Defining Veteran-Friendly and Military-Friendly for Higher Education
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This white paper was published in partnership with Pearson Education. Pearson is the world’s leading learning company, with 40,000 employees in more than 80 countries working to help people of all ages to make measurable progress in their lives through learning.

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When the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect in 2009, many military veterans and servicemembers sought to take advantage of the educational and financial opportunities the new law offered. Consequently, colleges and universities of all types recognized the opportunity to expand their enrollments and some suggested their policies, programs, and campuses were “military-friendly” or “veteran-friendly.”

In the ensuing years, veteran advocates and higher education stakeholders have searched for common ground on what, exactly, the terms mean. Into this void have stepped media publications that survey colleges and universities and then rate or rank institutions according to criteria these media entities have developed. In addition, at least three higher education groups have created best practices guides for students and institutions alike.

The federal government and state governments have also been involved in shaping the narrative around what constitutes a veteran or military supportive institution. The Department of Defense created a memorandum of understanding that allows institutions that have signed the agreement to enroll servicemembers and offer them certain educational benefits. In an effort to protect and support veterans and servicemembers, President Obama has signed an Executive Order that provides guidelines for consumer education, institutional transparency, and educational supports. The Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, a unique entity with a defense contract, maintains a set of standards for institutions to follow. Finally, State Approving Agencies are responsible for reviewing, evaluating, and approving the quality of education and training programs under state and federal criteria.

Taken together, these efforts have created a foundation to sharpen the definition of a military-friendly or veteran-friendly institution. While some have suggested adding information on educational outcomes to the mix, limited data exist on graduation rates, persistence rates, and post-graduation employment numbers for military veterans and servicemembers. For now, the current model of achieving transparency, compliance, and support through voluntary participation in all three areas—government compliance, media publication surveys, and higher education best practices guides—helps identify whether an institution is military-friendly or veteran-friendly.
Introduction

Colleges and universities that want to appeal to servicemembers and military veterans often say they are “military-friendly” or “veteran-friendly.” They cite various programs, policies, and external awards to justify their claims. But consensus is elusive on the meaning of the terms, and the terms lack credibility among veterans, servicemembers, and competing institutions. Recently, the federal government and private entities have established regulations and guidelines that help clarify what constitutes a military-friendly or veteran-friendly college or university.

The terms military-friendly and veteran-friendly to describe institutions of higher learning (IHL) likely gained mainstream attention after implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009. However, before the rollout of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, IHLs recognized the growing student servicemember population—mostly using military tuition assistance—as the military force increased in size to accommodate engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2008, at the Council for College and Military Educators (CCME) annual meeting then voluntary education chief for the Coast Guard, Robert Bothel, challenged higher education officials to make military-friendly more than a slogan. It may be the first modern account of a credible figure not only elevating the term military-friendly, but also providing thoughts around defining the term.

The first academic publication devoted exclusively to the topic, Creating a Veteran-Friendly Campus: Strategies for Transition and Success, was published in the summer just before the Post-9/11 GI Bill’s rollout. Around this time, media publications began to survey academic institutions to gauge their level of support for veteran and military students. These surveys yielded lists that ranked the institutions according to their support of these students. Subsequently, some higher education groups published best practices guides to provide institutions with ways to support veterans and servicemembers on campus.

The federal government, while not explicitly having labeled their initiatives veteran-friendly or military-friendly, plays a key role in the evolution of the terms. In 2011, the Department of Defense (DoD) published a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Institutions that signed the MOU were eligible to enroll servicemembers and accept military education benefits. The following year, President Obama issued Executive Order 13607, known as the Principles of Excellence, aimed at protecting and supporting veterans and servicemembers enrolled in postsecondary programs.

This review of media publications, higher education best practices guides, and government guidelines and regulations shows that various initiatives have contributed to the current understanding of what constitutes a military-friendly or veteran-friendly institution.
Media Lists: Rankings and Ratings

The most notable efforts by media outlets to suggest institutions are military-friendly or veteran-friendly include Victory Media’s “Military Friendly® Schools” list, the Military Times “Best for Vets: Colleges,” and KMI Media Group’s “Guide to Military-Friendly Colleges & Universities.” All three lists emerged on or around the time discussions surfaced regarding a reformed GI Bill and each share similarities. Some key differences, however, distinguish them in the selection criteria, the schools these lists recognized, and the overall vetting process. Recently, U.S. News & World Report announced a “Best Colleges for Veterans” list, which brings the rankings franchise into the competitive sphere for veterans’ attention.

• Victory Media: Military Friendly® Schools. According to the Military Friendly Schools website, Victory Media surveyed more than 10,000 Veterans Administration-approved institutions and 4,000 student veterans to compile the 2014 list of the top 20 percent of colleges and universities it deemed military-friendly. The survey results were “independently tested by Ernst & Young LLP based upon the weightings and methodology established by Victory Media.” The number of respondents to the survey is unclear, however. In addition, the Military Friendly Schools list leverages an external advisory board to help develop its methodology. The additional survey of student veterans, independent testing by an outside entity and the use of an external advisory board differentiates the Military Friendly Schools list from other media lists.

• Military Times: Best for Vets. Approximately 600 institutions responded to the 2014 Military Times Best for Vets survey, and the publication’s editorial board created the list after reviewing the results. The criteria comprise five categories: university culture, student support, academic quality, academic policies, and financial. This year’s publication marks the first time Military Times used data from the Department of Education. Moreover, until U.S. News & World Report entered the fray, Best for Vets had differentiated itself by numerically ranking the institutions.

• KMI: Military Advanced Education’s Guide to Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities. KMI’s Military Advanced Education (MAE) releases an annual guide to military-friendly colleges and universities. The MAE 2014 guide is unique from other media lists in that it does not rank institutions or incorporate selectivity. Instead, it lists all institutions that responded to its survey. According to the publication, the MAE editorial board modified the guide to be more inclusive and provide the publication as a resource for comparing institutions. However, MAE does provide a military-friendly seal to distinguish institutions that earned stronger survey results across five categories: military culture, financial assistance, flexibility, online support, and support on campus. Unique to its publication,
MAE invited institutions to provide an essay further detailing military and veteran support not captured in the survey. MAE’s 2014 guide had just fewer than 500 respondents to its survey.9

• **U.S. News & World Report: Best Colleges for Veterans.** U.S. News & World Report may be the best known media outlet that publishes an annual ranking of colleges and universities. Until 2013, U.S. News remained absent from ranking top schools for veterans. Leveraging its rankings brand, U.S. News cross-referenced its top colleges and universities with three additional categories related to veterans to form the Best Colleges for Veterans rankings. The three additional categories are membership in the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) consortium, GI Bill-approved institution, and Yellow Ribbon Program participating institutions.10

**Higher Education Best Practices**

Higher education groups, most prominently the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU), and Operation College Promise have published recommendation guides to provide higher education institutions with effective ways to support student veterans and servicemembers.

• **Operation College Promise Field Guide.** In February 2012, Operation College Promise (OCP), a research organization founded by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) to support the successful transition of servicemembers into postsecondary education, partnered with Operation Vets LLC to release a best practices guide aimed at supporting student servicemembers and veterans. The guide, *Creating an Environment for Student Veteran Success on Campus*, is a collection of initiatives by government agencies and nongovernmental groups for campus leadership to implement or use as resource for the support of servicemembers and veterans.11

• **ACE Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions.** In 2012, ACE launched an online guide known as the “ACE Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions.” Although the toolkit provides evidence-based programs and policies that support veterans and servicemembers, it does not prescribe criteria institutions must meet to be considered military-friendly or veteran-friendly. According to ACE President Molly Corbett Broad, “The definition of ‘veteran-friendly’ is as diverse as today’s higher education community.”12 This statement reinforces the ambiguity surrounding the term veteran-friendly.
The Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions allows individuals to participate in a shared environment of support for student veterans. Visitors to the site can upload or download documents aimed at supporting veterans on campus. Additionally, viewers have access to brief videos and summaries across five categories of support: programs, admissions and financial aid, academic services, student services, and campus life. The toolkit, largely a culmination of a three-day virtual collaboration of veterans and postsecondary education officials, is free and publicly available. It remains one of the most robust best practices guides to emerge since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.¹³

• **APSCU Best Practices Guide for Military and Veteran Students.** One year after ACE released its online toolkit, APSCU published a best practices guide aimed at preparing institutions to better serve military and veteran students. The guide addresses four areas: consumer information, institutional commitment, student services, and tracking outcomes. The organization commissioned a blue-ribbon task force consisting of leaders at member institutions, nonmember institutions, and external advisers from national veterans groups. Much like the ACE toolkit, many of the recommendations in the APSCU guide apply to institutions of all types in higher education.¹⁴

**Federal and State Governments: Oversight and Compliance**

Federal and state governments have established agencies and regulations aimed at supporting student servicemembers and veterans. The most recent regulatory initiative is the President’s Executive Order 13607, the Principles of Excellence, which provides guidelines for consumer education, institutional transparency, and supports for military and veteran students. For servicemembers specifically, the DoD requires institutions to sign a MOU. By signing and complying with the MOU, institutions are eligible to accept military tuition assistance benefits. Predating both of these initiatives lays the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), uniquely positioned through a contract with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and backed by the DoD.

At the state level, State Approving Agencies (SAAs) are responsible for approving programs for veterans’ education benefits. According to the National Association of State Approving Agencies, the role of SAAs “continues to be the review, evaluation, and approval of quality programs of education and training under state and federal criteria.”¹⁵ Taken together, a distinct but interconnected regulatory environment exists to ensure postsecondary institutions provide quality education and supports to servicemembers and veterans.
**Principles of Excellence.** On April 27, 2012, President Obama issued Executive Order 13607—Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Servicemembers, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has summarized the primary practices for institutional compliance with the Principles of Excellence as follows:

- Provide students with a personalized form covering the total cost of an education program
- Provide educational plans for all military and veteran education beneficiaries
- End fraudulent and aggressive recruiting techniques and misrepresentations
- Accommodate servicemembers and reservists absent due to service requirements
- Designate a point of contact to provide academic and financial advice
- Ensure accreditation of all new programs prior to enrolling students
- Align institutional refund policies with those under Title IV, which governs the administration of federal student financial aid programs.

Institutions participating in the Principles of Excellence program are listed on the VA's website.

**Department of Defense MOU.** The DoD MOU is an agreement between the agency and individual higher education institutions. It allows these institutions to be eligible to educate servicemembers participating in the military tuition assistance program in exchange for complying with a specific set of provisions paraphrased below:

- Sign the DoD MOU and adhere to the Service-related addendums
- Be accredited by a national or regional accrediting agency recognized by the Department of Education, approved for VA funding, and participating in the Title IV programs
- Comply with the regulatory guidance provided by DoD and the Services
- Participate in the Third Party Education Assessment process when requested
- Prior to enrollment, provide each student with specific information on locating, understanding, and using the following tools: The College Scorecard; the Department of Education's Financial Aid Shopping Sheet; the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s website
- Designate a point of contact or office for academic and financial advising, including access to disability counseling, to assist Service members with completion of studies and with job search activities
- Prior to offering, recommending, arranging, signing-up, dispersing, or enrolling Service
members for private student loans, provide Service members access to an institutional financial aid advisor who will make available appropriate loan counseling

- Have a readmissions policy for Service members
- Have policies in place and within compliance with the regulations issued by the Department of Education related to program integrity issues, including restrictions on recruitment, misrepresentation, and payment of incentive compensation. Adopt an institutional policy banning inducements to any individual or entity
- Have policies in place and within compliance with the regulations issued by the Department of Education related to program integrity issues, including State authorization. Refrain from high-pressure recruitment tactics as part of efforts to eliminate unfair, deceptive, and abusive marketing aimed at Service members. Such tactics include making multiple unsolicited phone calls to Service members for the purpose of securing their enrollment
- Refrain from providing any commission, bonus, or other incentive payment based directly or indirectly or use third party lead generators on securing enrollments or Federal financial aid (including TA (Tuition Assistance) funds) to any persons or entities engaged in any student recruiting, admission activities, or making decisions regarding the award of student financial assistance. These tactics are discouraged as part of efforts to eliminate unfair, deceptive, and abusive marketing aimed at Service members
- Refrain from automatic program renewals, bundling courses or enrollments. The student and Military Service must approve all course enrollments prior to the start date of the class
- If the institution is a member of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), in addition to the requirements stated in paragraphs 3.a through 3.l of this DoD MOU, the institution will: Agree to SOC principles, criteria, and military bill of rights and; have a process to evaluate prior military training and experience applicable to the Service members degree program; recognize and use the ACE Guide to evaluate and award credit acquired in the military
- If an institution elects not to be a member of SOC, in addition to the requirements stated in paragraphs 3.a. through 3.l. of this DoD MOU, the institution will adhere to an additional set of policies and disclosures

In addition to these 14 requirements, there are numerous subsections outlining specific or clarifying language. Moreover, there are 10 additional tuition assistance program requirements for education institutions. The final rule for the new DoD MOU was released on May 15, 2014.
Servicemembers Opportunities College (SOC). Established in 1972, SOC was created to provide educational support to servicemembers while appreciating their regular displacements due to military service. SOC, working in cooperation with 15 higher education associations, has a consortium of over 1,900 member-institutions providing a range of postsecondary programs to servicemembers. Additionally, in order to be a member of SOC institutions must adhere to SOC principles and criteria as follows:

**Principle 1.** In order to enhance their military effectiveness and to achieve their educational, vocational, and career goals, servicemembers should share in the postsecondary educational opportunities available to other citizens

**Principle 2.** Educational programs for servicemembers should rely primarily on programs, courses, and services provided by appropriately accredited institutions and organizations, including high schools, postsecondary vocational and technical schools, colleges, and universities.

**Principle 3.** To enhance access to undergraduate educational opportunities for servicemembers, institutions should maintain a necessary flexibility of programs and procedures, particularly in admissions, credit transfer, and recognition of other applicable learning, including that gained in the military; in scheduling and format of courses; and in academic residency requirements to offset servicemembers’ mobility, isolation from campuses, and part-time student status.

The SOC criteria provides more clarifying language around transfer of credit policies, academic residency requirements, credit for military training and experience, and credit for extra-institutional learning. Finally, SOC provides a “Military Student Bill of Rights,” detailing 10 rights around marketing, admissions, and student services that student servicemembers should be afforded.

State Approving Agencies. State Approving Agencies (SAAs) are the primary bodies that deem education programs eligible to accept students using VA education benefits. According to an article by the President of the National Association of State Approving Agencies, SAAs have five responsibilities:

1. Program approval—the review, evaluation, and approval of quality programs of education and training based on state and federal criteria, as well as institutional policies and procedures
2. Facility oversight—conducting visits to approved education institutions and training
establishments in order to determine continued compliance with applicable laws and regulations

3. Technical assistance—providing assistance with applications for approval and keeping education institutions and training establishments informed of their approval status and changes in the laws and approval criteria

4. Outreach—working to ensure that all veterans and eligible individuals are fully aware of their earned benefits and how they can be used. Outreach takes many forms, including conducting training workshops for institution officials so they are fully aware of their role and how best to provide the necessary information to veterans/eligible individuals; conducting training sessions during the transition assistance program (TAP) to furnish information regarding training opportunities for individuals leaving the military at approved education institutions and training establishments; conducting mass mailings to provide up-to-date information; participating in job fairs; and other similar events

5. Liaison—acting as the state’s liaison in assisting National Guard and Reserve organizations in providing base personnel with quality education; providing follow-up information; and meeting with school officials, employers, labor groups, state veterans organizations, or any other appropriate organization to provide information and promote GI Bill use. SAAs also advise federal and state leaders as to needed policy and regulatory changes23

Given this robust charge, SAAs are arguably the best positioned agencies to ensure institutions are complying with laws and regulations aimed at supporting student veterans.

**The Model: Defining Military-Friendly and Veteran-Friendly**

A positive environment exists among the media, higher education groups, the federal government, and state agencies driving oversight, transparency, and supports for student veterans and servicemembers. This environment provides a strong foundation to create a military-friendly and veteran-friendly model for institutions of higher education to follow (see figure 1).

First, an institution that aspires to such status voluntarily complies with government regulations such as the Principles of Excellence in addition to, or separately, the DoD MOU. An institution would accomplish a degree of transparency by participating openly and cooperatively in one or more of the media surveys. Finally, an institution would show its strong support of the student veteran and servicemember community by implementing the best practices asserted by various higher education groups and reinforced by veteran groups.
Of course, overlap exists in achieving transparency, compliance, and support through voluntary participation in all three areas: government compliance, publication surveys, and higher education best practice guides. For example, an institution could show its support for veterans and servicemembers on campus by participating in the Principles of Excellence and adopting several best practices defined in higher education publications.

It is important to note that there exists a key distinction between military-friendly and veteran-friendly. Military-friendly institutions sign on to the DoD MOU, while veteran-friendly institutions may not participate in this agreement. Veteran-friendly institutions primarily serve GI Bill beneficiaries, the majority of which are no longer serving in uniform. Critics may argue that merging the terms inadvertently labels some institutions as supportive of servicemembers and veterans alike, even though these student populations are distinct from one another in terms of the benefits or types of supports they require or for which they are eligible.

More important than this distinction, however, are the similarities in the initiatives the government and higher education stakeholders have created to support servicemembers and veterans. The Principles of Excellence, for example, protects and supports servicemembers as well as veterans. It is not uncommon for government or private sector initiatives to be inclusive of both military and veteran students. Notably, though, veteran-friendly institutions that do not sign the DoD MOU still meet the criteria of voluntary compliance, transparency, and support.
by participating in the Principles of Excellence, media surveys, and best practices guides. Essentially, veteran-friendly institutions have a strong foundation for becoming military-friendly if they so choose (see appendix for veteran-friendly and military-friendly institution profiles).

Some have suggested that veteran-friendly and military-friendly cannot be adequately defined without discussing the educational outcomes of student veterans and servicemembers. Conceptually, this argument has merit. Unfortunately, even with the release of the Million Records Project by Student Veterans of America, limited data exist on graduation rates, persistence rates, and post-graduation employment figures for military veterans and servicemembers. As applicable and reliable data become available, it certainly makes sense to incorporate this information into a revised definition of military-friendly and veteran-friendly. In the meantime, a lack of such data should not deter institutions from broadening and strengthening their support for servicemembers and veterans.

**Conclusion**

There exists a disconnected, but complimentary environment of separate entities providing guidance for the support of student servicemembers and student veterans. By linking disparate groups together based on commonalities in initiatives, institutions of higher education are better equipped to support a growing student population. Moreover, encouraging transparency, compliance, and support for military and veteran students through participation in government agreements, media surveys, and best practice guides provides a macro-level model for defining a veteran-friendly or military-friendly institution. The aforementioned entities also have the ability to redefine their agreements, surveys, and guides to continually strengthen the model. With this framework institutions can remove the guesswork often associated with delivering supports to the military and veteran populations on campus. Finally, participation in each of these initiatives is voluntary—a hallmark for ultimately defining a veteran-friendly or military-friendly institution.
Appendix

Military and Veteran-Friendly Profile 1: American Military University

American Military University (AMU), an accredited online university founded in 1991 by a Marine Corps officer, has a military student population that comprises nearly 60 percent of its total enrollment. AMU participates in both the DoD MOU and Principles of Excellence. AMU also participates in the MAE Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities Guide and was recently named a Top 10 institution by Military Times Best for Vets: Colleges 2014 under the online and nontraditional schools section.

AMU has instituted many of the programs, services, and policies found in various best practices publications. For example, the university has a dedicated staff member committed to military and veteran support, a student veteran’s organization, and provides tuition at a rate that allows veterans and servicemembers to maximize their benefits. While AMU primarily educates a large military student body, the institution has established itself as both military and veteran-friendly.

Military and Veteran-Friendly Profile 2: ECPI University

ECPI University has been in existence for 45 years, specializing in technology, business, criminal justice, health sciences, and culinary arts programs. ECPI participates in the Principles of Excellence and the DoD MOU. The university also publicly displays on its website how it complies with specific sections of the Principles of Excellence and its military partnerships in support of servicemember education. Additionally, ECPI has been ranked number one by Military Times Best for Vets: Colleges 2014 under online and nontraditional schools. It also participates in the MAE Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities Guide and was listed as a top institution on Victory Media’s Military Friendly Schools list.

ECPI has instituted many of the programs, services, and policies found in the APSCU best practices guide and other publications. For example, the university has a dedicated staff member committed to military and veteran support, a student veteran’s organization, and flexible readmission policies for servicemembers deployed or recalled for service, along with a number of other supports. ECPI University embodies the three drivers defining a military and veteran-friendly institution: transparency, compliance, and support.
Military and Veteran-Friendly Profile 3: Florida State University

Florida State University (FSU), a four year public university, has a number of the most robust veteran programs and services. FSU participates in the ACE Toolkit for Veteran-Friendly Institutions, Principles of Excellence and DoD MOU. The university has also been ranked in the top 10 of the 2014 Military Times Best for Vets Colleges list and was accepted into the 2014 Victory Media Military Friendly Schools list.

FSU President Eric Barron has also publicly announced that he wants FSU to be the most veteran-friendly campus in the nation. While ambitious, the president of FSU may be the only prominent higher education figure in recent history to make a public proclamation of becoming the most veteran-friendly institution in the country.

Military and Veteran-Friendly Profile 4: Lansing Community College

Lansing Community College (LCC), located in Michigan, participates in the Principles of Excellence, DoD MOU, and ACE Toolkit for Veteran-Friendly Institutions. LCC has also been named to the 2014 Victory Media Military Friendly Schools list.

LCC has a robust website dedicated to supporting military and veteran students. Included on their website is a live chat option where future and current students can discuss a range of issues related to their benefits. The live chat is staffed Monday-Friday from 9:00am to 3:00pm eastern. Additionally, LCC has veteran-specific orientations and confidential counseling services. There are number of other best practices at LCC that distinguish this community college as military and veteran-friendly.

Military and Veteran-Friendly Profile 5: D’Youville College

D’Youville College, a private Catholic college located in Buffalo, New York, was recently ranked number one by Military Times Best For Vets Colleges 2014 under 4-year schools. Additionally, D’Youville is listed on the 2014 Military Friendly Schools list, the MAE Military-Friendly Colleges and Universities Guide, participates in the DoD MOU, and Principles of Excellence.

D’Youville has a number of programs and policies dedicated to serving the military and veteran populations. One major commitment they have made is to the Yellow Ribbon Program by providing unlimited contributions to an unlimited number of students.
37 Found by searching the Victory Media’s Military Friendly Schools list: www.militaryfriendlyschools.com/mfslist.aspx.