

## **Preliminary Strategy Recommendations on Improving College Completion among Veterans**

*From discussions hosted at the St. Louis Regional Chamber, July 16, 2013*

### **Should we more clearly focus our strategy by segmenting the universe of veterans?**

For example:

- Are there statistics on veterans going into the military with the specific intent to go to college afterwards? They could be a focus.
- What are recruits / volunteers thinking in regards to college when they first go into the military? We need stats on those who have just left military service.
- We need to break the veterans group down by age. Younger vets are more inclined to enroll because it is part of their DNA / upbringing.
- There are trends within the Vietnam / Gulf War vets returning for additional training, in part due to the economy.
- We should focus on those 28-30 years of age.
- The needs are very different for those who are single vs. married, with dependents or not.
- There is a difference in what is available / eligibility between the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post-911 GI Bill.
- Coming out of active duty, veterans that have families are more likely to see college as an option after the support system has been set. Those who hold off until later find it more difficult to complete.
- There are significant differences between undergrad and grad school. Officer population is a major target for several graduate schools.
- Vets don't use the services that are available because they feel they don't need help. Many don't know how easy it is to use their education benefits, or don't know what it entails or what they get.
- Online programs can solve many issues related to childcare, work schedules, etc.
- Benefits are limited to 12 months, so it helps with new training but vets often lose basic skills, which prevent them from taking it to the next level.

- It will be important to capture those who transition out and have started a degree but haven't finished it. Sometimes, we are dealing with people who have blown through their benefits and so the focus becomes "what can we do to get them something?" (A certificate or other.)
- Two-thirds of those eligible for Post-911 benefits transfer these benefits to their dependents. For whatever reason, their dependents (on average) do not do as well as other students.

### **What must the St. Louis region do to break into a new trajectory?**

- Vets are ill-prepared to transition from military life to student life. Exiting service members are looking to educational opportunities as a means to transition and prepare for civilian life. Expectations need to be set early and clearly.
- Practices to share and scale up
  - a. Veterans centers
  - b. Financial planning
  - c. Reaching out to active duty from area centers
  - d. RAFT (Regional Alliance for the Troops) – Big college fair with vendors, colleges that offer support
  - e. Offer incentives for employers
  - f. Continue communication with them during active duty and after discharge
  - g. Military credit transfer – ability to transfer military experience and knowledge to college credit
  - h. Send college letters to returning veterans, showing support as well as detailing benefits and a list of contact info for each St. Louis area colleges
  - i. Colleges sharing resources to recruit veterans
  - j. Issues = tracking, communication. Need to find a way to reach veterans from our region and pull them into our network.
  - k. Build a support system. Give credit for prior learning experience.
- "Military Mondays" – institute series of informational sessions at universities across the region. Reach out to vets and active duty military.
- Informational resources on regional service organizations for vets. How do we connect higher ed with the service organizations to connect and leverage service and education?
- Veteran-focused academic counseling would help.
- Some veterans transfer their educational benefits to their children, when using these benefits themselves might actually be of greater benefit to their family. Is counseling on this decision regularly available?

- Is the American Council on Education willing to work with the region to assess credit transfer opportunities? ACE seems to cooperate, and they are looking for faculty to participate in review.
- How do we leverage military command to help veterans transition their experience into appropriate academic programs and related job opportunities? (i.e., logistics.) See ESGR website for conversion ideas.
- With large numbers of veterans about to come out of the military, we must focus on that FIRST academic experience to prepare for success.
- Implement “standard operating procedures” across institutions to participate:
  1. In DOD memoranda of understanding and principles of excellence
  2. Yellow ribbon
  3. Transfer of credit opportunities.
- How do we tie all this together thru university supports or structure (School one-stop shop?)
- Need a strategy to increase / improve the ‘word of mouth’ potential from other successful vets / alums.
- St. Louis area institutions of higher education coming together to present a ‘pre-enrollment, non-biased information” session. All institutions then implement a veteran / service member-focused, post-enrollment goal-setting and expectation-setting orientation / advisement program.
- Ensure that advisors interacting with veterans and service members are subject matter experts on veterans / military and student-related benefits.
- McKendree surveyed students to find out which services they would like. It is difficult to know which services they want.
- Veterans want structure.
- Vets tend to have a ‘hodge-podge’ of credits. We need to make sure that institutions are transfer-friendly for military courses.
- Market online to military and vets.
- Flexible formats, accelerated courses, blended formats.
- Partnerships between universities and VA offices. Collaboration among universities.
- Regional college fair, and region “transfer fair.” Veterans’ open house with all universities.

- Develop more transfer -friendly policies.
- Radio / TV PSAs; information campaign explaining the benefit of a college education.
- Ensure regional sites are equipped to service students. Have advocates on staff who are proactive. Have an easy-to-find webpage for military students.
- Assign a mentor / advocate to help check in / guide the vet. Checklist to help with the transition to higher ed, giving credit for military training to help fast-track a student.
- Greater collaboration between DOD institutions and higher ed to facilitate transition. Maybe use St. Louis region financial services firms to help with financial planning so a vet is getting the information from a professional.
- “Beef up” Missouri Returning Heroes Act to service a larger vets audience, including programs that help with dependent care.
- Transition, credit for experience and training, financial planning.
- Vets have a tremendous sense of community and will go where other vets are. Offer vets-only classes. Educate business on incentives for hiring students. Create a mentor program for vets within the business community, similar to what exists for tradition students.
- Community colleges are pushing to see how military training can be transferred to academic credit, but they are just starting.
- It takes longer for veterans to complete their degrees because of family and work.

### **What are the underlying trends that will hold us back?**

- Lack of acceptance of military training, transfer of credits from prior learning, DANTES / CLEP exams, hours at UMSL
- Veterans need to start planning for their future sooner, when first getting out. Most get out without a plan, then find work, and before long college seems too difficult to get back into.
- Vets don’t show up for the program opportunities that some organizations are providing. Is there a feeling of connection with vets and long-term career opportunities in the region?
- Must help veterans answer the question: “Is it all worth it?”
- Family, work, and finances are an issue.

- Veterans have the benefits and they don't know how to use them. Unwilling to take advantage of services.
- Not understanding the structure of the institution.
- Veterans tend to expect organization and details. They are often frustrated at the organizational structure – this means they are motivated; they want to be successful, but are unable to navigate the system.
- A problem is lack of integration to help vets transition into college.

### **How would you describe the veterans' culture regarding college?**

- Veterans go to college to better themselves financially.
- Higher ups and officers are encouraging their veterans to go to college
- The current culture regarding college seems positive (want to better themselves), but when they get home, life gets in the way. Support their families, time for work and family, find jobs, and more are all higher on the list of priorities.

### **Generally, how motivated do you think the veterans are to complete college degrees?**

- Generally, very, but expectations need to be set early and clearly so the prospective student understands the benefits and opportunities available of both attaining a college degree and entering the civilian workforce:
  - Early potential / career type and industry
  - Lifestyle expectations / quality of life
  - Employment and cycle / career progression
  - Retirement
  - "Military Monday" tie-in
- Motivation is not the issue. Life factors get in the way of completing their degree.
- Vets are motivated more by the prospect of gaining a better financial situation, rather than getting a college degree.

### **How can you be better supported to lead the change process?**

- Need information about how to make the case to vets that St. Louis is an attractive place to come and live. Need to do this more quickly and show evidence. The vets are concerned about the crime, etc. in St. Louis.

- Connect business and the higher ed community more closely with a focus on opportunities for vets.
- What do we know about those vets who have come back to StL with a degree, and how can we demonstrate their success to others?
- How do we identify those coming out of service with some college credit and provide awareness of degree completion opportunities?

**What advice would you provide the St. Louis region in its quest to place in the top ten metro areas in college attainment by 2025?**

- Credit articulation for skills and training – standardize among universities
- Greater coordination between two- and four-year colleges
- Tuition and dependent services
- Mentor program
- Program with DOD and business community for financial planning.