From *Combat* to the *Classroom*:
Veterans Returning to School after Iraq and Afghanistan

By Jodi Koehn-Plake

With the end of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is seeing the largest influx of student veterans since the original GI Bill. The Post-9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008 provides benefits at a level not known since the 1944 GI Bill. An added source of assistance is the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) which has removed barriers to campus accommodations for many disabilities, particularly psychological and cognitive ones. This has enabled veterans to go back to school to pursue a higher education who would have been unable before.

Re-entering an academic environment after the military poses some unique problems. Veterans Upward Bound plays a crucial role in helping veterans transition from the military to civilian and academic settings by providing intensive basic skills development and short-term remedial courses for military veterans to help them successfully transition to postsecondary education. With the help of VUB, veterans learn how to secure support from available resources such as the Veterans Administration, veterans associations, and various state and local agencies that serve veterans.
The veterans seeking help now from VUB programs are different, demographically, than in the past. In general, they are a little younger, which is to be expected. There has also been an increase in the number of women. “In the past year, we have had more than twice as many women enter our program,” said VUB Director at the University of Pennsylvania, Diane Sandefur. “Usually, we have 5-6 women per year; this year we’ve had 18.” Christine Wolf, VUB Adviser at Western Nebraska Community College, says that veterans returning from recent deployments are looking for an education that will lead them to a career. “Most have had little or no college education before they entered the service, and are now looking to the VA education benefits awarded to them,” she said. “They seem to come back home to where they were raised to spend more time with family and work on their education.”

“One problem the veterans encounter is realizing that they want to get a higher education and recognizing they need help to get there.”

Diane Sandefur, VUB Director at the University of Pennsylvania

Veterans returning to school face many challenges—psychologically, academically, and socially. Christine Wolf says that depending on their experience overseas, they can be on edge, constantly vigilant. “Some who were involved in duties outside the wire, or military posts, seem to have an adrenaline rush that is difficult to match here in civilian life,” she said. “They can be quick to react to an unfamiliar or loud noise, and can be uncomfortable unless they can be aware of their surroundings.” Natricia Cordie, VetSuccess Counselor at San Diego State University says that it’s hard to come out of the military without some kind of condition—even if it’s not considered a disability.

After returning from active duty, veteran students need to find new ways of coping with problems they encounter—which is different from the way they coped while in the military. Jonathan Lopez, Veterans Upward Bound Program Advisor at the University of Arkansas, says that he had a student who was used to being able to yell and act violently to settle conflict—although he had no intention of causing harm to anyone. “While that’s acceptable in the military, it isn’t allowed on campus,” Lopez said. “He had to learn to cope differently.”

A related problem, Wolf reported, is that many students have various forms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which can cause memory loss, insomnia, nightmares, and depression. “Some are able to deal with these issues on their own, while others have found help with VA Counseling services,” Wolf said. “A few are coming back with undiagnosed TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury), only to find they cannot function in civilian life, but are unable to get the help they so desperately need from the VA.” This is where programs like Veterans Upward Bound can help.

Some veterans say that the challenge of managing PTSD, depression, VA appointments, and life while trying to go to school is sometimes overwhelming.

One of the biggest challenges reported by veterans is trying to balance their time between school, family, and work. “For me personally, balancing school, supplemental instructions and tutoring, with family time has posed some problems,” said retired Army Sgt. Dale Spiehs, a VUB student at Western Nebraska Community College. “I believe this will continue to be a struggle whether it is work or school; you inevitably do the best you can and hope that no one feels slighted.” Another veteran, Charles, a VUB student at the University of Pennsylvania, echoes this sentiment. “I feel my greatest challenge... is dealing with my family and finding time to be a student,” he said. “My house is like a zoo with five children always wanting daddy’s attention.”

Another challenge for the veterans is acclimating themselves to being back in an academic environment. “Difficulty with mathematics that I have not used in many years is a major challenge,” said Chris Baker, a VUB student at Western Nebraska Community College. “Getting back up to speed with math and grammar rules is difficult also, relearning study and note-taking skills is another obstacle to overcome.” Another veteran, Terry, at the University of Pennsylvania says that it is discouraging when you’re not “with it.” “I’ve been out of school for over thirty
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<th>BENEFIT DETAILS</th>
<th>NEW GI BILL</th>
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<td>Eligibility Requirements</td>
<td>To qualify for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, you must have served after September 10, 2001 and needed either 90 aggregate days of active duty service or 30 continuous days and discharged with a service-connected disability. Also, with this bill, there is no enrollment fee.</td>
<td>Served at least a 2-year enlistment after June 30, 1985 and paid the $1,200 program enrollment fee.</td>
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The answer depends on the percentage of benefits for which you qualify, based on the length of your military service, the state in which your college resides, whether the college is a private or public school, and whether you are taking resident classes, online, or a combination of both.

Length of service requirements and associated benefit percentages include:
- 36 months, or at least 30 days on active duty and discharged due to a service-connected disability—100 percent
- 30 to 36 months—90 percent
- 24 to 30 months—80 percent
- 18 to 24 months—70 percent
- 12 to 18 months—60 percent
- 6 to 12 months—50 percent
- 0 to 6 months—0 percent

| G.I. Bill Payout (New G.I. Bill & Old G.I. Bill) | Tuition and fees, up to the maximum amount per state, are paid directly to the school each term. The maximum amount is based on an undergraduate program at the most expensive public college or university in that state's state. | With 3 years or more of service, the current payment is $1,221 per month; with less than 3 years, the rate is $1,073 per month. This is a nationwide, annually-adjusted, fixed, monthly payment rate paid directly to the veteran. |

The new bill can include both a living expense and a books/supplies stipend. Paid monthly directly to the student, the living expense stipend is based on the BAH for an E-5 with dependents in the zip code in which the college is located. The books/supplies stipend is also paid to the veteran, but proportionally each term for up to a total of $1,000 per year. An online-only program does not qualify for the living expense stipend. (New G.I. Bill & Old G.I. Bill) |

Under the old program, a veteran does not receive any additional payments for these or any other expenses. |

| Full/Time Student Payment Rate | The new bill allows for up to 36 months of benefits to family members. Benefits are supplementary to family members are defined as spouse and children. A spouse can use the transferred benefits immediately, while a son or daughter can use them only after a service member has completed 10 years of service. The sponsor may revoke or modify benefit transfer at any time. |

The Department of Defense is currently working on the eligibility details, but basic eligibility allows all service members who are still serving, with 6 years of service who agree to reenlist for 4 more years, to transfer up to 36 months of benefits to family members. Benefits transferability is limited to the Army and the service member may transfer up to 36 months to family members at any time. The sponsor may revoke or modify benefit transfer at any time, as well. |

| Additional Expense Payments | The benefit period spans 15 years from the last period of active duty of at least 90 aggregate days or more. |

This old bill benefit period spans 10 years after the last separation or discharge. |

| Benefit Expiration | The new bill provides for education and training courses taught at accredited colleges and universities (including:
- College, business, technical, or vocational courses
- Distance learning including online and correspondence courses
- Certification tests (limited to one test)
- Flight training) |

For eligibility under the old bill, you had to pay a $100 per month for the first 12 months. |

Benefits transferability is limited to the Army and the service member may transfer up to 36 months to family members at any time. The sponsor may revoke or modify benefit transfer at any time, as well. |

| Education Programs Covered | This is a new provision in the G.I. Bill. Under the Yellow Ribbon Program, participating institutions, whose tuition or fees are above what the bill pays, agree to waive half of the additional fees. The VA picks up the other half with no additional charge to the veteran's entitlement. This can be a very useful benefit option, if veterans are attending a private institution, graduate school, or a terminal where they pay out-of-state tuition. |

This did not exist under the old bill. |
years,” he said. “There are a lot of things to adjust to and overcome because there is so much to learn and there is the need to balance school and work together.”

Christine Wolf notes that some veterans find they have no or very few study skills and are not in the habit of listening so they don’t absorb information presented during class. One of the problems is time management. “It is easy for them to underestimate the amount of time their homework will take or put off assignments until the last minute; sometimes it takes a rough semester for them to learn how to balance everything,” Wolf said. “While some veterans can afford to repeat a semester, others can’t.”

Confidence and uncertainty provide further obstacles to overcome. One veteran from the University of Pennsylvania says that having the confidence to go to college was his greatest challenge. “I never thought I would go to college; some kids are brought up knowing that they will go, but I never thought that I had the skills to go to college,” he said. One problem the veterans encounter is realizing that they want to get a higher education and recognizing they need help to get there says Diane Sandefur. “A big challenge is coming to grips with the fact that they need pre-college help and can’t go straight to college.”

Veterans returning to school can also be the target of for-profit institutions which give misleading information and false promises. Jonathan Lopez says that the majority of the veterans he’s spoken to reported that during their Transition Assistance Program—a mandatory class taken when leaving the military and going back to civilian life—they were contacted by for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix. Despite what they were told upon enrolling, many veterans find out later that the credits earned at such institutions cannot be transferred to a four-year university. “So they’ve spent their GI Bill money and have no credit to show for it,” Lopez said.

Why Go Back to School?

There are numerous reasons why veterans choose not to go to college after high school but decide to go back to school after being deployed. For older veterans, one of those reasons is the current economy, Christine Wolf said. “After having the same job for years, they are having to re-career due to employee cut backs or layoffs,” she said. “They are looking to update their skills in computer, math, and writing to make themselves more employable for whatever they can find.”

One veteran, Charles, says that he always thought about going to college after his four-year tour of active duty, but that there were always circumstances that came up, such as children, that changed his priorities. He says that if he had not been injured in Iraq, he probably wouldn’t have gone on to college because he was making a good living in the Ironworkers Union.

Chris Baker says that after high school, he didn’t have the money for college and didn’t feel challenged in high school, so he enlisted in the Army. After spending six years in the Army and three deployments to Iraq, he decided that grunt work was not what he wanted in life. “I felt like my intelligence was being wasted and not appreciated in the Army,” he said. “And in some instances, intelligence was punished.” Baker says that “you’re paid to work, not think” was a common phrase. After working with a Navy psychologist during his third and final deployment, Baker realized that he wanted to learn to help people. “College provides me the means to reach my objective in obtaining a Ph.D. in psychology so that I will be able to help other veterans who have faced similar difficulties; perhaps even saving a life in the process,” he said.

Another veteran, Dale Splehs, says he wanted to join the military right after high school, but went to college instead—at the urging of his family. He earned
26 credits, but says he had no sense of direction and didn’t know what he wanted to do for a career—so he joined the Army.

How the VUB Program Has Helped and Why It’s Important

Many veterans expressed appreciation for the VUB staff—many of whom understand what they’re going through, having served in the military themselves—and the support they provide. “One of the greatest days was listening to a VUB instructor talk about the war experience as it meant so much to me to connect in this way,” said Terry*, a VUB student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dale Spiehs, who is transferring to a four-year college in the fall, says that he’s completed three semesters at a community college and for two of those, he’s enrolled late—but the VUB staff has always had him up and running by the first day of class—“even making last minute changes for me ensuring that my needs were met and that I never once missed a beat,” he said. “My confidence in them is incalculable,” Spiehs said. “I am afraid of the upcoming move to the University of Nebraska for the fall semester as I cannot imagine I will be so fortunate to work with the caliber of persons that I have here.”

“I truly believe that if it wasn’t for this program, I currently would not be enrolled in any higher education, and would become another of the 90% of veterans who never use a dime of their hard earned G.I. Benefits,” said Chris Baker. “Many veterans are, unfortunately, untapped potential students who many colleges do not reach; we need programs like VUB to reach out to veterans and ensure that their educational benefits and needs are being met.”

“Programs like VUB help avoid wasted potential in the brave men and women completing their service commitments,” said Baker. “If education is the doorway to a happy, productive life, then surely the VUB program helps veterans find the key to that door.”

* Last name withheld.