

The Returning Veterans

By: W. Scott Lewis, JD

Higher Education is set to experience a seemingly familiar phenomenon – the return of troops from war. As before, the group will primarily consist of 19-30 year old men who have seen and experienced things that the traditional college student has not. But this time, in addition to several other similarities, there are some significant differences that cannot be ignored. If institutions of higher education choose to use old methodologies to respond to this impending crisis, they do so at their own peril; and this time – unlike in previous years – the perils are more than primarily financial.

The Economic Situation

In the late 1940's, the veterans of World War II returned to an economy that was largely dependent on supporting the war that had just ended, but still able to be bolstered by other programs that would employ some of the returning veterans. The women in the workforce, in large part returned home, creating some opportunities, but not enough (although "Rosie the Riveter" would change the face of women in the workplace from this moment forward). The advent of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (the GI Bill, later the Montgomery GI Bill) not only provided a mechanism for these veterans to get training and education (in 1947, almost half of all college students were on the GI Bill), but prevented an economic and unemployment crisis.

In the 1970's, a slumping economy existed, but some jobs were still available for the returning veterans. Once again, the GI Bill (in a marginally different form) allowed veterans to go to college to get training and education. However, college was more commonplace in the 1970's than in the 1940's – similar to the situation we face today – thus creating the necessity of veterans taking advantage of the opportunity.

Today, returning veterans face a reduced GI Bill (although, at this writing, Congress is attempting to reinvigorate the Bill, as it did every decade from 1950-1990), a slumping economy, and rising unemployment. It is the economic equivalent of a combination of the previous situations.

The Political Situation

The veterans of WWII returned as heroes, having rid the world of the "Axis Powers" and preserving freedom. The veterans of Vietnam returned to a politically volatile situation – they were soldiers who fought in an unpopular war, and returned to a less positive situation.

In essence, today's situation is a combination of WWII and Vietnam. Like the veterans of Vietnam, they are returning from a politically unpopular war, but like the veterans of WWII, they are looked upon politically favorably and more positively. Like the veterans of both previous wars, these soldiers will see the GI Bill as a benefit to be taken advantage of. Like the veterans of WWII, they will likely take advantage of the support immediately.

Similar to both 1940's and the 1970's, the government is in a fiscal and political position where supporting or reinvigorating the GI Bill is the only option. To not reinvigorate the bill in the next election cycle will prove to be politically and fiscally suicidal. In short, the government's fiscal position (and the political climate) does not lend itself to maintaining a large number of these troops in the military (similar to WWII) and the majority of the troops will likely not be inclined to remain in the service (similar to both prior wars). (Note: This may alter if the country goes to war again – e.g., Iran – but this will not change the fiscal situation).

The X (or Millennial) Factors

The doors of higher education are open wider than they have ever been. With the dwindling number of traditional college age students over the next decade coupled with increasing competition amongst institutions of higher education, they will not "narrow" anytime soon. Add to this increasing costs and dwindling budgets, and this will inevitably lead to a "courting" of these veterans, as they bring guaranteed money, maturity and experience (all factors which historically point to a higher matriculation rate).

The survival rate of these troops is higher now than at any time in history. This will be especially pertinent to student disability services – students with a variety of EDs, PTSD, ADD, ADHD, and physical disabilities have been entering college at an already increasing rate; this will increase further as these veterans return home with a variety and combination of these conditions.

The military enlistment standards (relating to academics and criminal histories) have been altered over the last six years to better meet enlistment goals. Thus, a number of these returning veterans may not be qualified to enter directly into four year institutions, and face other potential challenges in the post Virginia Tech admissions environment. As such, this is likely to have a more significant initial impact on open enrollment and two-year institutions.

Some Conclusions

The troops will return, most likely en masse. Regardless of one's political affiliation, we must accept that they will return, and we must prepare. Historically, institutions of higher education have been reactive to these situations instead of proactive. This will not

suffice in today's fiscal and assessment driven situation. Higher Education must be ahead of the curve here, especially in the areas of:

- **Veterans Affairs** – this is an area where most colleges and universities have reduced staff significantly since the last war. Desert Storm will not be the litmus test to measure staffing needs.
- **Disability Support Services** – colleges and universities will be faced with another increase in students requesting support from these already understaffed offices. As these services are mandated by law, there will be no acceptable response (not to mention the potential public relations disaster not serving this population could create).
- **Facilities and Housing** – These populations will be better served by apartment style and/or family style housing. They are more likely to be married (possibly with children), and typical first year housing will not suffice. This will significantly impact two year schools.
- **Mental Health Support Services** – Similar to Disability Services, these services will face a likely increase (on top of the “Millennial Effect” they are already experiencing) with a different population. 24 hour on call services will become the standard, as community and VA services will not be able to serve this clientele effectively.
- **The increased necessity of CUBIT teams** – In the wake of Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, and the other shootings being carried out by this generation, the importance of well run, well trained behavioral intervention teams to proactively respond to these issues will not only be the standard, but an ethical and moral imperative.

Finally, higher education will have to become more effective proactive lobbyists for more funding and staff to be prepared to address this impending crisis. Any other course of action will place us in a familiar situation – facing the unfunded mandate – but with more significant fiscal and safety issues at stake than have existed in the past.

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