their work intersects, and incentivize efforts to connect broader institutional changes to the needs of veteran students.

In the absence of the above policy changes, the experiences of the Kohlberg Prize winners suggest some programmatic strategies for overcoming the challenges described in this brief.

- 1. Increase opportunities for veteran students to participate in work-study.** The prizewinners have used work-study funds in creative ways to supplement their veteran support services, and thereby establish a more welcoming atmosphere for veterans, while at the same time providing veteran students with funding and leadership opportunities. Research indicates that community college students have less access to federal work-study funds than students at other types of institutions.¹⁰ The federal Veterans Affairs work-study allowance is available to all students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and attending college at least three-quarters time, as long as colleges are able to find a work position for the student.¹¹ Thus, substantially more students could be employed via this funding stream than currently are.

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2. Work with policymakers to identify veterans' needs. To promote policy changes to benefit student veterans, Kohlberg Prize winners are engaging strategically with state and federal policymakers. Chabot and Las Positas Colleges participated in an advocacy day at their state capital, in which student veterans shared experiences and articulated their needs.

The Kohlberg Prize winners continue to implement their one-stop centers. We will report on their progress, as well as the progress of new grantees, in a future publication. In particular, we will examine how they overcome the challenges described here, and their efforts to connect veterans' centers to other reforms occurring on the grantees' campuses.

Endnotes

1. Using federal data, Radford, Bentz, Dekker, and Paslov (2016) found that there were nearly 200,000 more military undergraduate students in 2011–2012 than there were in 2007–2008. This represents an increase both in raw enrollment and in percentage of undergraduates (4.9% in 2011–2010 as compared to 4.5% in 2007–2008).
2. Radford et al. (2016).
3. Deming, Goldin, & Katz (2012); Thomason & Blumenstyk (2015); U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (2014).
4. U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions (2012, 2014).
5. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.-a).
6. Person, Goble, & Bruch (2014).
7. Karp & Klempin (2016).
8. Karp & Klempin (2016).
9. Not all of these individuals are available full-time.
10. Kelchen (2015).
11. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.-b).

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