

a



Completing the Mission III:

Assessing the Impact of the COVID Pandemic on Student Veterans and Campus Support Services

Wendy A. Lang, M.A.

Founder and Director, Operation College Promise

February 1, 2021

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Background.....	5
The Study.....	7
Methodology.....	8
Institutional Responses.....	9
Student Responses.....	12
Participating Universities.....	15
Major Findings.....	16-22
Conclusions.....	23
Other Research.....	24
About Operation College Promise.....	25
Additional Sources.....	26

Acknowledgments and Notes

A project of this magnitude cannot succeed without the type of collaboration that is core to the OCP mission. To this end, I would like to recognize the following:

The assistance of Col Gerald “Jerry” Smith (Ret.), Montaigne Long and the entire Texas A&M University System for their contributions to and support of this project from start to finish.

The input of my dear colleagues and friends Rod Davis, Trokon Fiawoo, and Lauren DelRicci, who endured the endless calls, texts, and emails “To, Through, and Beyond” the completion of this project. You represent the best in our veterans, and I am privileged to have you on “Team OCP.”

Those who lent a hand with the dissemination of the surveys to schools and veterans: Ben, Frank, Elaine, Betsy, Tanya, Jim, Amy, Dan, Brian, and Esmerelda. Thank you!

Dr. Michael Klein, Dr. Darryl Greer, and Dr. Herman Saatkamp for their guidance on this project. They have believed and supported OCP from its conceptual creation in 2008 and remain its strongest advocates to this day.

Finally, this project goes out to all of those who have worn the uniform and inspire me every day to “stay in the fight.”

And to my favorite veteran, Richard Alan Lang. As always, Dad, this one is for you.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges for institutions of higher learning (IHLs), especially ones related to funding, staffing, and shifting priorities manifesting over the past year. To better understand how COVID has affected military-connected students, Operation College Promise (OCP) and the Texas A&M University System partnered to research the pandemic's effects on this population. The resultant data will help OCP continue to develop both live and virtual programming to support staff and students as they navigate the "new normal" of the 2020–2021 academic year and beyond. Among the significant findings:

- **As some students have enrolled in school under the Forever GI Bill to both pursue a degree and gain eligibility for the additional income provided by the benefit, respondents are revealing more significant needs for support as they navigate pandemic impacts on employment, finances, mental health, and access to education benefits. This reality coincides with reductions in staff, funding, support, and communication that have already led to some students withdrawing. Schools need to be aware that support services are often a yardstick for success and strive to find alternative methods of assistance while advocating to maintain existing programs. The ability to do so will be a critical factor for military-connected student success.**
- **All but a few of the campuses surveyed have moved to either wholly online or hybrid models. This pivot has created an environment that some military students have found tough to navigate. Most in the study asserted that their "education experience" had diminished as a result.**
- **Nearly 40% of student respondents noted a reduction in communication with institutional staff. This is troubling, as this interaction is often the key to a successful transition, and particularly to the persistence necessary to maximize education benefits. Historically, military-connected students who "stop-out" are unlikely to return to campus. Further, these relationships are critical in linking students to ancillary services that can enhance academic progress. The impacts of the pandemic on university resources indicate interruptions in student-staff communication. Over the next semester, institutions of higher learning (IHLs) must develop alternative methods and solutions to overcome these new obstacles.**

Completing the Mission III: Assessing the Impact of the COVID Pandemic on Student Veterans and Campus Support Services

BACKGROUND

On June 30, 2008, the United States Congress passed legislation that changed the landscape for a generation of college learners—servicemembers and veterans of the Post-9/11 era. The Veterans Educational Assistance Act, frequently referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, distinguished itself as the most generous educational entitlement for servicemembers since the Servicemember Readjustment Act of 1944—the GI Bill. Over the past 11 years, the statute has seen formidable changes, including a vast expansion permitting servicemembers to access this benefit at any time.

The Forever GI Bill encourages student veterans—both active and separated—to consider pursuing a degree at a rate not witnessed

“Military-connected students have unique characteristics and institutions have worked diligently to address them with programming appropriate to their campus and population. The COVID pandemic has put further strain on institutions as they grapple with new priorities that may affect both staffing and funding. This research will help us better align OCP’s programming to best support this population in this emerging environment.” Wendy A. Lang, Founder and Director, Operation College Promise 2020

since the post-World War era. This is particularly true for those who had not considered an advanced degree before their military service. Further, first-generation learners (nearly 70%) seek a higher education degree for both the amplified earning potential and the career paths a degree offers. For these students, this benefit can be a game-changer in determining post-service career options.

As student veterans' enrollment swelled under this new benefit, institutions initially grappled with their needs and how to provide the type of support that can be critical to their success. Ultimately, awareness expanded, and many colleges became more cognizant of how to support their success during their transition from military service. Operation College Promise (OCP) was founded in 2008 to support student veterans' successful transition “To, Through, and Beyond”™ the postsecondary lifecycle. To assist institutions as they create or enhance a campus blueprint for

student success, OCP designed a curriculum encapsulated in the Certificate for Veterans' Service Providers' (CVSP) training. This report is the third research project that OCP has developed to assess student veterans' higher education experience in the Post-9/11 era. The results and data collected will be used to adapt OCP programming to fulfill the emerging needs triggered by the COVID pandemic.

In the early years of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, separating veterans returned from their military service to a struggling economy. At times, the unemployment rate for the youngest veterans (18-24 years) was greater than 25%, and numbers skyrocketed as these new job seekers flooded an unstable market. Veterans often pursued higher education as both a financial and transitional stepping-stone, much like they had done in the post-World War II era. In the current climate, seeking a degree may very well be a byproduct of the pandemic and a struggling job market.

The COVID pandemic's impact poses significant employment challenges that mirror those during and after 2008 and stand as impediments in the transition to civilian life. While the military itself remains robust and "mission-ready," jobs in the civilian economy remain elusive, with unemployment rates among veterans increasing from 3.6% in February 2020 to 8.6% in July, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The resurgence of the pandemic and new restrictions threatens to amplify this challenge.

What is the impact of the pandemic on campus support services for military-connected students? How are institutions recalibrating communication with and education delivery to student veterans under COVID? How have these students been personally affected? How are campuses adapting to their needs? These are a few of the questions this study will explore, utilizing data from a diverse set of institutions and military-connected students from across the nation.

THE STUDY

This research builds on and utilizes some similar components of the 2011 and 2013 OCP research on military-connected students' progress toward degree attainment. These initial analyses—*Completing the Mission I & II* reports—evaluated how these students moved toward degree attainment at institutions that had either incorporated OCP's Certificate for Veteran's Service Providers (CVSP) training or had adopted a similarly comprehensive approach to serving them.

These studies debunked standard rhetoric that veterans were not successful in higher education and, instead, highlighted just the opposite. These students were excelling on campuses that offered comprehensive support services, and, in many cases, were outperforming their civilian counterparts.

This study seeks to measure how the COVID pandemic has affected students and campus support over the past year. The data collected will help higher education institutions better support this population during and after the COVID pandemic.

COVID-19 has created new and unique challenges for both student veterans and the campus veteran offices that support them. These surveys will play a key role in identifying the critical aspects of these challenges but, more importantly, the results will provide timely information to assist campus leaders in program creation or refinement that will maximize student veteran success as we move through and beyond the pandemic.

-Col Gerald "Jerry" Smith, USMC (Ret.) Director, Office of Veterans Services, Texas A&M University System

"With campuses closed and all courses transitioned to online for the remainder of the semester, this presented a potentially devastating challenge to our student veteran." (Jeremy Butler, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America 2020)¹

¹ Butler, J. (2020, April). Helping student veterans amid the coronavirus crisis. *The Morning Consult*. Retrieved December 4, 2020 from: <https://morningconsult.com/opinions/helping-student-veterans-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

METHODOLOGY

This research commenced in the summer of 2020 with the support of the Texas A&M University System. It is not intended to be wholly comprehensive but rather to provide a snapshot of emerging trends resulting from the COVID pandemic and serve as a starting point for further research. The research consists of two surveys: one for personnel at institutions of higher learning (IHLs) and another for military-connected students.

The surveys were released on September 15, 2020, and remained active through November 13, 2020, with input from 75 colleges and universities and 230 military-connected students. It should be noted that students both within and outside of the institutional pool participated. Institutions were encouraged, but not required, to self-identify. Survey participation was voluntary and self-reported.

Schools from the following states contributed: Texas, New Jersey, Indiana, Arizona, Indiana, New York, North Carolina, Iowa, Colorado, Virginia, California, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Kentucky.

Students from the following states responded: Texas, Indiana, North Carolina, Maryland, Washington State, and California.

Unless otherwise specified, the term “military-connected” refers to veterans, active-duty, Guard and Reserve members, as well as dependents. They were not required to be current beneficiaries of the Forever GI Bill and could have participated in other GI Bill variations.

OCP sent initial data collection requests through the Texas A&M University System Listserv, which has a membership of over 500 institutions in schools in Texas and across the nation. Over the last eight years, OCP has supported the Listserv's national reach by offering it as a resource to CVSP participants. OCP generated additional outreach with the support of the following organizations:

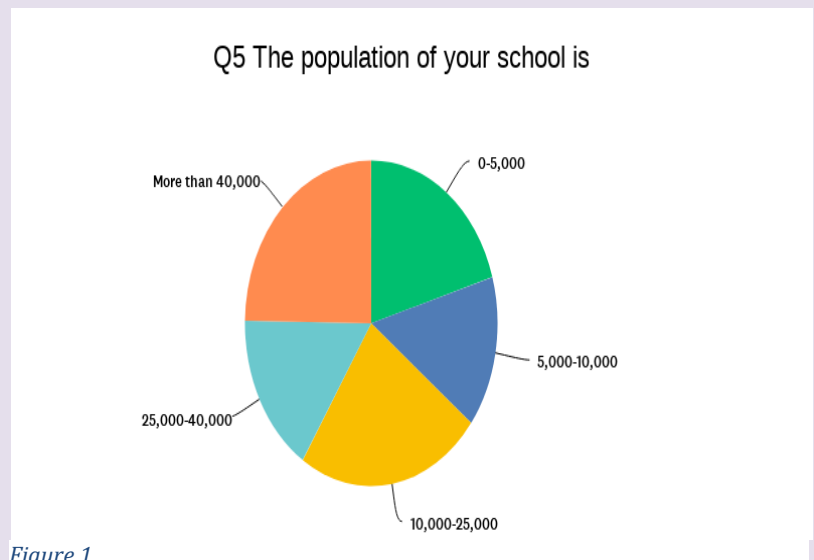
- ♦ [Council on College Military Educators \(CCME\)](#)
- ♦ [Headquarters, Department of the Army, Soldier for Life Program](#)

- ♦ The Delaware Valley Veterans Consortium (DVCC) The New Jersey
- ♦ The George W. Bush Presidential Library
- ♦ Association of Veterans Program Advisors (NJAVPA)
- ♦ Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC)
- ♦ Service to School (S2S)
- ♦ Warriors and Quiet Waters
- ♦ Veterans Education Success (VES)

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

The majority of the nearly 100 participants, about 60%, were affiliated with four-year schools, with 36% saying they worked at two-year institutions. One respondent was with a non-credit-degree institution, while another was employed by a government agency.

Participating schools were predominantly public at 74%, with the remaining 24% were private. The student population was evenly split among the designated size categories, as illustrated in *Figure 1*.



For the purposes of displaying enrollment numbers only, we

bifurcated the military-connected definition into two categories: "military-connected" students (those who are veterans, active duty, Guard and Reserves), and "military-affiliated" (those who are dependents.)

The military-connected population of institutions in the study varied noticeably. At the beginning of the 2020–2021 academic year (AY), about a third of schools had more than 1,000 military-affiliated students, while an additional third of schools reported a number between zero and 250. The remaining 40% had between 250 and 1,000 students.

Institutional responses indicated a significant enrollment decrease for both military-connected students (40%) and military-affiliated students (30%). However, 29% and 22%, respectively, reported increases in these populations. The remaining schools reported no change.

About 36% of schools reported that they had between zero and 250 military-affiliated students at the beginning of the 2020–2021 AY. Just under 31% had more than 1,000, with the remaining 25% reporting between 250 and 1,000 students. Only 7% did not collect this data.

The report focuses on effects and reactions to effects on education delivery, staff, communications, budget, and support program stability. Below are responses to some of the questions most relevant to pandemic conditions and disruptions in the campus educational process.

EDUCATION DELIVERY

As of the beginning of the 2019–2020 AY, just under half of the responding schools offered education entirely in person. About 19% offered hybrid models, and an additional 31% replied that their school fell into the "other" delivery category. Only 1% reported being entirely online. Schools in the "other" category reported a combination of in-person, hybrid, and online instruction, with one university noting that it had a modality breakdown of "80% in-person, 8% online, and 12% synchronous (hybrid live)."

The beginning of the 2020-2021 AY marked an extraordinary shift away from the in-person education modality at only 2%, with a nearly equal distribution of schools reporting hybrid (42%), online (20%), or other (34%) delivery.

Of those who responded "other," most commented that they were employing a combination of all delivery modes listed, and one respondent gave their breakdown as to "26% in person, 12% online, 62% synchronous (hybrid live)," noting a significant reduction in in-person classes.

STAFFING

The survey measured staffing levels for military support at the onset of the 2019–2020 AY and again in the 2020–2021 AY. For most institutions, the pandemic's impact began in the 2020 Spring semester and after most budgets were formalized.

“We have the same number of SCOs, however we should recognize the ability to complete tasks is somewhat impacted due to limitations in access to network systems required to support enrollment certifications.” (IHL Respondent, OCP Survey 2020)

Staffing levels for these support offices remained static on about 65% of campuses, while 13% reported that the number of these positions had either increased or decreased. A small group said that they did not have a dedicated military support office. Among the notable comments in the "other" category was that the number of student workers had decreased for some. In other cases, the staff could not return to work due to personal issues related to COVID. The number of certifying officials largely remained unaffected at 73%, although 11% of respondents indicated an increase and 10% a decrease.

BUDGET

In the fiscal impact analysis, 53% of the respondents replied that their budget had not been affected, while 30% noted a decrease, 10% replied with “other,” and only 3% recorded an increase. Several answered that the military support office had been eliminated.

“We do not have a central support office, but those offices who do support veterans have had budget decreases.” (IHL Respondent OCP Survey 2020)

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

At the beginning of the 2019–2020 Academic Year (AY), 80% of the schools had a dedicated office for military support, while 84% had a website or portal for their military-connected students. These were reduced to 72% and 80%, respectively, at the beginning of the 2020–2021 AY. Social media presence remained constant at about 68%, as did Yellow Ribbon matching funds at 40%. (Note: Yellow Ribbon funding is determined in the Spring.) These responses were in a “check all that apply” format.

During the 2019–2020 AY, 66% of institutions had a dedicated space or lounge for military students, and 72% had a student veterans' organization. These dropped to 48% and 64%, respectively, at the beginning of the 2020–2021 AY. Career counseling services similarly decreased from 66% to 58%, while the number of responding schools offering peer support was reduced from 55% to 51% of responding schools over the two academic years. The percentage of schools with dedicated veterans' support offices was reduced from 82% to 76%. Other available funding or scholarship increased slightly from 42% to 44%.

COMMUNICATION

Most schools (95%) responded that they were communicating with students through email. The next two most prevalent methods were by phone at 78% and social media at 43%. Listservs were being used by 30% of respondents. The 30% cited other means of connecting, including Zoom, Blackboard, in-person and socially distanced meetings, texting, WebEx, and Teams.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Among the respondents, 80% reported attending a four-year school, with 12% at two-year schools and 6% at other institutions. The majority—95%—of respondents were almost entirely attending public schools, with 3% at private schools and the remaining 2% at other institutions.

ATTENDANCE

Students reported, at a rate of 65%, that they were already enrolled in school before the 2020–2021 AY, while 17% began school and 23% resumed school. A small percentage (5%) answered that they changed schools, while 6% said they changed their degree path. One student had contracted COVID, while two others said that COVID had not impacted their studies.

“Unfortunately, I had to leave school to aid with COVID relief and my school forced me to drop my scholarships as a result.” (Military-Connected Student Respondent, OCP Survey 2020)

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Based on a scale, a website or portal was most frequently listed as the offering most valuable to responding students at 34%, followed by the presence of a veterans' support coordinator (17%) and a dedicated office at 16%. Transfer of credit also ranked highly, at 13%. The prevalence of each of these services had increased substantially since OCP's research in 2013.

COMMUNICATION

Students' preferred mode of communication was through email at 46%. Phone contact was favored by 11% and in-person contact by 38%. Schools were primarily utilizing email (37%), text (32%), and in-person communication (22%). Additional methods included Zoom, Blackboard, and Teams.

COVID IMPACT

The impact of the pandemic is clearly illustrated in these responses. Only about 20% of answering military-connected students replied that they had experienced "no negative impact" from circumstances related to the pandemic. Nearly 60% reported a financial impact. About 32% noted an impact on employment, while 13% identified a negative effect on education benefits. A majority, 52%, noted mental health implications. Respondents were asked to "check all that applied" (*Figure 2*).

Typical comments described lack of communication and collaboration; isolation; competing priorities; being activated or deployed; physical health; lack of a veterans' lounge; infection/recovery from COVID; and death in the family. Overall, most students were satisfied with how their institutions are handling the pandemic.

Q10 During the COVID pandemic, please indicate if you have been negatively impacted in the following ways (check all that apply)

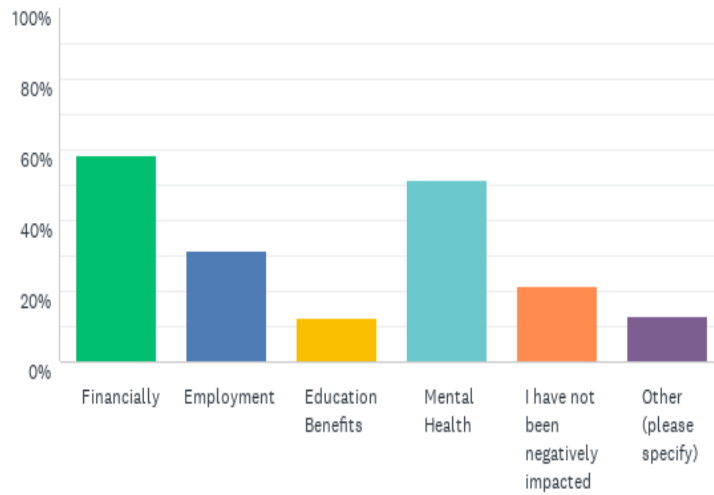


Figure 2

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

Amarillo College
Angelo State
Austin Community College
Barstow College
Blinn College
Brown University
Dallas College
Dallas College, Cedar Valley Campus
Dallas International University
El Paso Community College
Florida State University
Gateway Technical College
Grand Canyon University
Houston Community College
Ivy Tech Community College
Jefferson Community & Technical College
Kirkwood Community College
Lee College
Lone Star College
MyComputerCareer
National Guard Bureau Education Services
CA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD
Northern Arizona University
Nicolet Technical College
New York University
Park University
Pikes Peak Community College
Quality Dental School of Technology, Inc.
Ramapo College of New Jersey
Rutgers University
Saint Joseph's University
San Antonio College
San Jacinto College
Schreiner University
Stephen F. Austin University
Southwestern University
Tarrant County College
Texas A & M University
Texas A&M University-Central Texas
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
Texas A&M University-Galveston
Texas A&M University-Texarkana
Texas State Technical College
Texas State University
Texas Tech University Health Science
Center - School of Nursing
The University of Chicago
The University of Southern Mississippi
The University of Texas at Arlington
The University of Texas at Austin
The University of Texas at Tyler
Texas State Technical College
University of Iowa
University of South Carolina, Aiken
University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley
University of Texas, Dallas
Villanova University
Washington State University
Western Governors University

MAJOR SURVEY FINDINGS

There has been much debate on evaluating the success of military-connected students pursuing a college degree in the Post-9/11 era. The cost of these benefits prompted calls for detailed data collection to validate the positive return on investment, which is vital for maintaining federal support. Notably, the ability of IHLs to both collect and report more comprehensive data has increased in sophistication since OCP's last report in 2013. While this study, like the previous ones, illuminates campus support offerings, its primary objective was to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both students and the IHLs that serve them. It is important to note that most institutions formulate their budgets in the Spring. Thus, further analysis in F.Y. 2022 will be required to assess the pandemic's long-term implications. The current study's findings are delineated below.

COVID IMPACT

Both educators and military-connected students stated the myriad effects of the pandemic. Among the specifics provided by student respondents were that there was "difficult learning," "diminished study time," "clinical rotations reduced or postponed," "military withdrawal or activation," "difficulty completing assignments without support," and "lack of presence in the community."

"What we're seeing are the exacerbation of stress and anxiety that veterans were already experiencing as a result of their wounds and/or transition challenges. Additionally, due to the implementation of community health measures intended to stem the spread of COVID-19, we're also seeing increased isolation of our veterans – a condition that many of them already struggle with. Finally, we're seeing an increase in financial challenges for those veterans that have lost work due to COVID. We believe the need to continue serving veterans throughout the pandemic is urgent and acute!"

-Col Brian Gillman, USMC (Ret), Executive Director of Warriors and Quiet Waters.

Finding: As some students have gone back to school under the Forever GI Bill to both pursue a degree and gain eligibility for the additional income provided by the benefit, responding students are revealing greater needs for support as they navigate the pandemic's impacts on employment, finances, mental health, and access to education benefits. This coincides with some staff reductions, funding, support, and communication that have already led to some students withdrawing. Schools need to be cognizant that these services are often a yardstick for success and strive to find alternative support methods while advocating to maintain existing programming. The ability to do so will be a critical factor for military-connected student success.

EDUCATION DELIVERY

The shift to online learning over the past year has been a dramatic one for many institutions. Few have been able to resume in-person learning for the Fall 2021 semester. Managing this modality pivot has created challenges for those institutions and faculty which did not previously specialize in online learning. This change has had a mixed impact on students, with some finding the distance learning enhancing their flexibility and others struggling to adjust to this new learning method. Several respondents pointed to selecting a brick-and-mortar institution because they were more comfortable in a live environment. Additionally, military students are more likely to have families, and several referenced the difficult balance of managing their children's online education along with their own. For some, this has likely resulted in either pursuing fewer credits or ceasing their education entirely.

Finding: All but a few campuses surveyed have moved either wholly online or to some hybrid model variation. This change has created an environment that some military students have found tough to navigate, and most in the study asserted that their "education experience" had diminished as a result. (Figure 3).

"I am now trying to juggle taking care of three children under four, care for my disabled veteran spouse, and juggle teaching and studying online without the help of childcare."
(Military-Connected Student Respondent, OCP Survey 2020)

Q6 If your institution has moved from a traditional "on-campus" education to either a "hybrid" (part on-campus/part-online) or completely "online" has your education experience been

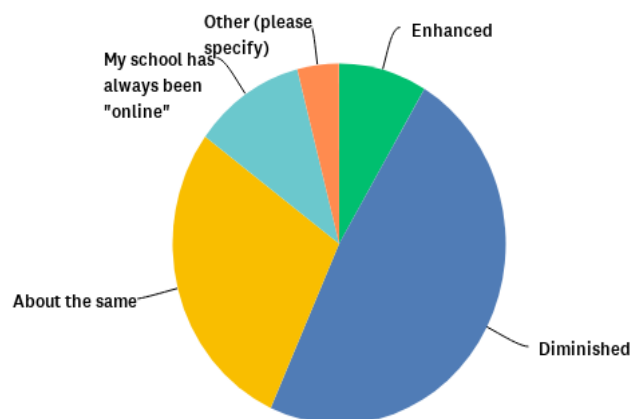


Figure 3

FUNDING

Funding for higher education has been on the decline for many years, creating a challenge for schools to meet all non-traditional students' supplemental needs. For the military-connected students, what was commonly referred to as the "Sea of Goodwill" had started to evaporate even before the COVID pandemic due to both financial woes and shifting priorities. The pandemic is magnifying this reality.

"The economic collapse caused by the coronavirus pandemic wrecked state revenue collections, causing a cumulative shortfall of billions of dollars across two fiscal years. Higher education, as it so often does, bore an unfair share of the significant cuts that states made to public services. This at a time when per-student state appropriations never fully recovered from the Great Recession. Institutions also faced drops in tuition revenue from declining enrollment domestically— as students and their families grappled with record unemployment and could no longer afford the costs of attendance. As many colleges and universities struggled to keep campuses open and contemplated a third straight semester of almost exclusively online instruction, presidents and trustees need innovative and creative solutions to continue to offer a quality education in a safe setting to their students while protecting the financial health of their institutions, Michael W. Klein, PhD, JD, Nathan Public Policy Fellow at the Rockefeller Institute, SUNY, Associate of the PhD in Higher Education Faculty, Rutgers University.

Finding: New funding priorities related to the pandemic threaten to jeopardize schools' capacity to provide the critical support services shown to optimize military-connected student success. With 30% already reporting budget cuts to military programming, some schools may be forced to further degrade these mission-critical offerings in the next academic year. Moving forward, schools must find creative options for addressing the needs of military-connected students, including enhanced collaboration within and beyond their campuses. Doing so can be systematically and financially practical when considering campus, community, and other support organizations. Often, appropriate support programs mirror those of other non-traditional populations or merely an expansion of those provided to their civilian counterparts. (Figure 4).

*"Well before the pandemic, colleges and universities were already grappling with a growing financial crisis, brought on by years of shrinking state support, declining enrollment, and student concerns with skyrocketing tuition and debt. By one estimate, the pandemic has cost colleges at least \$120 billion in pandemic-related expenses and suppressed revenues from sports, housing, meal plans and will likely impact ancillary support programming for all populations for the foreseeable future."*²

STAFFING

Although several schools reported eliminating their military support programs, the overall staffing of veteran support offices had not increased or decreased dramatically over the past year. Several schools noted that some staff had not returned entirely to their positions due to factors linked to the COVID pandemic, while others stated that staff had been assigned additional duties outside of the scope of the military space.

Q14 Compared to Academic Year 2019-2020, the budget for the military support office and/or programming in Academic Year 2020-2021 has

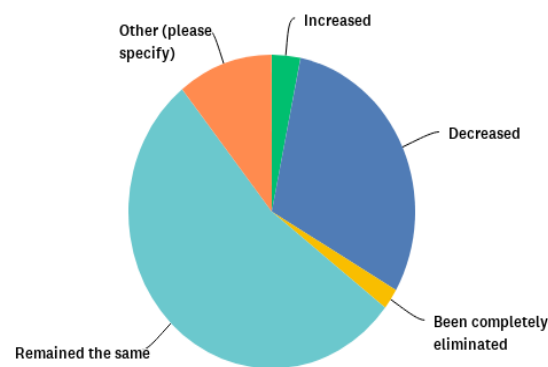


Figure 4

*"We haven't seen a budget crisis like this in a generation," said Robert Kelchen, an associate professor at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., who has been tracking the higher learning funding crunch. "There's nothing off-limits."*³

³ Nierenberg, A., & Pasick, Adam. (2020). Colleges are Slashing Budgets. *The New York Times*. Retrieved October 30, 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-budget-cuts-finance.html>.

Finding: While the responding schools did not see a dramatic financial impact at the beginning of the 2020–2021 AY, the next year's military budgets will likely be more austere. This could impact the quality of services simultaneous to needs growing and, in some cases, there is an increased number of military-connected enrollments. Schools should prepare to maximize interdepartmental and community resources to ensure continued support for this population. Securing top-down support will be pivotal for the future of many military-connected students.

COMMUNICATION

Veteran's support offices have been pivotal in assisting military-connected students in navigating what can be a daunting and counter-intuitive transition to college. Campuses have been striving to increase and expand these offices' abilities, which are proven to provide a "warm hand-off" to

"As a former student veteran and someone who worked in the veteran's support office, I can attest to the intrinsic value of having strong veteran support services. For some, the trimming of these could have longstanding implications for transition and degree completion. We need to work together to assure that these vital programs continue." Lauren DelRicci, Navy Veteran

make the application and entry to school more manageable and efficient. In this survey, students once again pointed to the communications value support professionals in these offices provide during their transition.

Finding: Nearly 40% of responses noted a reduction in communication between military-connected students and staff. This is troubling, as this interaction is often the linchpin to a successful transition and the persistence necessary to maximize education benefits. Historically, military students who "stop-out" are unlikely to return to campus. Further, these relationships are critical in linking students to ancillary services that can enhance academic progress. The impacts of the pandemic on university resources include continued interruptions of student-staff communication. IHLs must strive to develop alternative methods and solutions to overcome these obstacles.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Schools with the most effective campus support services consider the unique features of their campus, the input of military-connected students, and their specific demographics. Over the past 13 years, support programming for military-connected students has expanded significantly, and these efforts have paid verifiable dividends. OCP research in 2011 and 2013

found that military students thrive at colleges and universities that deploy a holistic approach. As one example, OCP research conducted in 2013 showed that the “persistence rate” among participants averaged 97%, slightly higher than the 94% reported in 2011 and significantly higher than the 65.7% average for traditional students from the first year to second year (ACT, 2008). Additionally, these students had solid GPAs of 3.04 and were taking more than enough credits to surpass traditional students in meeting their degree requirements. Overall, the input of military-connected students participating in this new study affirmed the value of a dedicated military support office, website or portal, and a lounge or other dedicated space for these students.

Finding: The presence of veterans' offices with coordinators to manage academic, certification, registration, and advising issues needs to remain a top priority for institutions, as such offices can “bridge the gap” between the structured environment of the military and the more amorphous campus structure. The cuts in hallmark services, including an 18% reduction in lounges, raise questions about whether these will be restored post-pandemic. With the large percentage of student respondents experiencing financial, employment, and mental health concerns, support services are more relevant than ever. The isolation from peers and peer-related groups that stems from the pandemic, along with a significant reduction in military-specific lounges, may further hinder academic success. While most schools have a dedicated website or portal, this is an excellent time to consider how to move beyond virtual services and, as we move through the worst of the pandemic, develop strategies to retain the more effective in-person contact and designated veteran community areas (Figure 5).

Q16 As of the start of Academic Year 2020-2021, your school is providing the following services for military-affiliated students (check all that apply)

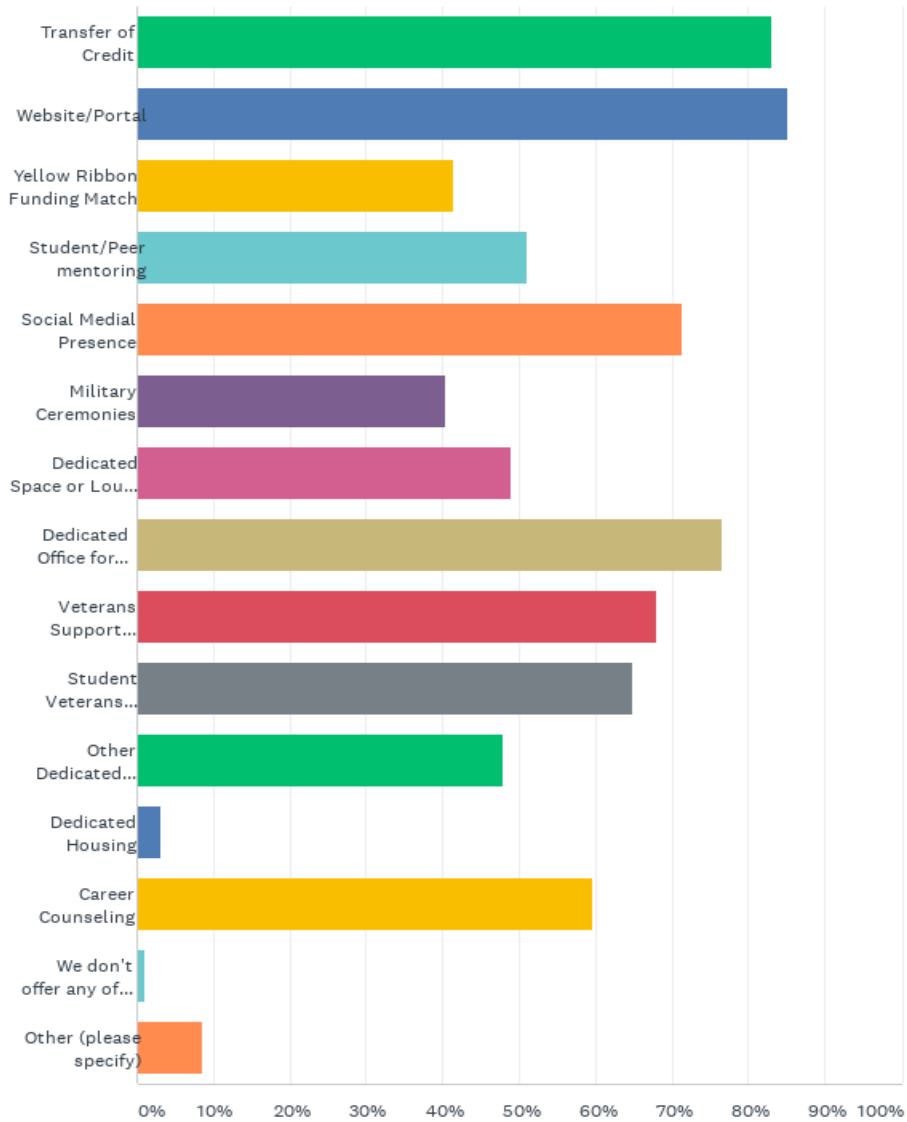


Figure 5

CONCLUSION

MOVING FORWARD

The pandemic is and will continue to impact institutions financially, organizationally, and structurally for years to come. Schools' ability to adapt to these shifting circumstances cannot be overstated as we strive to keep our military-connected students not only on track, but thriving, in higher education. The presence of consistent and appropriate campus support is often a harbinger of success and bridges the gap to the next mission—a fruitful reintegration to civilian life.

Much will need to be accomplished with fewer resources and limited person-to-person contact due to COVID restrictions in the short term. Schools should continue to track essential data to be prepared to justify a strong support structure for their military-connected students. Campus task forces and other coordinated efforts will be essential to reignite discussion of these students' value and the benefit of supporting them “To, Through, and Beyond”™ their higher education life cycles.

OCP will use the data compiled in this report to develop further online resources that can effectuate the type of pivot many schools will need to implement moving forward toward a post-pandemic environment. OCP's “REBOOT” model will offer institutions virtual training and orientations to assist institutions in responding to this study's findings.

“The pandemic’s impact on college and university budgets is producing a particularly harsh degradation of support and services for student veterans, both on and off campus. There’s always been a roller-coaster of support for veterans, ramping up during wartime and dropping off when peace has returned, and the same is going on now. Only with an unwanted accelerant—COVID 19. Which is really its own war. We must find ways to re-double our support for vets and their families in a time of great need and challenge. Outreach and training for university staff and for student vets can help create a campus-wide atmosphere of cooperation and sense of mission that plays a critical role in academic success.”

--Rod Davis, author, US Army veteran, and co-founder of The Texas A&M University System’s first Veterans Support Office.

“During my time as President of Stockton University from 2003 to 2015, we initiated a holistically based veterans’ affairs support office, and I can say with certainty that these targeted services helped this population to prosper. With these resources, our student veterans thrived on campus, with GPAs and retention rates that surpassed their civilian peers. The pandemic has exacerbated the budget woes of higher education and threatens to force draconian budget cuts that will impact institutions for years to come. That said, we cannot afford to degrade the very services that we know can be critical to our student veterans completing their degree. Campuses will need to be innovative and collaborative moving forward as we navigate the uncharted waters of the COVID pandemic.” Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. PhD, Senior Fellow, Institute for American Thought, Indiana University Indianapolis. Founding and Consulting Editor, The Works of George Santayana, MIT

FURTHER RESEARCH

Ongoing tracking of the effects of COVID on the military-connected population will be necessary to gain a clearer understanding of both the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic while monitoring the population’s demographic diversity. An additional study will be conducted in the Spring of 2021 when next year’s budgets are completed. The following are some questions that will be explored in future data collection.

For Military-Connected Students:

- What branch did you serve in?
- What is your age?
- Do you have a family?
- What factors contributed to you starting school or disenrolling?
- What is your major?
- Were you deployed for COVID relief?

For Institutions:

- What will be the change in the student veteran population over the next several semesters?
- Will services be reduced as schools build their 2021–2022 AY budgets?
- Will staffing for support services be affected in the 2021–2022 AY budgets?
- Have military students attending schools transitioned from mainly in-person to online

learning successfully, or have they been negatively affected by lack of progress or disenrollment?

- How have campuses addressed the needs of those activated to respond to COVID-related deployments?
- How has academic progress been impacted by the pandemic and shift to a predominantly online format?
- What are the military branches and ages of military-connected students who respond?

ABOUT OPERATION COLLEGE PROMISE

Operation College Promise is a national policy, research, and education program based in Trenton, New Jersey, which supports the transition of our nation's veterans "To, Through, and Beyond"™ their postsecondary objectives. The programs' signature Certificate for Veterans' Service Providers (CVSP) program has certified 1,000 professionals representing over 250,000 student veterans. OCP continues to be a leader in assessing student veterans' progress to a degree with the completion of three national research projects: Completing the Mission I, II, and III.

In May of 2020, OCP launched "Operation Reboot," which now provides virtual options for student orientations and the CVSP professional development training.

OCP's work has been featured in the New York Times, USA Today, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Chronicle on Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed, Military Advanced Education, NBC, Fox News, NPR, and CNN, among many other media outlets. The project contributed a chapter to "What's Next for Student Veterans – Moving from Transition to Academic Success," a book published by the National Resource Directory

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ACT. (2008). *National collegiate retention and persistence to degree rates*.

http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/retain_2008.pdf

American Council on Education (2011). *Promising Practices in veterans' education: Outcomes and recommendations from the Success for Veteran Awards Grants*.

Cline, D. (2020). COVID-19 exacerbates job woes for veterans, military spouses. *The Augusta Chronicle*. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from:

<https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2020/08/30/covid-19-exacerbates-job-woes-for-veterans-military-spouses/>

Lang, W. (2013). *Completing the Mission II: A pilot study of veteran students' progress toward degree attainment in the Post-9/11 era*. Operation College Promise.

Lopez, S., Pisacreta Davidson, E., & Schwartz, E. (2018). *Student veterans need targeted support due to COVID-19 educational disruptions*. Ithaka SR. Retrieved October 22, 2020, from <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/student-veterans-need-targeted-support-due-to-covid-19-educational-disruptions>

McNichol, E., Leachman, & Marshall, J. (2020). *States need significantly more fiscal relief to slow the emerging deep recession*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from <http://cbpp.org>

Military Benefits.info. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from

<http://militarybenefitsinfo.org/>

National Student Clearing House Monthly Update on Higher Education Enrollment November 12, 2020, Retrieved November 22, 2020, from

<https://nscresearchcenter.org>

Nierenberg, A. & Pasick, A. (2020, October). Colleges are slashing budgets. *The New York Times*. Retrieved October 30, 2020, from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-budget-cuts-finance.html>.

Sisk, R. (2020, August). The COVID-19 unemployment crisis may be turning around for veterans. *The Military Times*. Retrieved October 13, 2020, from

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/08/07/covid-19-unemployment-crisis-may-be-turning-around-veterans.html>

St. Amour, M. (2020). Enrollment still down. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved December 3, 2020, from

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/11/12/enrollment-declines-continue-national-student-clearinghouse-finds>

Schwartz, N., Casselman, B., & Koeze, E. (2020) How bad is unemployment? Literally off the chart. *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/08/business/economy/april-jobs-report.html>

State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2020, June). Still a target: What Does another recession mean for higher education funding? *Higher Ed Today*. Retrieved October 30, 2020, from <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2020/06/01/still-target-another-recession-mean-higher-education-funding>

©Operation College Promise, 2021. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.