

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT:

Tracking the Academic Success
of Servicemembers and Veterans



July 2012
Education Working Group convened by
Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges

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Executive Summary

The increased concern over program accountability for student success across the spectrum of higher education has called attention to the need for consistent, relevant, and reliable definitions and measures of student progression and student outcomes. Current sources of data are inadequate to the task of establishing common measures of military student outcomes. Databases that would permit Voluntary Education policymakers to track military student outcomes and permit comparisons across institutions that serve them are not available. The problems are compounded by the mission-defined mobility of active-duty servicemembers. This paper is a collaborative approach toward developing common definitions and common measures of success for this sub-population of adult learners.

The findings of this report are, at this time, only recommendations.

Introduction

The multimillion-dollar investment by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)¹ and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)² in providing higher education access to our servicemembers has understandably raised key questions related to the outcomes derived from this investment. In April 2012, President Obama signed an executive order requiring institutions receiving payments from military or veteran education benefits to produce outcomes data on servicemembers and veterans as well as provide them additional educational assistance. In addition, DoD, VA, and congressional committees are actively questioning the return on investment of the military Tuition Assistance (TA) program. The current federal budget situation has added urgency to these demands for accountability. This paper is the product of a working group convened by Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) to propose specific parameters for addressing the accountability issue.

In defining the parameters of the charge, the working group limited itself to identifying the need for metrics, and how to define the participants in data collection. The report certainly does not dismiss the importance of other questions, such as the extent to which TA/VA-supported education contributes to job performance or how Voluntary Education participation impacts military retention. Similarly, the paper does not duplicate the research of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and others about the relationship between earned prior learning credit and persistence and time to degree completion. The report appreciates that the cohort definition may not be easy for some institutions to currently implement, and how this might be managed as a policy matter is an important question. Finally, the paper does not recommend any benchmarks nor identify any standard measurements of success.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper focuses on providing a set of common definitions and a common methodology that will permit comparisons of institutional-level metrics. At the request of military-serving institutions, the working group has provided a consistent and measurable definition of a military student, data collection parameters, and next steps.

This paper is a collaborative approach toward developing common definitions and common measures of success for this sub-population of adult learners.

History/Background of the Working Group

In February 2010, SOC conducted a pre-conference Burning Issues Summit at the annual meeting of the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME). The Summit generated considerable discussion on

¹ For FY 2010, DoD spent approximately \$641 million dollars on active-duty and Reserve component TA funding.

² For FY 2013, VA estimates more than \$8 billion dollars in educational expenses.

the diverse practices, policies, and metrics that colleges employ to assess persistence and degree completion of adult learners. There was no consensus, however, on what definitions and metrics could most effectively capture the military student population. It was recommended that SOC provide leadership to bring together a working group of key stakeholders in the voluntary education community to focus on persistence (progress to degree completion), and degree completion metrics for this group of adult learners.

In December 2010, a working group of higher education and military education strategic thinkers and data analysts began to identify a common set of definitions of persistence and degree completion as well as to propose a common set of variables that would allow comparisons across the Voluntary Education community.

The working group was charged with:

- Making recommendations on possible metrics and variables for evaluation
- Improving the data collection process by which military students are measured, including their success and nonsuccess (as defined both by the military and by institutions, since these definitions differ)
- Defining what is a military and veteran student for data collection purposes.

This focus on metrics sought to inform and shape policy decisions and institutional program accountability. The initial focus was on active-duty servicemembers but was later expanded to include veteran students.

In an effort to avoid redundancy, the working group sought to incorporate research already completed by military-serving institutions. The group also explored how certain existing methodologies for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data could be adapted to better reflect the experience of military students and veterans in postsecondary education. That analysis produced the recommended framework and definitions.

In constructing this paper, the working group collaborated with stakeholders and constituents of Voluntary Education including Transparency By Design (TBD), the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME), the National Association of Institutions for Military Education Services (NAIMES), the SOC Advisory Board, and others.

A full membership list is found in Appendix C.

Environmental Considerations

As of the printing of this report, the political environment regarding accountability of Tuition Assistance dollars spent and the desire to research and dictate success measures is complex. President Obama's April 27, 2012 signing of an executive order mandating data collection from institutions as well as (among other requirements) the establishment of a federal, centralized complaint database for servicemembers and veterans about colleges and universities at which they study is the most recent political development.

Previously, studies by the Lumina Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other organizations have proposed various methodologies and determined findings related to military or veteran student education. Tuition Assistance and the future of the Voluntary Education community has been the subject of Congressional hearings and white papers. Where possible, the findings and suggestions of these reviews have been incorporated into this paper. For additional information, please reference Appendix A.

Introduction to the Military Student

It is rare for a servicemember to be both active-duty military and a full-time, first-time student.³ Data from some of the largest providers of higher education to the military indicate that the average military student currently takes less than three courses a year. This means that military students are not included in the Department of Education's first-time, full-time completion calculation, and they will not complete their degrees within the 150% time line (normally six years from beginning to completion of a BA or BS degree).

The military force is increasingly mobile and prefers the flexibility and portability of online courses. The FY 11 DoD Voluntary Education Fact Sheet reported that 73% of all servicemembers participating in the military Tuition Assistance program enrolled in online classes.

Even with a DoD 100% Tuition Assistance reimbursement program (with limitations), the most lucrative GI Bill program in history, and development of service-specific virtual education portals, educational achievement remains relatively low and stable among the military force. Data from the FY 2011 DoD Voluntary Education Levels Report indicate that approximately 85% of the enlisted force do not possess at least an associates' degree, nearly 95% of the enlisted force do not possess a bachelor's degree or higher, and approximately 58% of the officer corps do not possess a master's degree.

Military students behave differently than other non-traditional adult populations. Because of deployments and the rapid pace in theater in recent times, it is often difficult for students to predict when is a good time to start a course or if they will be able to complete it on time. For this reason, institutions that serve the military have to have very liberal withdrawal and leave of absence policies that will not punish servicemembers for work conditions that are beyond their control. In addition, some military students are under-prepared for college because they did not complete a college preparatory track in high school.

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Data from some of the larger institutions that serve the military indicate that the average military student attends three or more colleges before earning an undergraduate degree. Military students often *stop out* which means they stop attending college and resume later.

Even when an institution is able to offer an online program to meet the frequently reassigned military member's needs, sometimes there may be connectivity issues. While connectivity may be limited for troops in a remote war zone such as Afghanistan, it may also occur when members of our navy are at sea, assigned to ships and submarines. Additionally, some of the psychological stresses (PTSD, etc.) experienced by many members of our modern military may impact all course-based learning as well as extend the time required for degree completion.

³ A full-time student, as defined by the Department of Education, is an undergraduate student enrolled in at least 12 semester hours or quarter hours, or more than 24 contact hours a week each term. An undergraduate part-time student as one who is enrolled either less than 12 semester hours or quarter hours or less than 24 contact hours a week each term. For graduate students, part time is defined as less than 9 semester or quarter hours.

Methodology

The widely accepted methodology used to monitor persistence and graduation rates is the cohort tracking approach. This methodology is central to IPEDS⁴ and provides tracking over a period of time for a cohort of students, with metrics at key milestones (enrollment in Fall terms) and a final metric on graduation (six years after first enrollment): *Of X students, A% returned for a second year and B% graduated after six years*. The cohort tracking methodology has also been endorsed by the American Association of Community Colleges and by the Transparency by Design Initiative.⁵

The key issue, however, becomes how to appropriately define the cohort for military-serving institutions. The IPEDS definition is wholly inadequate for this purpose because it tracks only first-time⁶, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen. Acknowledging the growing interest in data collection on military and veteran students who do not fit this IPEDS definition, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) – which is responsible for IPEDS – held a Technical Review Panel in November 2011 titled "Collecting Data on Veterans." The Technical Review Panel's suggestions included collecting basic data through IPEDS on the number of military and veteran undergraduates and graduates as well as limited data on military- and veteran-serving programs available at the institution and the amount of DoD and Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits awarded to students through the institution. However, the panel acknowledged multiple difficulties of collecting data on military and veteran students, including that IPEDS does not currently capture any data on them. It thus "determined that collecting additional data on completions, persistence, and graduation rates of veterans and military servicemembers in IPEDS is not feasible at this time and needs further study" due to "the limitations in data systems and available data" but that further examination of other federal data sources should be done.

Military students typically do not start their college education as full-time freshmen or necessarily with the goal of pursuing a degree. While the Voluntary Framework of Accountability and the Transparency by Design Initiative have broadened the IPEDS definition of cohort by adding first-time, **full- and part-time**, degree-seeking freshmen, even this broadened IPEDS definition (e.g., including part-time students) is not appropriate for military students. Defining a cohort appropriate to the measurement of persistence and graduation of military students must take into account several factors that are unique to military students:

- There is a fundamental difference between persistence and graduation rates of online/distance education programs and of traditional delivery methods, paralleling the differences between all types of institutions.
- Military training and Service School credit may be accepted (via voluntary participation in the SOC Consortium and agreement to the SOC *Principles and Criteria*) as college credits based on the American Council on Education's *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services*.
- Like adult students in general, many military students enroll in a course offered through distance education institutions "to try out" online education, only to find out that they prefer to take their early courses face-to-face at a nearby institution.⁷

⁴ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System – the federal reporting system required of all institutions that receive federal student financial assistance (Title IV) funds.

⁵ American Association of Community Colleges ([Voluntary Framework for Accountability](#), Metrics Manual Version 1.0, November 2011). Transparency by Design Initiative ([Learners Progress Metrics](#), <http://collegechoicesforadults.com/>, August 2011).

⁶ First-time here refers to first enrollment ever in any higher education institution.

⁷ Based on analysis and findings from American Public University System and University of Maryland, University College.

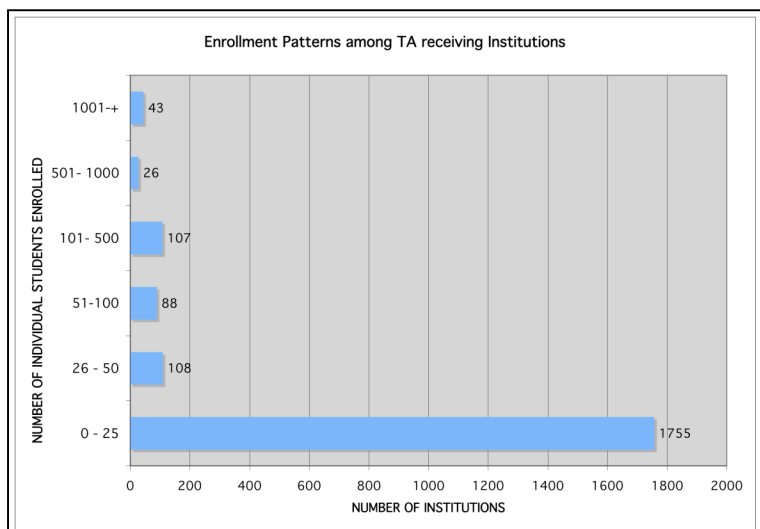
- Military deployments throughout the nation and the world expose servicemembers to many military-serving institutions, increasing the likelihood of their attending multiple institutions en route to graduation.
- The increased use of government-sponsored online websites that facilitate enrollment, registration, Tuition Assistance disbursement, and degree planning, such as the GoArmyEd portal, allow students to determine time to degree and allows the military Services to maximize Tuition Assistance.
- A good number of students enrolled in non-selective colleges and universities (i.e., institutions that provide universal access to higher education) face significant educational challenges derived from inadequate primary and secondary educational preparation.
- The outcome of these and other factors is that military students, by the time they graduate, are likely to have attended 5+ institutions.

This "swirling" is not necessarily bad – it is actually a fact of life for military students as a result of their increased educational options. So the key question to answer concerns *the point at which it is reasonable to expect that it is the intention of the student to complete a degree at a given institution.*⁸ Any proposed definition must also take into account the large diversity of military-serving institutions: term- and non-term, multiple starts within a term, competence-based, etc. The definition recommended by the working group aims to address both the "swirl" factor and the diversity of institutions.

Institutional Inclusion

Given the high level of expense and time needed to identify and track unique sub-populations of post-secondary students, the working group recommends that only institutions with a “large” number of military and veteran students should be expected to track this subpopulation of adult learners. In an attempt to define and quantify what constitutes as a sufficiently large pool of military students and to help determine what an appropriate minimum threshold might be for tracking military students, members of the working group reviewed FY 11 Tuition Assistance course enrollment data to examine enrollment patterns. Comparable data on veteran enrollment behavior and patterns were not available from the Department of Veterans Affairs at this point in time.

Figure A



⁸ The problems facing any definition of degree-seeking students for tracking purposes was addressed by the U.S. Department of Education’s Committee on Measures of Student Success ([Draft Report](#), November 15, 2011). The Committee’s draft includes a recommendation for ED to clarify the definition of degree-seeking student.

The Department of Defense military Tuition Assistance data showed that 312,760 individual servicemembers use TA to fund their course enrollments from 2153 distinct campuses.⁹ When enrollment data was aggregated by academic institution across the military Services (including Coast Guard), student enrollments ranged from 1-50,000 students. This wide range of military student enrollments by institution reinforced the need to proceed cautiously in making universal recommendations about post-secondary educational institutions tracking military students; it would be burdensome to require academic institutions with extremely low enrollments of military students to track student success metrics for them. More than 70% (1534) of the institutions that participate in the military Tuition Assistance program have 25 or fewer military students enrolled. Conversely, only 9% (176) of the academic institutions each enroll more than 100 servicemembers. See figure A for the distribution of Tuition Assistance enrollment by institution.

To produce an "n" large enough for future analysis and institutional cost efficiency, the working group recommends that institutions that enroll 100 or more servicemembers and veteran students (using Tuition Assistance and/or GI Bill education benefits) should participate in reporting. Institutions with fewer than 99 enrolled students may choose to voluntarily participate.

Proposed Cohort Parameters

The working group recommends that two separate cohorts be established for tracking purposes. The use of two cohorts will allow the differences in servicemembers currently serving in the Uniformed Services and veteran students to be integrated into the analysis of the persistence and graduation rates. The cohorts are identified as:

Military Students:

- Define military students for purposes of this analysis to include active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard servicemembers receiving military Tuition Assistance.¹⁰
- Include all military students who:
 - have successfully completed three courses/nine credit hours in a two-year period, and
 - have a cumulative GPA ≥ 2.0 , and
 - who have transferred and had accepted at least nine credit hours. Completing three courses and requesting that a transcript is sent to the institution should constitute enough evidence that the student intends to graduate from a given institution. How the nine credits are earned (e.g., by transfer, MOS/Rating, or exam) is irrelevant.
- Track the cohort at a rate 200% that of "normal" time, as adult and military students attend on a part-time basis – eight years for bachelor's and four years for associate programs.
- Keep a student in the cohort once captured regardless of military status in further enrollments.
- Cohort should be measured on a calendar year, so to include various start dates across multiple months.

Veteran Students:

The cohort for veteran students, which should be tracked separately from the military student cohort,

⁹ As per DoD reporting, individual campuses/locations were listed separately for select institutions.

¹⁰ The National Survey of Veterans (2010) documents that roughly 8% of active-duty members use their VA educational benefits to pursue a degree. As such, these students should not be included in the cohort.

remains largely unchanged, with the following adaptation:

- Define veteran students as those receiving education benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.¹¹
- Include all veteran students who have successfully completed five courses/15 credit hours in a two-year period with a cumulative GPA ≥ 2.0 and who have transferred and had accepted at least nine credit hours. How the transfer credits are earned (e.g., by transfer, MOS/Rating, or exam) is irrelevant.¹²

Constructing data metrics for veteran student data and collecting accurate veteran student educational data is in some ways more difficult than doing so for military students. There are multiple education benefit programs for veterans and their families as compared to the single Military Tuition Assistance benefit program for servicemembers. In FY 2010, VA reported there were over 800,000 beneficiaries of the education programs funded by the VA, with the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty programs having the highest numbers of beneficiaries.

To add to the complexity, the population of students using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in particular both overlaps with and differs from the population of students using Tuition Assistance benefits. Military students can choose to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, if eligible, instead of Tuition Assistance. However, students on Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits can either be veterans themselves or eligible family members of veterans with transferred Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. Thus, accurately assessing the progress and success of veterans using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in particular—as opposed to family members or servicemembers using Post-9/11 GI Bill instead of Tuition Assistance benefits—is highly dependent on institutions' individual student information systems and the granularity of data available within those systems.

Reporting Variables

The working group further suggests that institutions track standard variables for the cohort, thereby providing a clear framework for data collection and analysis. These variables might include:

Reporting Variables

- Gender
- Age
- Race (approved IPEDS race categories)
- Enrollment Status (full-time vs. part-time and degree-seeking vs. non-degree-seeking)
- Branch of Service (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Air Force)
- Duty Type (Active, Reserve, National Guard, Veteran, family)
- Rank or Rating (Active-duty personnel only)
- Degree Level (undergraduate certificate, associate, baccalaureate, master's, post-baccalaureate certificate, post-master's certificate, and doctoral)

¹¹ In most cases, dependents and spouses receiving transferred benefits would also be included in this cohort.

¹² Course limits and time were determined based on discussions and feedback provided which indicated that veteran students are more likely to attend full time and/or at quicker rate than active-duty members.

Summary Recommendations

As next steps, the working group offers these recommendations, for conversation only:

1. The working group supports the "concept" of a comprehensive strategy on outcomes measures as reflected in the April 27, 2012 Presidential Executive Order on Veterans Education (Section 3.c).

2. The working group recommends that the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education, along with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), should collaborate with Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) and other higher education stakeholders as much as possible in developing future outcomes measures and institutional reporting requirements. Where possible, community consensus should be achieved on data collection, analysis, and usage.

The working group suggests that the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education should – in collaboration with other stakeholders whose expertise and interests overlap with DoD and ED – continue to examine the current availability of data on military and veteran students at the federal level.

3. Consistent with this paper, the working group offers its recommendation for the future construction of a common, measurable persistence rate (from year one to year two) and graduation rate for both the military student and veteran cohorts.

4. For these metrics, the working group also offers the variables and definitions proposed in this paper to be used or adapted for national metrics for servicemembers and veterans.

5. The working group recognizes the recommendations from the Department of Education's Technical Review Panel 37, Selected Outcomes of the Advisory Committee on Student Success, as an important step toward recognizing the changing character of the nation's college-going population.

Issues Outside the Scope of this Working Group

Since military and veteran student research is a growing field and the Post-9/11 GI Bill in particular has created new questions about metrics used to measure veteran and military students' educational progress and success, many issues related to data metrics and data collection were not within the province of this working group. The working group's charge was to propose a common cohort definition of military students and common measures by which to track their persistence and academic success. No existing data analysis was requested. Nor was the group asked to construct military/veteran-student-specific data metrics on other topics such as placement and graduate salary metrics. In addition, the working group was not requested to link these proposed metrics to any kind of "military-friendly" definition.

Conclusion

The increasing complexities of higher education options available to an increasingly diverse student population render the use of any one-success metric as the universal metric inadequate and misleading. Such a metric would mask the many different paths that very different students take through higher education. The metrics proposed in this paper are applicable to military students. As has been suggested,¹³ success metrics are needed for different student cohorts (e.g., those who are under-prepared for college). And the need continues for a macro or systemic analysis of student journeys across institutions – an analysis that can be provided only by state or federal entities. This paper is a contribution to the national conversation about the success metrics most appropriate to different types of students.

¹³ See ED's Committee on Measures of Student Success Draft Report.

Appendix A: Environmental Scan

1. **Completing the Mission: A Pilot Study of Veteran Students' Progress Toward Degree Attainment in the Post-9/11 Era.**

Available at:

www.operationpromiseforservicemembers.com/Completing_the_Mission_Nov2011.pdf

2. **Improving Educational Outcomes for Our Military and Veterans**

Available at www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/federal-financial

[management/hearings/improving-educational-outcomes-for-our-military-and-veterans](http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/federal-financial/management/hearings/improving-educational-outcomes-for-our-military-and-veterans)

3. **Military Service Members and Veterans: A Profile of Those Enrolled in Undergraduate and Graduate Education in 2007–08.**

Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011163>

4. **Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Pre-degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions.**

Available at: <http://www.studentclearinghouse.info/signature/>

5. **White House Press Office. (April 27, 2012). *Executive order—Establishing principles of excellence for educational institutions serving service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members.***

Retrieved April 30, 2012 from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/27/executive-order-establishing-principles-excellence-educational-instituti)

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6. **Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Redesign of Retention, Graduation and Time-to-Degree. Retrieved July 12, 2012.**

Available at: <http://www.wascenior.org/redesign/ugretentionandgraduation>

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Appendix C: Working Group Membership

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