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Linking Learning and Work

# Investing In Veterans: The Need for Career and Education Advising



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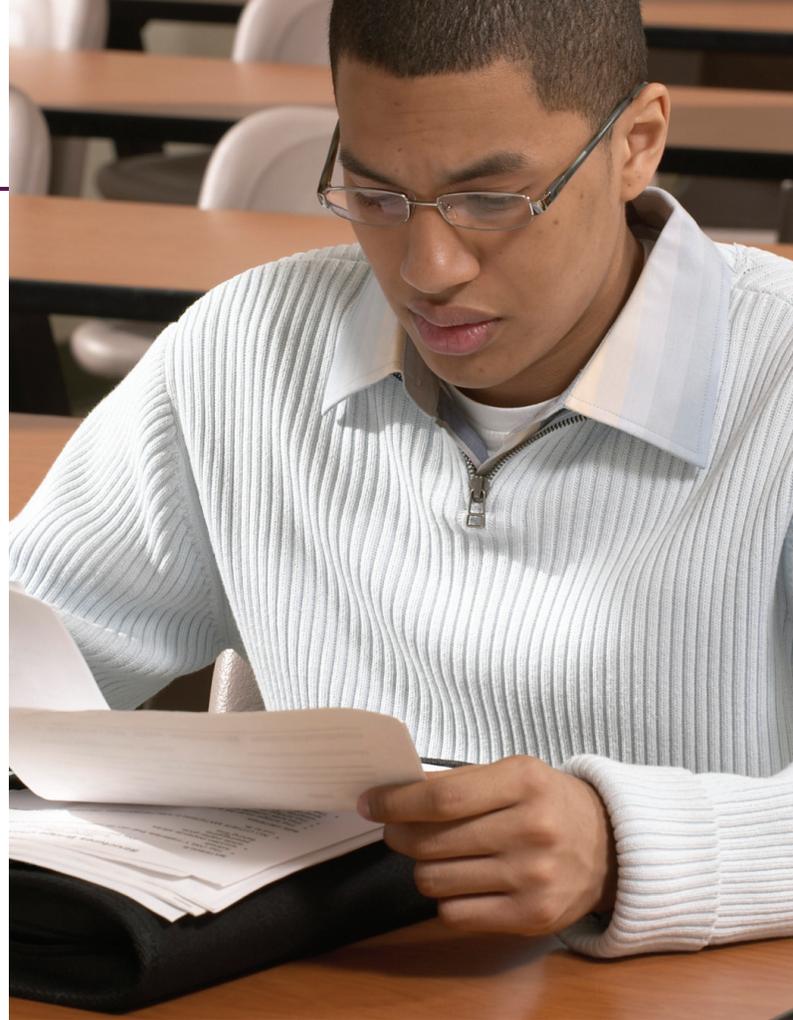


## Executive Summary

Federal education benefits for veterans represent a substantial investment—\$18 billion since 2009 under the Post-9/11 GI Bill—in the development of a skilled American workforce. Unfortunately, this investment does not always pay off because many veterans encounter serious obstacles as they attempt to navigate the difficult terrain of the higher education system and the labor market. Access to career and education advising programs would enable more veterans to successfully complete degrees and to pursue satisfying careers.

This paper surveys the career and education advising options currently available to veterans via military reintegration programs, web-based resources, non-profit service providers, and colleges and universities. **It concludes that additional career and education advising resources are needed—especially those available to veterans prior to enrollment in postsecondary institutions—to ensure that veterans are able to take full advantage of their federal education benefits.** The paper offers the following specific recommendations for helping veterans make informed choices about how to use their education benefits at each stage of the transition process:

- **Expanding the content of military reintegration programs**
- Providing Education Services Officers (ESOs) with the resources needed to advise servicemembers and veterans and to undertake collaborations with civilian organizations
- Reaching out to and educating military families before servicemembers are discharged
- **Evaluating and consolidating web-based resources and establishing a one-stop shop for active-duty military personnel and veterans**
- Ensuring that resources remain available to veterans following their separation from the military
- Developing the capacity of the Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP) to provide education and career advising



- **Developing community-based resources focused on helping veterans choose appropriate courses of study and postsecondary institutions**
- **Supporting a consortium model for educational institutions to provide unbiased career and education advising to veterans**
- **Providing training to on-campus veterans clubs on education benefits and career planning resources**

GI Bill education benefits can be a tremendous asset for veterans as they transition to civilian life. A comprehensive career and education advising program would minimize the obstacles encountered by veterans by offering guidance on identifying degree programs and career paths that fit with their skills and interests. This assistance will ensure that each veteran is getting the most bang for the education buck.

## Introduction

Federal education benefits have the potential to transform the lives of today's post-9/11 veterans, providing them with opportunities to pursue postsecondary education and rewarding careers, and to bolster the struggling American economy with an infusion of skilled and dedicated workers. As Secretary of Veterans Affairs General Eric Shinseki noted in a June 2011 speech: "The Post-9/11 GI Bill has every potential of transforming our country in globally significant ways." He told veterans: "As you pursue your degrees, you are preparing yourselves for leadership—of your communities and our country."

Veterans education benefits represent a substantial investment of federal funds. Since May 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has spent approximately \$18 billion under the Post-9/11 GI Bill to provide education benefits to nearly 720,000 veterans (Office of Senator Jim Webb, 2012). Estimates indicate that federal spending during the first 10 years of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits will reach \$90 billion (Sander, April 2012). Yet, despite this available financial support for veterans' education, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and others have raised concerns that far too many veterans do not earn degrees, earn degrees that do not always improve their employment prospects, or accrue substantial



student-loan debt (Harkin, 2010).

Part of the challenge is that veterans are asked to navigate two systems that are notoriously complex: the labor market and the world of higher education. Many need some professional guidance to make the right decisions about what, where, and how to study. This paper describes the navigational challenges facing veterans and the assistance available to them in making decisions about career goals and educational options. It then offers recommendations for new policies and programs that will provide the information and advice needed by veterans seeking to make the most of their education benefits.

## The Promise of the GI Bill

The GI Bill and other education benefits can provide a great opportunity for veterans and their families to build a foundation for long-term success in the civilian labor market. Following World War II, the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or GI Bill, made colleges and vocational programs accessible to millions of veterans, and the resulting educational attainment made it possible for veterans to secure rewarding jobs and climb the socioeconomic ladder (Mettler, 2005). Education is arguably even more important today, as those with degrees generally have lower unemployment

rates and greater earning power. In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Americans to achieve middle-class status without a college degree or vocational training, requirements that are unlikely to change anytime soon. Estimates suggest that, by 2018, 63% of jobs paying a minimum of \$35,000 per year will require some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

In addition to its positive impact on the lives of individuals, the Post-9/11 GI Bill can play a role in encouraging economic growth by helping to create a skilled workforce equipped to

respond to the new global economy. Just as the post-World War II GI Bill helped to create a skilled workforce and expanded the middle class (Smith & Bender, 2008; Greenberg, 1997), the Post-9/11 GI Bill can help meet the country's need for a skilled workforce as today's economy slowly recovers from a recession. Estimates indicate that the U.S. workforce is not keeping pace with the shift to a knowledge-based economy that has occurred in the U.S. since

the 1970s. By 2018, the shortage of workers with postsecondary degrees may reach three million (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). According to a 2010 survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are more than two million post-9/11 veterans in the United States, a number that is expected to increase over the next several years. With the help of their education benefits, those veterans could substantially reduce the shortfall of workers with postsecondary degrees.

## The Reality of the GI Bill for Veterans

The transition from military service to an institution of higher education, and from there to employment, is a challenging one for many veterans. **Veterans with little civilian career and higher education experience may exhaust their benefits on postsecondary programs that do not lead to jobs or that lead to career paths that are dead ends or a poor fit for an individual's skills and interests.** Many veterans have limited experience with the demands and possibilities of the civilian employment market and are unsure how to identify—let alone secure—civilian jobs suited to their skills and interests. As a result, veterans may struggle to navigate the career pathways that lead to sustainable and satisfying employment.

These navigational challenges are particularly acute in today's economy, in which careers are changing rapidly and employers seek a workforce that is not only educated and highly skilled but also flexible (Carnevale & Smith, 2011). Current job growth is centered in emerging industries and small companies; since 1980, most job growth has been in companies with fewer than 500 employees (Acs, Parsons, & Spenser, 2008). This specialized and rapidly changing employment landscape can be very difficult to navigate, particularly for veterans used to the highly structured environment of the military.

These struggles in the labor market are very real for veterans attempting to make a transition from the military to the civilian workplace, as unemployment data for veterans readily show. In 2011, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans was 12.1%, as compared to 8.7% for nonveterans. The situation was especially acute for male

veterans between the ages of 18 and 24, 29.1% of whom were unemployed, as compared to 17.6% of their nonveteran peers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). In 2011, the military spent nearly \$1 billion on unemployment benefits payments to veterans without jobs (Zoroya, 2012).

Veterans opting for education may be similarly at a loss, as the world of higher education, too, is changing quickly. Postsecondary options available to veterans range from vocational programs to liberal arts degrees and from professional certificates to online degree programs. **CAEL has learned from our own outreach to veterans and the people serving them that with so many available options, veterans without a clear plan can—and do—resort to choosing education programs based largely on convenience, the recommendation of a friend or relative, or even a strong marketing message, rather than assessing whether those programs will minimize veterans' student loan debts, are clearly aligned with veterans' career goals, and are likely to lead to long-term employability.**

Moreover, there are several additional challenges related to veterans' use of their education benefits:

- **GI Bill benefits have a time limit.** **Veterans cannot afford to take any "wrong turns" in their educational choices because they only have 36 months of GI Bill educational support.** If they make any mistakes—such as choosing the wrong course of study or the wrong educational institution—veterans may not be able to complete a degree during their allotted 36 months.

- **Veterans may choose to go to college because GI Bill benefits provide students with a living stipend that, for many, represents their best, or only, source of income.**

One job placement service provider told CAEL that the topic of educational benefits often comes up in conversations with veterans who are unemployed and struggling to find work. The question that the service provider poses to these veterans is: “Why aren’t you in school? If you go to school on the GI Bill then you at least will have your living expenses covered.” Pragmatically, this advice makes a great deal of sense, but it suggests that some veterans enroll in postsecondary institutions without clear educational goals. Their education benefits may be helping them survive financially in the short term, but their benefits may not be supporting educational goals that will ensure long-term career success.

- **Postsecondary institutions may unknowingly present barriers to student veterans.**

Student veterans face challenges that range from a lack of disability accommodations to difficulty interacting with a younger student body that presents a sharp contrast to someone transitioning from the demands of the military. Many veterans need help adapting to and navigating these environments.

- **Veterans—and their federal tuition dollars—are attractive recruiting targets for some institutions or vendors.** A 2010 report by Senator Tom Harkin raised particular concern about the growth in the number of veterans attending for-profit institutions. Revenues from VA educational programs at 18 for-profit education companies increased from \$26.3 million in 2006 to an expected \$285.8 million in 2010. Harkin’s report noted that students attending these institutions had an average dropout rate of 57% after the first year, and the costs of these programs are sometimes so high that veterans need to take out loans to cover what the GI Bill does not (Harkin, 2010). To be sure, certain for-profit institutions may



be an excellent and appropriate choice for many veterans, but the rapid growth in veteran enrollments at these institutions, from which so many students drop out or end up in debt, is alarming to many public officials and veterans advocates.

- **Transferability of military training and experience is an issue for many veterans.**

Veterans seeking civilian credentials face significant challenges in gaining recognition for their military skills and experience with respect to gaining civilian credentials (American Council on Education [ACE], 2010). Examples include servicemembers who drove vehicles in the military, but whose military licenses were not recognized by the state; although these veterans already have significant skills and knowledge, they are not always able to obtain recognition for them in the civilian world.

Many veterans also lack information about how they can use prior learning assessment options in order to earn academic credit for their military training or experience.

- **Veterans may be uncomfortable when there is no clear direction.** One of the biggest challenges for veterans transitioning to

civilian life is that they need to make many more decisions than they did in the military. One person CAEL interviewed said: “We train them to be a soldier. They are in a structured environment through training and deployment. Then they come back and have no structure, no plan... They are waiting for someone to tell them what to do.” Some veterans would welcome more structure, more guidance, and a set of clearly defined steps to employment and education.

A robust system of career and education advising may be the key to ensuring that investments in veterans education benefits pay off. Advising prepares veterans to make informed decisions about the educational and career paths and resources available to them and to become valuable members of the American workforce. Job counseling was a component of the very successful 1944 GI Bill (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). It is even more important today.

## Defining Career and Education Advising and Its Value

A comprehensive system of career and education advising for veterans would effectively overcome the challenges outlined above. Recent research makes clear the importance of this kind of advising in helping students, especially veterans and other adult and nontraditional students, define and achieve their goals.

Research has consistently shown that advising contributes to student success. For example, ACT has conducted four national studies examining best practices in student retention and has consistently found that academic advising improves retention rates (ACT, 2010). Another study found that some of the factors that contribute to high college drop-out rates include a lack of assistance in helping students understand financial aid programs, college courses, and the higher education system (Pusser, 2007). Jayne K. Drake (2011) explains that retention and graduation rates improve for students with access to advising services because “[a]dvisors teach students to negotiate the higher education maze, to make effective and thoughtful decisions about their futures, to adapt their life skills to the new academic world, and to cultivate the academic skills and knowledge needed to succeed.” A report by the Center for American Progress notes that, for adult students who are already in the workforce, advising improves postsecondary retention and graduation rates, ensures that individuals develop marketable skills, and guides individuals to satisfying and sustainable careers (Choitz, Soares, & Pleasants, 2010).

Veterans, in particular, stand to benefit from access to advisors (California Research Bureau, 2012). A pilot study of 200 student veterans, con-

ducted by the Pat Tillman Foundation and Operation College Promise, found that veterans with access to on-campus support systems and services, including advising, have higher grades and retention and graduation rates than their nonveteran peers (Lang & Powers, 2011).

CAEL’s experience in developing programs for adult and nontraditional students further illustrates the ways in which advising ensures a return on investments in education. CAEL has worked with tuition-paying employers since 1984 and has long encouraged these employers to offer career and education advising in order to make the most of their tuition dollars. Many employers are enthusiastic about offering advising as part of their programs because they want their employees to make good decisions about how to use their tuition benefit: choosing an education program that is tied to a relevant career pathway; using strategies like prior learning assessments to save time and money in earning a degree; and choosing an institution based on program quality, value, and suitability for the employee’s learning style and needs. Making good decisions in these areas can transform a tuition benefit into an employee investment, in much the way that the GI Bill represents an investment in the American workforce.

Based on CAEL’s knowledge of the challenges facing veterans in their use of education benefits, and our on-the-ground experience advising them, we believe that a robust career and education advising program for veterans must include:

- Skill and interest assessments
- Review of military training and experience to identify existing skills, knowledge, and com-

petencies that may be evaluated for college credit, or that suggest a related civilian career pathway

- Career exploration, including discussion of jobs in high demand, career pathways, and how educational programs can be chosen to prepare for a job on a student's chosen career pathway
- Exploration of past experience in education and the student's learning style, including what type of learner he or she is, preferred learning environment, and type of services needed
- Development of a career plan and related education or learning plan
- Discussion of military and other education benefits and which combination of benefits is right for that person
- Exploration of educational institutions offering programs in the chosen career pathway and the services and supports offered to veterans at these institutions
- Assistance in seeking additional information on and guidance from the educational institution of choice

## Current Availability of Career and Education Advising

As part of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation's Midwest Veterans Employment Initiative, which is intended to create a strong network of support for Chicago-area veterans in their transition to employment, CAEL has been exploring the types of career and education advising currently available to student veterans. We initially assumed that veterans did have access to some basic career guidance or assistance in selecting an educational institution. Many of the people we interviewed, however, said they had found that this kind of service is missing for most veterans and that it is a critical unmet need. This view was shared by current military representatives, public sector agencies, non-profits, postsecondary institutions, and veterans themselves.

In this section, we describe the various entities that play a role in helping veterans who are making the transition to civilian life and the extent to which they address the decision-making process of veterans as they choose careers and postsecondary institutions.

### Military Reintegration Programs

Each branch of the military offers a formal program for servicemembers who are preparing to be discharged. Typically these programs offer workshops and information sessions to servicemembers prior to discharge or in the early months following discharge. The topics

covered include veterans benefits, resume and job search assistance, financial management, and other issues related to transitioning to civilian life.

Some military Transition Assistance Programs (TAP), however, reportedly spend little time preparing veterans for the worlds of higher education or work. Several people we interviewed noted that considerable time is spent talking about how to present skills and accomplishments in a resume, and coaching servicemembers on how to dress for an interview. However, there is little discussion in these sessions about planning for a viable civilian career. Servicemembers receive virtually no information about how the higher education system functions and only minimal information about available education benefits. A veteran working for a higher education institution told us, "The student veteran gets no help in understanding the educational landscape. The vets often don't understand what a 200-level course is, or don't understand core vs. electives. There needs to be a required Higher Ed 101."

In addition, interviewees said that the servicemembers attending these sessions and workshops are often not ready to absorb the volume of information presented. They are mentally preoccupied with returning home to their families and cannot focus on the content of the sessions. One service provider, who is also

a veteran, said, “There is lots of information bombarding them when they aren’t ready to have that conversation.”

In the summer of 2012, the Department of Defense began piloting a new transition assistance program, Transitions Goals Plans Success (GPS), which will replace the TAP program and seems likely to mitigate many of these concerns. The new Transitions GPS is a week-long program centered on ensuring that veterans leave military service with individual transition plans. A main component of the program is a three-day employment workshop developed by the U.S. Department of Labor. The workshop is intended to provide participants with:

- Guidance in identifying employment and education goals and skills veterans may possess that are transferable to civilian jobs
- Information about the civilian labor market, including what skills are in demand and where jobs are located
- Assistance in identifying which factors, such as salary, stability, location, and opportunities for advancement, are most important to each participant in choosing a job or career path
- Advice on how to handle challenges that veterans may confront while seeking employment
- Resources to use to search for employment opportunities (Cronk, 2012)

Transitions GPS will offer servicemembers interested in postsecondary education an opportunity to participate in an optional two-day module on higher education developed in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. The program is a response to concerns that veterans are not able to take full advantage of their education benefits; it is intended to provide

veterans with educational counseling and assistance in understanding the higher education landscape. According to the deputy director of the Defense Department’s Transition to Veterans Program Office, “military members weren’t making the best of their Post-9/11 GI Bill. We are getting them the information to help them choose wisely” (Cronk, 2012).

Current Department of Defense plans call for Transitions GPS to be fully implemented by the end of 2013. It promises to be far more effective than the TAP program in providing navigational assistance to servicemembers in the process of separating from the military.

### Education Services Officers

Education Services Officers (ESOs) in the military may also play an important role in education decision making. A representative of a postsecondary institution told CAEL that some of the veterans coming to its campus were referred by the ESO. ESOs can also help servicemembers transitioning out of the military understand and apply for the benefits available to them and arrange for prior learning assessment, such as College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) testing or preparing a portfolio through CAEL’s LearningCounts.org national online service. However, the work of ESOs is focused on



## The Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE)

The Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) is a regional consortium of 20 member colleges and universities that focuses on collaboration and resource sharing in order to promote student success and advance higher education. The activities and membership of the consortium are directed by a board made up of the leaders of member institutions. Each institution in the consortium is assessed a membership fee based on the size of its enrollment, and the consortium receives some additional funding through government sources. This funding is primarily related to SOCHE's work at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, where several member institutions have a presence.

SOCHE also maintains an office on the base, and the director of SOCHE's programs there works extensively with ESOs to advise servicemembers interested in enrolling in postsecondary institutions. She gives presentations to groups of servicemembers, then works one-on-one with those who are interested in further exploring their higher education options.

These one-on-one advising sessions cover a range of topics, including:

- Available career paths and labor market demands
- Career goals and what degree or certification is needed to attain them
- Previous experiences, if any, with postsecondary education
- A servicemember's ideal learning environment
- Schedule constraints
- Prior learning assessment and credit transfer options

The director uses the information acquired in these sessions to help servicemembers identify specific institutions and degree programs that will meet their needs. She also provides them with contact information for college representatives who can offer further assistance once the servicemember arrives on campus. During these sessions, servicemembers also acquire tools and information that enable them to advocate for themselves once they are enrolled in degree programs. For example, they gain familiarity with military transcripts and credit transfer tools, information that they can use to ensure that they receive credit for prior learning.

active-duty military personnel, and it may be difficult for veterans to access the resources they offer. In addition, ESOs may not be in a good position to provide servicemembers with guidance on which specific institutions or programs would be the best fit.

Cooperative arrangements between the military and civilian institutions can supplement the work done by ESOs to ensure that, by the time they are discharged, servicemembers who wish to pursue postsecondary education have a clear plan. For example, the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) provides onsite educational guidance to servicemembers at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio (see sidebar).

### Web-Based Resources

The wealth of online information and guidance available to veterans could supplement that provided via military reintegration programs. The Department of Defense and VA have developed a wide range of web-based resources to help veterans make good decisions about career and education pathways. These sites and resources, however, are just a handful among the many thousands of websites that may seem useful but that are really designed to steer veterans to a particular program or institution regardless of veterans' actual interests, learning styles, or reluctance to fall into unnecessary debt. One individual interviewed by CAEL estimated the total number of websites devoted to veterans to be as high as 8,000 (a simple Google search in June 2012 for "veterans career exploration resources" produced nearly 2.5 million hits).

Some of the most robust sites developed by federal agencies provide resources designed to help veterans navigate the maze of benefits and options available to them. For example, the Career Decision Toolkit, at [www.turbotap.org](http://www.turbotap.org), is a tool offered by the Department of Defense in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Labor. It offers interactive, web-based assessment and teaching and training tools designed to assist separating,

demobilizing, and retiring servicemembers and their families to plan for the transition to civilian life. While already offered online, the toolkit will also be made available through military reintegration programs and at military transition and family service centers.

Some government sites can suffer from an “abundance of riches” when it comes to links to additional resources, and some veterans may not know where to start or whether they will need to consult multiple sites. The National Resource Directory, a one-stop web shop sponsored by the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, is designed to help servicemembers, veterans, and their families with questions about benefits, education, employment, housing, family support, and more. However, the page on “GI Bill and Other VA Education Programs,” for example, offers more than 30 different links; the page on “Career Paths” provides a comparable number. Some online resources created by non-profit organizations aim to assist veterans making decisions about postsecondary education, but, like the resources maintained by the military and VA, they may not provide adequate navigational assistance.

Veterans may also not know to filter out those sites that are not reliable. There are sites that are not officially sponsored by the military, yet have URLs that may suggest otherwise. This issue has been recognized by many federal policy makers. In April 2012, for example, the Obama administration issued an executive order that included several measures intended to ensure that veterans are able to make informed choices about postsecondary institutions and directed the VA to seek a trademark for the term “GI Bill” (Obama, 2012).

Online resources are not only potentially confusing, but also may not be suitable for all veterans. As one veteran told us, it didn’t matter how much information was on a website; he preferred to get his information “from a real person.” Creating websites that are more accessible and easier to navigate might encourage more veterans to take advantage of the wealth of useful information available online.

In addition, it would be beneficial to provide a way for veterans to know which sites not only provide valuable and accurate guidance, but are also unbiased toward a particular vendor or type of vendor.

### Non-Profit Service Providers

Non-profit service providers are serving veterans in many ways, providing job-search assistance, resume help, job training, and assistance with other needs like housing, substance abuse, mental health, domestic abuse, utilities, transportation, and meals. Yet few have the capacity—or the appropriate veteran client population—to make preparing servicemembers for the world of higher education a core part of their services.

Most social service organizations are serving the hardest-to-serve veterans. Several organizations acknowledged that the veterans they serve are typically not the ones interested or ready to use their education benefits. Some of the agencies said that their typical clients are not Iraq and Afghanistan veterans; the veterans are more likely to have served prior to 9/11 and are not eligible for new education benefits.

### Colleges and Universities

Postsecondary institutions have become, for many veterans, the most viable source of career and education advising. Yet many colleges and universities are struggling to find appropriate means of responding to the recent influx of veterans. These institutions generally see serving all students—including veterans—as the focus of their mission, but campuses do not always offer the specific resources veterans need.

The assistance provided by postsecondary institutions to veterans frequently falls into three broad categories: assistance in understanding and accessing financial benefits; transition services, such as veterans orientation sessions and classes on study skills; and peer advising and support. Peer advising and support systems may include on-campus veterans centers that offer a common area where veterans can study or participate in social activities; they can help create a sense of community among veterans on campus. On-campus student groups such as Student

Veterans of America (SVA) also play a role in providing peer advising. Like veterans centers, student groups can help create a sense of community and provide an informal venue in which veterans can seek advice and support.

At many institutions, veterans who need career and academic guidance are often referred to advisors who serve the entire student body. These advisors are not always prepared to guide veterans through the intricacies of translating military training and experience into academic credit and relevant work experience. Moreover, college advisers may not have a thorough enough understanding of military occupations to help veterans identify related civilian career paths. One example of an institution taking steps to provide advising that is targeted to the needs of veterans is the military student advising program at the University of Maryland University College (see sidebar).

Many veterans would also benefit from assistance *prior* to selecting an institution. While college-based advisors can be helpful to veterans in designing a program of study or considering career options, it is the rare on-campus advisor who is in a position to refer veterans to a different postsecondary institution. Veterans may therefore miss out on education or training options that would be a good fit for their learning styles, career goals, or other considerations. The SOCHE consortium model, described earlier in this report, provides a model for postsecondary institutions to pool resources to provide this kind of pre-enrollment advising and navigation help. A possible variation on that model is for state higher education systems to form partnerships with military organizations, as seen in the example of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and the My Military GPS Life Plan (see sidebar on next page).

## The University of Maryland University College

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC) has a dedicated military advising unit designed to meet the needs of active-duty and veteran students. Advising staff work individually with affiliated military students and veterans to provide integrated career and education advising. Rather than treating students' degree requirements and career goals as separate entities, the UMUC approach encourages students to consider what they hope to get out of their education and whether their choices of program major are compatible with their career goals. This advising begins even before students start classes at UMUC; the dedicated military pages of the university website contains sections with advice on choosing a major and course planning for the student's first semester.

In addition, the university hosts regular open house events and information sessions throughout the year, both at the main campus and virtually on the web, to connect students with advisors, faculty, financial services, and veterans affairs. For students who may be less familiar with online learning, a week-long program called UMUC 411 enables interested students to "test-drive" a sample course. A specialized section of UMUC 411 is geared toward meeting the needs of military and veteran students. UMUC's program is designed to provide integrative support that promotes academic success and career preparation to help student veterans make the most of their veterans benefits.



## Federal Policy Responses to the Need for Advising

A growing number of federal policy makers have recognized that career and education advising can foster a return on their investment in veterans education benefits.

Several members of Congress introduced bills in the spring of 2012 that explicitly addressed the need for education and career counseling.<sup>1</sup> The provisions of the legislation included:

- Making the VA and Department of Defense responsible for providing veterans with one-on-one education counseling
- Requiring postsecondary institutions that enroll 20 or more student veterans who are receiving education benefits to provide veterans with career counseling
- Expanding education and career counseling options for veterans already enrolled in postsecondary institutions by requiring those institutions to provide veterans with education and career advising
- Requiring the VA to make available statistics related to colleges' veteran enrollments, policies on education benefit payments, students' average student-loan debts, and job-placement rates
- Requiring the Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP), which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, and the VA to coordinate with military reintegration programs on the provision of counseling services to veterans
- Requiring the VA to provide all veterans with academic advising, including guidance on the development of an academic plan before enrollment in postsecondary institutions, unless the veteran explicitly opts out. This counseling would include a discussion of asking questions about the availability of career advising before selecting or enrolling in a postsecondary institution

## MyMilitary GPS Life Plan

A partnership between the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, the Minnesota Army National Guard, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Higher Education Veterans Programs, and MyMilitaryEducation.org, the MyMilitary GPS Life Plan initiative is intended to guide veterans from the military to higher education to work.

The initiative provides resources to service-members and veterans at each stage of the transition from the military to civilian life. Members of the Minnesota Army National Guard have the opportunity to attend workshops offered at reintegration events that help them begin to explore career paths and postsecondary institutions. The GPS LifePlan system also offers a website that provides extensive information and advice on topics such as:

- career exploration
- how to match military occupational specialties and experience to civilian career paths
- education and training options
- managing job loss and transitions
- factors to consider when choosing a college or university
- choosing a degree program aligned with career goals
- military credit transfer

For students enrolled in an educational program, GPS LifePlan continues to offer the same support system through the student's college or university, as well as information on topics such as study skills and selecting and scheduling classes. An online and telephone support advising center that serves the entire state gives veterans access to advisors with military backgrounds and a counselor who provides individual career advising. GPS LifePlan also encompasses a Higher Education Veterans Program (HEVP), which places veterans employed by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs on campuses throughout the state where they work with students, staff, and faculty on veterans issues and provide additional advising on benefits and other topics.

- Providing interested veterans with access to TAP resources and programming for up to three years following separation from the military.

Many of these proposals would be very helpful in filling the gaps in the resources currently available to veterans, especially if they go beyond unfunded mandates and provide the resources needed to shore up existing federal investments in veterans education benefits.

The importance of advising was also recognized in a joint letter released in April 2012 by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor. The letter emphasized the agencies' commitment to working together to promote "career pathways" approaches that rely on career and education advising and other support services to assist adult students in linking learning with work (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

## Recommendations

In light of the challenges faced by veterans seeking to define—and achieve—their educational and career goals and the lack of available advising resources, a system of advising needs to be developed that will enable veterans to fulfill the promise of the GI Bill and other education benefits. Collaboration among the military, postsecondary institutions, and non-profit organizations is a promising route to the creation of an integrated and comprehensive support system for veterans navigating complex career and education landscapes. Many of the programs outlined below could be staffed by veterans, who would be well positioned to serve as advisors and mentors to other veterans navigating the transition to civilian life.

Our recommendations, some of which are aligned with elements of the proposed legislation described above, center on providing these resources to veterans at every stage of the transition process, from discharge from the military to enrollment in postsecondary institutions. This ensures the availability of advising resources before veterans enroll in postsecondary institutions, which is critical to ensuring that veterans find degree programs and careers in which they will succeed.

### Stage 1: Separation from the Military

- **Expand the content of military reintegration programs (in progress).** We recognize that the various military branches have a tremendous task in helping servicemembers make the transition to civilian life and applaud the step the Department of

Defense has taken in designing and piloting the Transitions GPS program.

We are hopeful that the revised reintegration program will include:

- information on postsecondary options and opportunities, including prior learning assessment and military credit transfer;
- a list of questions for veterans to ask when choosing a career pathway or an educational program; and
- greater guidance on the use of education benefits.

These elements are included in a workshop designed for military-connected audiences that CAEL has developed as part of the McCormick Foundation's Midwest Veterans Employment Initiative. It offers:

- an overview of the labor market;
- suggestions on choosing postsecondary institutions and career paths;
- information on securing education benefits and using prior learning assessment to secure academic credit for military training and experience; and
- strategies for college success.

Advisors working within military reintegration programs could provide group workshops along these lines, as well as individual advising for those who request such assistance. The goal is to educate new veterans on promising career pathways, the

educational requirements for those careers, and the importance of thinking through education and career decisions with some care and, ideally, professional guidance. **One idea would be to develop a video on these topics—in clear language, with humor and appealing graphics—that could be used online,** as well as during in-person meetings related to military reintegration programs.

- **Provide Education Services Officers (ESOs) with the resources needed to advise servicemembers and veterans and to undertake collaborations with civilian organizations.** ESOs are a great resource for many servicemembers interested in going to college. The ESOs may, however, benefit from additional information sessions or resources that would help them work with servicemembers on topics such as promising career pathways in this new economy, the benefits of programs that offer prior learning assessment, and college best practices in meeting the educational needs of veterans. Collaborations between ESOs and organizations like the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) provide a model for how local organizations might be leveraged to build the capacity of ESOs and support this kind of guidance prior to military discharge.
- **Reach out to and educate military families, especially the spouses and parents of servicemembers, prior to discharge** about the importance of education and the value of advising in choosing the right career and use for education benefits. An initiative could partner with one or more of the military branches to provide additional outreach and information to family members about the great opportunity provided by GI Bill education benefits, the factors that should be considered in choosing a new career or education program, and where to access additional information that veterans will need to make good decisions about how to use their benefits.

- **Evaluate and consolidate web-based resources and establish a one-stop shop** for active-duty military personnel and veterans on career exploration, education advising, and guidance on entering the world of post-secondary learning. Currently there are too many different web-based options that are available to veterans; it is difficult to know where to start and which sites are trustworthy. The Department of Defense should work with a team of organizations and advocates—as well as the Departments of Labor, Education, and Veterans Affairs—to develop a one-stop Internet shop. Topics covered on the site should include:
  - career exploration
  - education benefits
  - postsecondary decision making

This one-stop should be explicit in the way it guides veterans through the site, making clear the recommended steps and sites to visit at different parts of the decision-making process. While additional links might be provided, they should be limited in number, and the sponsors of the site links should be transparent to the user.

## Stage 2: Transition

- **Ensure that resources remain available to veterans following their separation from the military and that veterans are familiar with these resources.** The creation of the Transitions GPS program is an extremely promising development for those leaving the military now and in the future, but does little to assist post-9/11 veterans who are already struggling with transitions to civilian employment. Those veterans could benefit substantially from a retroactive application of the Transitions GPS program that makes the program's resources available to all post-9/11 veterans. In addition, CAEL's research has shown that, during the process of separation from the military, not all servicemembers are ready to absorb information about the options and benefits available to them as vet-

erans. Reaching out to veterans again 6 to 12 months after they are discharged would likely encourage many to take advantage of available resources.

- **Develop the capacity of the Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP) to provide education and career advising.** VWIP, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, aims to address the needs of veterans seeking employment through local one-stops. VWIP offers an impressive range of services, from job training to assistance developing resumes, but these services have tended to focus on ensuring that veterans have the credentials and skills they need to secure employment, not on helping veterans make choices about their careers. Expanded career advising services would be very much in keeping with the goals of VWIP and extremely valuable to veterans navigating an unfamiliar civilian labor market. Training of workforce system case managers should be done to build capacity for providing career and educational assistance.
- **Develop community-based resources focused on helping veterans choose appropriate courses of study and post-secondary institutions.** A model for this type of resource might be the Chicago-based Complete the Degree program, in which CAEL provides one-on-one advising services to adults, including veterans, who have some college credit and are making a decision about whether to return to college. Complete the Degree's free services include assistance with college planning and applications, support in securing credit for prior learning, assistance with financial aid applications and issues, and academic skills coaching. ([www.completethedegree.org](http://www.completethedegree.org))

### Stage 3: Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions

- **Develop partnerships through which educational institutions can provide unbiased career and education advising to veterans.** Many educational institutions have already stepped forward to provide what seems to be the main source of information and guidance to veterans interested in postsecondary education. However, the guidance they provide comes rather late in the decision-making process, after the decision about where to go to school has been made. One way to improve this is to help postsecondary institutions to collaborate on a new model, similar to the SOCHE model in Ohio or the MyMilitary GPS LifePlan in Minnesota, that can provide information and guidance *before* veterans enroll in postsecondary education programs.
- **Provide training to on-campus veterans clubs on education benefits and career planning resources.** On-campus veterans clubs are currently a critical part of supporting the educational success of student veterans. These clubs could serve as vehicles through which additional information and career planning resources can make their way to veterans. The clubs could receive training on veterans education benefits or schedule visits from the Department of Veterans Affairs to answer questions and troubleshoot problems. In addition, career advisors could attend on-campus veterans meetings to discuss how to navigate careers, choose educational programs that help veterans advance along career paths, or the importance of planning several semesters of courses to ensure that there are no interruptions in benefits or housing support.



## Conclusion

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GI Bill education benefits can be a tremendous asset for veterans as they transition to civilian life. Without improved advising and counseling resources, these benefits may be wasted if veterans take wrong turns in choosing a postsecondary institution or degree program. A lack of assistance in choosing an appropriate course of study may also haunt veterans even after they have completed their postsecondary education, as the choices they make about their educations have a direct impact on their ability to secure satisfying and stable employment after graduation. **It is therefore essential that veterans have access to academic advising before they enroll in postsecondary institutions.**

We applaud the McCormick Foundation for supporting CAEL's research on this topic, as the consensus from those we interviewed was clear: career and education advising is largely

missing from the menu of services currently available to veterans, and it is badly needed. We also acknowledge the important steps that the Department of Defense and other agencies are taking to fill this gap through the development of the new Transitions GPS program.

Federal education benefits provide an important opportunity for veterans to acquire postsecondary credentials that lead to stable and satisfying careers and to contribute to the development of a skilled American workforce. A comprehensive career and education advising program would minimize the obstacles encountered by veterans by offering guidance on identifying degree programs and career paths that fit with their skills and interests. This assistance will ensure that each veteran is getting the most bang for the education buck.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The legislation relevant to career and education advising for servicemembers and veterans that was introduced in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress was as follows:

- S. 2179: Military and Veterans Educational Reform Act of 2012, introduced by Senator Jim Webb (D-VA) on March 8, 2012
- S. 2241: GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act of 2012, introduced by Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) on March 27, 2012
- S. 2206: GI Educational Freedom Act of 2012, introduced by Senator Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) on March 20, 2012
- H.R. 4051: TAP Modernization Act of 2012, introduced by Representative Marlin A. Stutzman (R-IN) on February 16, 2012
- S. 2246: TAP Modernization Act of 2012, introduced by Senator John Boozman (R-AR) on March 28, 2012

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