

Student Veterans/Service Members' Engagement in College and University Life and Education

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Executive Summary

Since the passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, also known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the enrollment of active-duty service members and veterans in American colleges and universities has increased substantially. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, more than three-quarters of a million veterans have used their earned benefit to enroll in postsecondary courses. In response to the influx of veteran student enrollment, a group of higher education associations and veterans' organizations collaborated in 2009 and 2012 on a study that asked college and university administrators whether their institutions had geared up campus programs and services specifically designed to support the unique needs of veterans.¹ The results indicated that administrators had indeed increased support levels, sometimes by quite significant margins.

But how do student veterans/service members² perceive their experiences at higher education institutions? To date, there is little or no information to assess whether the efforts by institutions to provide targeted programs and services are helpful to the veterans and service members enrolled in colleges and universities. Similarly, not much is known about the transition to postsecondary education from military service experienced by student veterans/service members, or whether these students are engaged in both academic programs and college and university life to their fullest potential. In this context, this issue brief explores student veteran/service member engagement in postsecondary education. The brief utilizes data from the 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an annual survey of

students enrolled in four-year universities, to assess how student veterans/service members perceive their integration on campus (see Methodology on page 3).

A key finding is that student veterans/service members are selective about the campus life and academic activities in which they invest their time. Student veterans/service members are more likely to be first-generation students—the first in their families to attend a college or university—and older than nonveteran/civilian students; they therefore tend to have responsibilities outside of higher education that put constraints on their time. Student veterans/service members report placing greater emphasis on academic areas that they find essential for academic progress than on college and university life and activities—academic or otherwise—that are not essential for success in the courses in which they are enrolled. Student veterans/service members are less likely to participate in co-curricular activities, and they dedicate less time to relaxing and socializing than nonveteran/civilian students. In particular:

- Student veterans/service members are less likely to participate in experiential learning opportunities, such as internships or practicums, learning communities, study abroad, or community service. Sixty-eight percent of student veterans/service members say they have plans to participate in or have already participated in community service or volunteer work, compared with 82 percent of nonveteran/civilian students.

¹ The idea for this issue brief emerged as a result of *From Soldier to Student*, a research series on campus readiness to support the increasing number of post-9/11 veterans enrolling in higher education. The research was started by the American Council on Education (ACE), Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the National Association of Veteran's Programs Administrators, with the support of Lumina Foundation (Cook and Kim 2009). *From Soldier to Student II* showed that campuses have increased programs and services specifically designed for post-9/11 veterans, in part propelled by the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in 2008 (McBain et al. 2012).

² This brief uses the term "student veterans/service members" to indicate college and university students who are either current or former members of the U.S. Armed Forces, Military Reserves, or National Guard. It uses the term "nonveteran/civilian students" to refer to students who have never served in the military.

- Student veterans/service members are more likely (70 percent) than nonveteran/civilian students (65 percent) to spend at least 10 hours per week preparing for class.
- Student veterans/service members are also more likely (60 percent) than nonveteran/civilian students (58 percent) to discuss grades or assignments with their instructors.
- Forty-nine percent of student veterans/service members indicate that they collaborate with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments, compared with 57 percent of nonveteran/civilian students.

In terms of student veterans/service members' relationships with others in their college or university communities, the results are mixed. For all students, forming good relationships with others is an important way to successfully engage in campus life and academics. While student veterans/service members are more likely than nonveteran and civilian students to state that they have a friendly and supportive relationship with faculty and staff, the reverse is true of their relationship with other students.

- While 61 percent of student veterans/service members say they have a positive relationship with faculty members, 54 percent of nonveteran and civilian students feel the same way.
- Similarly, 46 percent of student veterans/service members say they feel supported by and have a sense of belonging with administrative personnel, versus 36 percent of nonveteran/civilian students.
- But in terms of relationships with other students, 58 percent of student veterans/service members say they have friendly and supportive relationships, compared with 62 percent of nonveteran/civilian students.

The NSSE also explores students' personal experiences, achievements, and skills acquisition. While there are a few areas of similarity, in general student veterans/service members are more likely than nonveteran/civilian students to report lower gains

during their time as students in higher education.

- Seventy percent of student veterans/service members, compared with 78 percent of nonveteran/civilian students, indicate gains in working effectively with others.
- Sixty-eight percent of student veterans/service members indicate gains in learning effectively on their own, compared with 75 percent of other students.
- Fifty percent of nonveteran/civilian students report gains in contributing to the welfare of their community, compared with 40 percent of student veterans/service members.

The average age of student veterans/service members enrolled in four-year universities is 33, compared with nonveteran/civilian students, whose average age is 22. To capture differences and similarities in campus integration among student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students of the same age, survey responses from student veterans age 25 and over—the age group to which veterans are more likely to belong—are compared with those of nonveteran/civilian students in the same age range. One aim of this study was to explore how students at a similar stage of life manage college and university life and education.

- Student veterans/service members age 25 and over are just as unlikely as nonveteran/civilian students to be engaged with faculty members on activities other than coursework, such as serving on committees, attending orientation, and participating in student life activities.
- Both student veterans/service members and nonveteran and civilian students age 25 and over invest their time in preparing for class. Approximately 72 percent of both groups report spending 11 or more hours per week studying.
- Student veterans/service members age 25 and over are less likely than nonveteran/civilian students to work with peers outside of class to prepare assignments.

- Student veterans and civilian students age 25 and over report lower gains in achievement as a result of their academic experiences than nonveteran/civilian students age 25 and over. Sixty-nine percent of student veterans/service members report gains in working effectively with others, compared with 77 percent of nonveteran and civilian students. In addition, 57 percent of student veterans/service members report gains in solving complex real-world problems, compared with 65 percent of nonveteran and civilian students.
- Student veterans/service members age 25 and over show somewhat greater cultural sensitivity than nonveteran/civilian students age 25 and over.

In general, NSSE data are revealing as to student veterans/service members' preferences and their allocation of time, in addition to demographic characteristics that can in part explain differences in their engagement in college and university life and education. Although their engagement is strong in some areas—especially in activities related to coursework—their engagement in co-curricular activities and other areas that form college and university life is not as strong as that of their nonveteran/civilian peers. Drawing attention to the unique experiences of student veterans/service members, which may not be well understood by faculty and staff, is important in institutions' efforts to create and adapt effective support systems for these students.

Methodology

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an annual survey of undergraduate students at four-year universities in the United States. The survey, administered by research staff affiliated with Indiana University, provides estimates of student academic engagement, perceptions of campus support, and perceptions of important gains in personal achievement while students are enrolled in higher education. In 2010, the NSSE was revised to include an identifier question on veteran status that allowed for a new kind of analysis, which was timely, given veterans' increased enrollment in postsecondary education since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and policymakers' efforts to improve support systems for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This brief utilizes data from the 2012 administration of the NSSE, which includes information from more than 288,000 first-year and senior full-time students at 584 United States institutions.³ One goal of this report is to pro-

vide information to supplement *From Soldier to Student II* (McBain et al. 2012), ACE's collaborative report with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the National Association of Veteran's Programs Administrators. As a result, only institutions that participated in both *From Soldier to Student II* and the NSSE were included in this study.⁴ In doing so, this brief connects the findings from the analysis of institutions to a related area of research on student engagement. The brief highlights results from 2,505 student veterans/service members who were enrolled full time at 132 institutions. For comparison purposes, more than 88,000 nonveteran/civilian students enrolled full time at these same institutions were included. Throughout the issue brief, the results for student veterans/service members are compared with the results for nonveteran/civilian students.⁵

³ Only results from four-year institutions are analyzed in this brief. While there is a separate survey of two-year institutions, called the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, it does not yet include a student veteran identifier.

⁴ The authors also analyzed the data from all 584 four-year institutions that participated in the NSSE, and the results were similar to those of the analysis of data from the 132 matched institutions in this issue brief.

⁵ All results are statistically significant (p-value<0.05).

Who Are the Student Veterans/Service Members?

Student veterans/service members are racially and ethnically diverse, and compared with nonveteran/civilian students, they are older, more likely to be male than female, and more likely to represent the first generation in their families to attend a college or university (see **Table 1**). These characteristics reveal useful information about student preferences, explaining in part why student veterans/service members' views on their participation in classroom activities and their

general integration on campus differ from those of other students. Take, for instance, the fact that 62 percent of student veterans/service members, versus 43 percent of nonveteran/civilian students, indicate they are first-generation students. A number of studies have shown the extent to which first-generation students' experiences differ from those of other students; for example, first-generation students are at greater risk of not persisting in higher education.⁶

Table 1. General Survey-Respondent Demographic Information

	Student Veterans/Service Members	Nonveteran/Civilian Students
Age	%	%
18–24	21.1	86.5
25 and over	78.9	13.5
Total %	100.0	100.0
Gender	%	%
Male	73.3	34.1
Female	26.7	65.9
Total %	100.0	100.0
Race/ethnicity	%	%
White	68.2	71.4
African American	10.6	7.1
Hispanic	7.8	6.8
Asian American	3.1	4.1
American Indian	1.5	0.9
Multi-racial/ethnic	1.7	1.9
Other	7.1	7.7
Total %	100.0	100.0
First-generation student	%	%
Yes	61.8	42.8
No	38.2	57.2
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

⁶ A report by the National Center for Education Statistics, *First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at Their College Transcripts*, found that first-generation students are less likely than other students to persist in postsecondary education. While 47 percent of first-generation students entering higher education between 1992 and 2000 obtained a postsecondary degree by 2000, 68 percent of students whose parents were college or university graduates did so during the same period (Chen and Carroll 2005).

These students are less likely to have guidance to help them navigate through their postsecondary education, are more likely to come from families with fewer financial resources, and are more likely to be in need of academic support—in general, their experience may be wrought with more anxiety than that of a typical student (Engle, Bermeo, and O’Brien 2006). Differences such as these have implications for how college and university administrators engage with student veterans/service members and provide them with effective support systems.

It is important to note that the majority of veterans starting higher education for the first time initially enroll in two-year institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education, while 84 percent of veterans initially enroll in two-year institutions, 16 percent of veterans start in four-year institutions.⁷ While the focus of this issue brief is four-year institutions, readers should note that in the continuum of learning, student veterans/service members’ education can begin outside of four-year universities. It is also important to consider that some veterans started their higher education either before or during active duty.

Overview of Findings

Fewer Student Veterans/Service Members Than Nonveteran/Civilian Students Feel Supported on Campus to Succeed

A key finding of *From Soldier to Student II*, which measured campus preparedness to support the increasing number of veterans seeking postsecondary education, was the extent to which college and university leaders had increased programs and services specifically designed for veterans. The results identified areas in which universities could still improve, especially in professional development training for faculty members as they interact with student veterans/service members with more frequency (an area of weakness that respondents in the study commonly mentioned). However, campus support systems for student veterans/service members had generally increased, despite a challenging economic environment in the aftermath of the Great Recession and declining state support for higher education.

Understanding the availability of programs and services is important, but what are the experiences of veterans and service members as students on campus? Taking stock of their experiences on college and university campuses—measuring both their ability to integrate socially and succeed

academically—is particularly important for campus assessment as more veterans and service members utilize the Post-9/11 GI Bill to enroll in postsecondary institutions. By gauging these students’ experiences, college and university leaders can assess how to improve programs and services to support student veterans/service members and improve their educational outcomes. It is worth noting, though, that veterans and service members are not a monolithic group; there are cultural, experiential, and other differences among groups of veterans and service members. For example, the experiences of active-duty military students who are using the Post-9/11 GI Bill to supplement tuition assistance from the Department of Defense may differ from those of National Guard members or those of disabled veterans.

In the end, efforts to create a better infrastructure supporting veterans and service members are ineffective if they do not perceive the intended benefits. How student veterans/service members view the support on campus may be affected by the world from which they come. In the military, the command-and-control organizational system sets clear directives and creates structure for its members. Therefore, campus administrators should consider how they approach student veterans/ser-

⁷ Authors’ calculation based on the National Center for Education Statistics Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Survey (BPS: 04/09).

vice members in the decentralized organizational structures of higher education—doing so will be as important as figuring out the components of the programs and services that work for veterans and service members.

Overall, results indicate that in various academic and co-curricular areas, a smaller percentage of student veterans/service members than nonveteran/civilian students feel they are adequately supported on college and university campuses. While the overall percentage of students who feel their institutions provide them with the support to succeed is high, there are some noticeable gaps between the responses of the two student types: 72 percent of student veterans/service members indicate that their institutions provide support to succeed academically very often or often, compared with 77 percent of nonveteran/civilian students. This difference, though not substantial, is noteworthy because various studies—including this brief’s analysis of NSSE data—show that veterans and service members in colleges and universities are more likely to be first-generation students (62 percent of veterans and service members versus 43 percent of other students), which is a risk factor for not realizing academic success. The first-generation risk factor of veterans and service members, in addition to the difference in veteran/nonveteran student responses, suggests that campus administrators could do more to elevate awareness of the academic needs of student veterans/service members.⁸

Extensive media coverage has also increased the public’s awareness of the integration challenges experienced by student veterans/service members. A number of news outlets have published stories about post-9/11 veterans’ struggle to adapt to the in-

dependent lifestyles of students, which contrast with the prescribed schedule of life in the military.⁹ These stories provide additional context to student veterans/service members’ greater risk of not progressing academically and not integrating successfully on campus. A common thread among all the stories is that, despite their skills and high levels of motivation, student veterans/service members sometimes struggle to navigate the world outside the military without the guidance of the armed forces command. Indeed, the chasm between how one leads life in the world of the military and in the rest of the world can be wide. And yet, time and time again, student veterans/service members find ways to adapt on higher education campuses, sometimes organically. For example, media reports have made reference to how veterans and service members find one another on campus to form peer support systems and student veterans’ organizations, making the transition to college and university life easier and providing a greater chance for academic success.¹⁰

Students increasingly juggle a variety of non-academic responsibilities, whether financial or personal. When students were asked about their non-academic responsibilities, differences between student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students resurfaced in the NSSE data: A smaller percentage of student veterans/service members than nonveteran/civilian students feel that their college or university helps them cope with non-academic responsibilities (26 percent of student veterans/service members versus 34 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) such as work and familial challenges. There is also a gap between the percentage of student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students who mentioned that their campus provides the support they need

8 The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study of the National Center for Education Statistics (BPS: 04/09) indicates that first-generation students’ first-year retention rate was 72 percent and their second-year retention rate was 51 percent, compared with 76 percent and 60 percent, respectively, for non-first-generation students.

9 See Paul Fain, “Scrambling to Understand Veterans,” *Inside Higher Ed*, December 4, 2012; Karen Brown, “Veterans Struggle to Fit Into College Campuses,” *Weekend Edition Saturday*, National Public Radio, October 10, 2009; and Jay Mathews, “Veterans, Struggling Students Need More College Support,” *Class Struggle*, *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2010.

10 See Phillip O’Connor, “Veterans Returning to College Face Unique Challenges,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 20, 2011 and Ryan Gallucci, “How to Help Veterans Succeed in College,” *At War*, *The New York Times*, February 13, 2013.

Table 2. Selected Areas in Which Students Veterans/Service Members and Nonveteran/Civilian Students Differ

To What Extent Does Your Institution Emphasize Each of the Following?	Student Veterans/ Service Members	Nonveteran/ Civilian Students
Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	%	%
Often/Very often	71.8	76.7
Sometimes/Never	28.2	23.3
Total %	100.0	100.0
Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities	%	%
Often/Very often	26.2	34.2
Sometimes/Never	73.8	65.8
Total %	100.0	100.0
Providing the support you need to thrive socially	%	%
Often/Very often	32.9	45.6
Sometimes/Never	67.1	54.4
Total %	100.0	100.0
Attending campus events and activities (e.g., special speakers)	%	%
Often/Very often	49.4	64.7
Sometimes/Never	50.6	35.3
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

to succeed socially (33 percent of student veterans/service members; 46 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) (see **Table 2**). For some student veterans/service members who may have experienced or witnessed trauma while serving in the military, interacting with individuals not familiar with or sensitive to their past can be awkward or uneasy (Raybeck 2010).¹¹ These differences could potentially reflect veterans' and service members' greater maturity and independence. While administrators can continue to help veterans and service members adjust to their new environment on campus with programs and services, campus leaders could also inculcate better awareness in nonveteran/civilian students in an effort to create an open and caring

environment for the veterans and service members who are a part of the campus community.

A smaller percentage of student veterans/service members than nonveteran/civilian students (49 percent of student veterans/service members versus 65 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) indicate that their college or university encouraged students to attend the various events and activities held on campus. This perception may be somewhat explained by the fact that veterans and service members are not as frequently on campus as other students are (the topic of which will be explored in the forthcoming section), and thus veterans and service members may be predisposed to feeling less supported.

11 Also see Clarence V. Reynolds, "Military Veterans Face Challenge of Going from Combat to Campus," *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, March 20, 2013.

Student Veterans/Service Members Engaged in Class Work, but Not as Much in College/University Life

Though student veterans/service members are engaged in activities related to class work, they may not have the time to participate in co-curricular activities. Research, including data presented in this brief, has shown that student veterans/service members are generally older than nonveteran/civilian students and are more likely to have dependents to care for (Radford 2009). Among other things, student veterans/service members are also more likely to live off campus and commute to class, perhaps contributing to time constraints.¹² Responses to the NSSE illustrate the emphasis that student veterans/service members place on academic work, provided that the tasks do not interfere with their responsibilities at home. According to the survey, student veterans/service members are less likely than nonveteran/civilian students to invest additional time outside of class on activities that are not central to fulfilling class requirements.

For instance, the differences in the number of hours that student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students commit to both academic and non-academic pursuits are striking. Nonveter-

an/civilian students are more likely than student veterans/service members to spend at least 10 hours per week working at on-campus jobs, participating in co-curricular activities, and relaxing and socializing (see **Table 3**). Student veterans/service members are less able to invest their time in activities that are associated with leisure or facilitated by living on or close to campus. On the other hand, student veterans/service members are more likely than their nonveteran/civilian peers to be engaged in preparing for class, working for pay off campus, providing care for dependents, and commuting to class.

When asked whether they discuss grades or assignments with their instructors, an effort necessary for successful progression in courses, student veterans/service members are slightly more likely than nonveteran/civilian students to do so (60 percent of student veterans/service members versus 58 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Similarly, student veterans/service members are slightly more likely to discuss ideas from readings with faculty members outside of class (29 percent of student veterans/service members versus 26 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Yet student veterans/service members are less likely to work with faculty members on activities other than coursework (18 percent of student veterans/

Table 3. Activities on Which Student Veterans/Service Members and Nonveteran/Civilian Students Spend More Than 10 Hours per Week

	% of Student Veterans/ Service Members	% of Nonveteran/ Civilian Students
Preparing for class	69.5	65.4
Relaxing and socializing	35.2	44.1
Working for pay off campus	43.1	29.6
Providing care for dependents living with them	43.1	12.1
Participating in co-curricular activities	10.9	17.0
Working for pay on campus	8.7	13.9
Commuting to class	11.1	8.3

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

¹² According to the 2012 NSSE, 72 percent of student veterans/service members drive to campus (rather than living on campus or walking to campus), versus 39 percent of nonveteran/civilian students.

Table 4. Percentage of Student Veterans/Service Members and Nonveteran/Civilian Students Indicating Participation in Various Academic Activities

	Student Veterans/ Service Members	Nonveteran/ Civilian Students
Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor		
Often/Very often	59.9	57.6
Sometimes/Never	40.1	42.4
Total %	100.0	100.0
Discussed ideas from readings with faculty members outside of class		
Often/Very often	29.2	25.5
Sometimes/Never	70.8	74.5
Total %	100.0	100.0
Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework		
Often/Very often	17.7	22.9
Sometimes/Never	82.3	77.1
Total %	100.0	100.0
Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments		
Often/Very often	49.4	56.7
Sometimes/Never	50.6	43.3
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

service members versus 23 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) or to collaborate with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments (49 percent of student veterans/service members versus 57 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) (see **Table 4**).¹³ These opportunities are valuable because they supplement the learning that takes place in the classroom. By not investing time in these activities, student veterans/service members are not positioning themselves for full engagement in all that higher education has to offer. Data suggest that student veterans/service members, who are at higher risk of not completing their postsecondary education, may benefit most by being more engaged in activities they do not perceive as essential for fulfilling course requirements.

Similarly, student veterans/service members are less likely to participate in activities associated with experiential learning, such as community service, internships or practicums, learning communities, and study abroad. For instance, while 82 percent of nonveteran/civilian students indicate that they either have plans to participate in or have already participated in community service or volunteer work, 68 percent of student veterans/service members say they plan to participate or have already done so. Taking part in such activities can indeed be challenging for the many individuals balancing work with home responsibilities. On the one hand, it is possible that student veterans/service members may feel “aged out” of the activities generally associated with younger students with less experience. On the other,

¹³ While differences between the responses of student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students are small, the results are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5. Quality of the Relationships of Student Veterans/Service Members and Nonveteran/Civilian Students with People at Their Institutions

	Student Veterans/ Service Members	Nonveteran/ Civilian Students
Relationships with other students	%	%
Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging	57.5	61.7
Somewhat friendly	33.7	31.0
Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation	8.8	7.3
Total %	100.0	100.0
Relationships with faculty members	%	%
Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging	60.6	53.6
Somewhat friendly	31.8	38.8
Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation	7.6	7.6
Total %	100.0	100.0
Relationships with administrative personnel and offices	%	%
Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging	46.1	36.0
Somewhat friendly	37.3	44.1
Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation	16.6	19.9
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

they may simply choose to focus their energy on other aspects of life rather than on having the “complete” educational experience at their more advanced age. Because of competition for their attention, student veterans/service members may have no choice but to allocate their time much more selectively than a typical student might.

Interestingly, student veterans/service members are more likely than nonveteran/civilian students to have participated in or plan to participate in an independent study program or self-designed major (26 percent of student veterans/service members versus 22 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). They are also more likely to have participated in or plan to participate in a culminating senior experience such as a senior project (66 percent of student veterans/service members versus 61 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Both results may be a reflection of the greater age and maturity of

student veterans/service members and the unique experiences they bring to campus. These academic choices may allow for flexibility in terms of classroom attendance, increased acceptance of military credit, and a chance to demonstrate their different backgrounds by infusing their military service into academic discourse.

Differences in Student Veterans/Service Members' Relationships with Others May Affect Their Integration on Campus

Another factor that influences student veterans/service members' ability to fit in on campus is whether they feel comfortable around their nonveteran/civilian student peers and other members of the campus community. It is often mentioned that student veterans/service members' transition from military service to an academic community can be a challenge.¹⁴

¹⁴ Student Veterans of America has worked to improve student veterans' experiences and integration on college and university campuses.

Table 6. Student Veterans/Service Members' and Nonveteran/Civilian Students' Perceived Institutional Contribution to Their Gains in Knowledge, Skills, and Personal Development

	Student Veterans/ Service Members	Nonveteran/ Civilian Students
Acquiring a broad general education	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	78.0	82.7
Some/Very little	22.0	17.3
Total %	100.0	100.0
Speak clearly and effectively	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	67.0	70.7
Some/Very little	33.0	29.3
Total %	100.0	100.0
Analyze quantitative problems	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	83.8	86.2
Some/Very little	16.2	13.8
Total %	100.0	100.0
Working effectively with others	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	69.9	78.0
Some/Very little	30.1	22.0
Total %	100.0	100.0
Learning effectively on your own	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	68.1	74.6
Some/Very little	31.9	25.4
Total %	100.0	100.0
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	48.8	57.3
Some/Very little	51.2	42.7
Total %	100.0	100.0
Solving complex real-world problems	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	57.7	63.3
Some/Very little	42.3	36.7
Total %	100.0	100.0
Contributing to the welfare of your community	%	%
Very much/Quite a bit	39.6	50.0
Some/Very little	60.4	50.0
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

A report published in 2010 by the RAND Corporation and ACE showed the extent to which student veterans/service members sometimes do not relate to their nonveteran/civilian peers on campus, particularly those who have recently graduated from high school (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley). And yet, forming relationships with new people is an important way for all students—both veterans and nonveterans—to adapt to campus and academic life. For veterans and service members in particular, adapting to campus life and the people with whom they are interacting may have a greater impact on their ability not only to progress and succeed in their studies but also to reengage with the communities they left when they joined the military.

When both student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students were asked in the NSSE about their relationships with the members of the campus community, student veterans/service members are somewhat more likely than nonveteran/civilian students to describe their relationships with faculty members and campus administrators as friendly and supportive. Sixty-one percent of student veterans/service members versus 54 percent of nonveteran/civilian students say they have a positive relationship with faculty members. A similar gap exists in their responses about their relationships with campus administrators: Forty-six percent of student veterans/service members say their relationship with administrators is positive, versus 36 percent of nonveteran/civilian students. However, student veterans/service members are less likely than nonveteran/civilian students to describe their relationship with other students in the same way. While 58 percent of student veterans/service members say they have friendly and supportive relationships with other students, 62 percent of nonveteran/civilian students report feeling the same way. Differences in age, as well as in the commensurate maturity level between the student veterans/service members and traditional-age students (typically age 24 and under), may affect student veterans/service members' ability to form a relationship that is as positive as their relationship with faculty members

and campus administrators (see **Table 5**). The average age of student veterans/service members is 33, versus 22 for nonveteran/civilian students.

Having a good relationship with other members of the campus community, in addition to having a strong programmatic and service support system, can affect the integration and overall collegiate experience of students.

Students were asked: “To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development?” Though there are a few similarities, most of the indicators measuring gains from enrolling at the institution significantly favor the nonveteran/civilian students (see **Table 6**). Student veterans/service members, when compared with their nonveteran/civilian peers, report lower gains in academic areas such as acquiring a broad general education, quantitative skills, and learning on their own. These student veterans/service members are also less likely to report high gains in speaking skills, working with others, and solving complex real-world problems. They also report lower gains in understanding people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. It is worth noting that student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students start from different baselines. The experiences gained by student veterans/service members outside higher education could moderate the gains possible in postsecondary education, in comparison with nonveteran/civilian students who have fewer real-world experiences.

Some of these results speak to certain fundamental differences between student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students. As mentioned earlier, student veterans/service members are generally older and have responsibilities off campus that can attenuate their experience on college and university campuses. But some of these students may experience other challenges such as physical injuries or post-traumatic stress. The fact that a lower percentage of student veterans/service members indicate gains in working effectively with others (70 percent of student veterans/

Table 7. Areas in Which Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over and Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over Are Similarly Engaged

Q: In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?

	Student Veterans/ Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Worked with other students on projects during class	%	%
Often/Very often	48.0	44.9
Sometimes/Never	52.0	55.1
Total %	100.0	100.0
Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework	%	%
Often/Very often	15.6	16.7
Sometimes/Never	84.4	83.3
Total %	100.0	100.0
Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor	%	%
Often/Very often	36.3	38.6
Sometimes/Never	63.7	61.4
Total %	100.0	100.0

	Student Veterans/ Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities)	%	%
11 hours or more	71.6	71.6
10 hours or less	28.4	28.4
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

service members versus 78 percent of nonveteran/civilian students), learning effectively on their own (68 percent of student veterans/service members versus 75 percent of nonveteran/civilian students), and contributing to the welfare of their community (40 percent of student veterans/service members versus 50 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) may indicate that the distinct characteristics of

student veterans/service members make them less likely to engage on campus.

But one should approach student veterans/service members and their connection to college and university life and academic success cautiously. Trying to fit this unique group into the traditional engagement model may not be appropriate, nor

should integration be expected in the same way that a typical student might achieve it.¹⁵ This model of engagement often views a successful student as one who participates in extracurricular activities, works with peers on campus, and attends lectures outside of class, a profile most often aligned with that of a residential student with few responsibilities apart from class. However, veterans and service members do not always fit neatly into this paradigm. They tend to be older than most students on campus and to have more life experience; some have traveled extensively, gaining experience that may surpass any study abroad or experiential learning opportunity. It is entirely possible that despite the greater responsibilities student veterans/service members have outside of class, they may *intentionally* choose not to participate in certain activities because the opportunities to engage on campus are not as important in their stage of life.

Student Veterans/Service Members and Nonveteran/Civilian Students Over 25 Share Similar Experiences, with Some Exceptions

This issue brief has suggested that some of the differences in engagement among student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students are, to a large extent, associated with responsibilities that older student veterans/service members have, and which nonveteran/civilian students do not. Nonveteran/civilian students, who are more likely to be younger than student veterans/service members, do not have as many interests competing for their time and thus may have more opportunities to integrate in campus and academic life. But how does the picture of engagement change when comparing students of similar age? By comparing individuals of similar age, it may be possible to observe nuances between student veterans/service members and their peers not visible when comparing students of all ages.

When comparing nonveteran/civilian students age 25 and over with student veterans/service members age 25 and over—the age group to which veterans and service members are more likely to belong—the results are mixed. Student veterans/service members age 25 and over are just as unlikely as nonveteran/civilian students age 25 and over to be engaged with faculty members on activities other than coursework (16 percent of student veterans/service members; 17 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Given older students' likelihood of having family and job responsibilities, regardless of veteran status, the low percentage of participation in this area outside of essential classwork is not surprising.

On the other hand, older student veterans/service members are almost as likely as older nonveteran/civilian students to have worked with other students on projects during class (52 percent of student veterans/service members; 55 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Older student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students are equally likely to have talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor. Both groups also indicate spending similar amounts of time preparing for class, with approximately 72 percent from each group indicating they spend 11 or more hours per week studying (see **Table 7**). These results, which indicate the seriousness with which both older student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students approach their education, contrast with the comparison made earlier in the brief between student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students of all ages. In that instance, nonveteran/civilian students put less emphasis on essential areas of academic participation than did student veterans/service members of all ages.

While the engagement of student veterans/service members and nonveteran/civilian students is similar in some areas—namely in the areas of essential academic concerns and class preparation—it is not

¹⁵ For example, Alexander Astin's model of engagement posits that students learn more the more they spend time on campus, participate actively in student organizations and other extracurricular activities, form relationships with faculty and students, and—in general—play an integral role in determining their degree of involvement on campus (1984). George Kuh, Ernest Pascarella, and Patrick Terenzini have also put forth theories of their own (Zhao and Kuh 2004; Pascarella et al. 2004).

Table 8. Areas in Which Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over Fare Worse Than Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over

Q: In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

	Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	%	%
Often/Very often	48.0	54.0
Sometimes/Never	52.0	46.0
Total %	100.0	100.0
Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)	%	%
Often/Very often	64.8	69.8
Sometimes/Never	35.2	30.2
Total %	100.0	100.0

Q: To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?

	Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Working effectively with others	%	%
Quite a bit/Very much	77.3	69.1
Some/Very little	22.7	30.9
Total %	100.0	100.0
Writing clearly and effectively	%	%
Quite a bit/Very much	75.8	80.3
Some/Very little	24.2	19.7
Total %	100.0	100.0
Solving complex real-world problems	%	%
Quite a bit/Very much	56.6	63.1
Some/Very little	43.4	36.9
Total %	100.0	100.0

Q: To what extent does your institution emphasize the following?

	Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	%	%
Quite a bit/Very much	24.8	28.2
Some/Very little	75.2	71.8
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

Table 9. Areas in Which Student Veterans/Service Members Age 25 and Over Fare Better Than Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over

Q: In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

	Student Veterans/ Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	%	%
Often/Very often	57.9	53.5
Sometimes/Never	42.1	46.5
Total %	100.0	100.0
Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	%	%
Often/Very often	57.6	54.8
Sometimes/Never	42.4	45.2
Total %	100.0	100.0

Q: Select the circle that best represents the quality of your relationship with people at your institution.

	Student Veterans/ Service Members Age 25 and Over	Nonveteran/Civilian Students Age 25 and Over
Relationships with administrative personnel and offices	%	%
Friendly, supportive, sense of belonging	49.5	46.6
Somewhat friendly	35.4	36.5
Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation	15.1	16.9
Total %	100.0	100.0

Source: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012. Authors' calculation.

the same in all areas. For instance, older student veterans/service members are less likely to have worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments than older nonveteran/civilian students (48 percent of student veterans/service members versus 54 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Older student veterans/service members are also less likely to indicate that they spend as much time discussing ideas from readings or classes outside of class with others (65 percent of stu-

dent veterans/service members versus 70 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). These student veterans/service members also report lower gains as a result of their academic experiences, compared with nonveteran/civilian students of similar age. For instance, student veterans/service members report lower gains in working effectively with others (69 percent compared with 77 percent); writing clearly and effectively (76 percent compared with 80 percent); and solving complex real-world prob-

lems (57 percent compared with 65 percent). When the older students answer the question, “To what extent does your institution emphasize helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities?” student veterans/service members are less likely than nonveteran/civilian students to respond “quite a bit” or “very much” (25 percent of student veterans/service members versus 28 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) (see **Table 8**).

In part, some of these differences may be a manifestation of veterans and service members’ unique backgrounds, which make the transition from the military to academia indeed challenging. But there certainly may be other possibilities, including the preference for independent work.

Conversely, student veterans/service members age 25 and over are more likely than nonveteran/civilian students age 25 and over to have had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than their own (58 percent of student veterans/service members; 54 percent of nonveteran/civilian students). Similarly, a greater share of student veterans/service members report having serious conversations with students who are very different from them in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values (58 percent of student veterans/service members; 55 percent of nonveteran/civilian students) (see **Table 9**). As mentioned earlier, student veterans/service members in general are more racially and ethnically diverse than nonveteran/civilian students. The greater cultural sensitivity of student veterans/service members is not surprising insofar as their own identity goes; being open to different views and in-

dividuals may be a reflection of the diverse nature of student veterans/service members in general. It is also true that, before entering academia, veterans and service members come from a U.S. military that is more racially and ethnically diverse than the U.S. population.¹⁶ Student veterans/service members also reported higher-quality relationships with the administrative personnel and offices on their campus (50 percent) compared with nonveteran/civilian students (46 percent).

While these results are not simple to interpret, they do show that the experiences of student veterans/service members, when compared with other students of a similar age, cannot be assumed to be the same. The results indicate that student veterans/service members tend to be older adults whose experiences of integrating into life at colleges and universities can be more challenging in some areas. Clearly, student veterans/service members of all ages engage in postsecondary education in ways that are different than nonveteran/civilian students of all ages. Many of the differences in engagement point to differences in maturity and the amount of responsibilities they may or may not have. But for a subset of the students (i.e., older students), the evidence shows that student veterans/service members and nonveteran and civilian students both are often equally engaged in ways that lead to academic progress and success. Student veterans/service members are more involved than older nonveteran/civilian students in certain areas, particularly in demonstrating greater cultural sensitivity to people not like them, while showing less investment in non-core, but still helpful, curricular activities in their academic pursuits.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, this report provides additional evidence that many student veterans/service members attending baccalaureate-level institutions are older and more likely to be first-generation students and students of color than their

nonveteran/civilian student peers. These differences provide an important backdrop for other results, which indicate that many veterans and service members are not feeling as supported by their institutions and are not as engaged in

¹⁶ Authors’ calculation based on the Department of Defense’s Armed Forces personnel data from the Defense Manpower Data Center and 2009 U.S. population data from the U.S. Census.

non-core academic areas as their peers. Student veterans/service members are more likely to report spending increased time on non-academic activities, such as dependent care and working for pay, which likely contributes to a more stressful academic experience. Though many student veterans/service members report good relationships with faculty, they are not as likely to report good relationships with other students and are less likely to engage with other students when completing class assignments. As a result, these student veterans/service members may not be benefiting from important interactions that lead to improved academic integration in their campus environment. Though many veterans and service members do report important gains in their experiences at institutions, they generally report lower gains as a group than their nonveteran/civilian peers in many academic-work-related skills.

It is important to remember that *From Soldier to Student II* only surveyed student veterans/service members enrolled full time at participating institutions. In general, most of those institutions reported enhanced programs to support veterans and service members; therefore, one may be surprised by the results of this report, which are that veterans and service members generally feel less supported or engaged. However, student veterans/service members do report high-quality relationships with administrative personnel and offices, which may in part reflect their interactions with support services that target student veterans/service members. It is important to understand, though, that many programs and services for veterans are either new to campuses or have recently been scaled up to support the many post-9/11 veterans who are now enrolled in postsecondary institutions. It may require time before the effectiveness of these new infrastructures can be understood and the possible impact of the programs and services can be assessed. For many institutions, enrollment increases of veterans and service members preceded or coincided with institutions' decision to add programs and services for veterans and service members.

The results also point to the seriousness with which student veterans/service members approach their academic programs. On activities they consider vital for successful progression, a greater percentage of veterans and service members than nonveteran/civilian students report investing time in those activities. Veterans and service members are more likely to prepare for class, discuss grades or assignments with an instructor, and discuss ideas from reading with faculty outside of class than nonveteran/civilian students.

One way that higher education administrators can approach the findings of this brief is to seek to understand what is and is not important for student veterans/service members. Clearly, student veterans/service members want to do well academically, as demonstrated by their time investment. This research also showed that overall, student veterans/service members, whether older than the average student or not, do not invest their energy on *traditional* "high-impact" areas, such as internships, community service, and study abroad. These high-impact, experiential programs and services may not fit the needs of veterans and service members because these students are more likely than nonveteran/civilian students to have responsibilities away from campus that compete for their time. Also, veterans and service members already bring with them valuable real-life experiences from the military that may make these high-impact programs less relevant. For veterans and service members, college and university administrators may want to develop new kinds of high-impact programs and services that bring more focus to learning opportunities. Veterans and service members seem more likely to engage in these activities than in those that are not essential to their academic progress.

In addition, higher education administrators can use these results to initiate a dialogue on their campus with faculty, staff, and their own student veterans/service members regarding the quality of veterans' and service members' academic exper-

riences. In some ways, the academic experiences of student veterans/service members are shared with their similarly aged counterparts, yet their unique experiences may not be well understood by the faculty or staff. The faculty and staff would benefit from this dialogue by becoming more educated regarding the student veteran/service member experience. Student veterans/service members would benefit from learning more about the services offered at their campus, and from faculty and staff who are dedicated to helping them succeed.

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