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News » Education

Pat Tillman's legacy: More help for military veterans in college

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Enlarge By Cheryl Evans, Arizona Republic

Next to an image of her deceased husband Pat Tillman, Marie Tillman, who took a prominent role in the foundation that bears his name, listens to two Tillman Scholars talk about their social welfare projects at Arizona State's LVA Building in Tempe in 2008.

By Jack Stripling, [Inside Higher Ed](#)

If the late Pat Tillman is remembered for his selflessness, then it seems fitting that the foundation created in the professional football star-turned-soldier's name would ask the same of the veterans it serves.

Now partnered with eight universities across the country, the Pat Tillman Foundation's Tillman Military Scholars program offers funding to veterans who demonstrate a record of service to their communities and pledge to continue those activities. The program disbursed \$642,000 to its inaugural class of 52 veterans and their families last year, and its ultimate goal is to provide \$3.6 million annually — an amount equivalent to the lucrative Arizona Cardinals contract Tillman turned down to join the Army Rangers after Sept. 11, 2001.

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It is the hope of foundation officials that the scholars program can be the bright spot of a soldier's story that has thus far served up nearly as much controversy and pain as it has inspiration. Cpl. Tillman was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan April 22, 2004, but the Army's slowness in acknowledging the true circumstances surrounding his death pitted the soldier's family against the very institution he had served.

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"We're not only focused on the veterans, but the scholarship is for their families, and that not only continues that legacy that Pat had as an athlete and a student, but as an American," said Hunter Riley, the foundation's director of programs. "As a foundation, (we) focus on the positive aspects of his life. When you look at Pat's story, that (controversy) is part of it, but it's not something we really discuss here at the foundation." The foundation was created in 2004 by Tillman's family and friends.

Scholarship applicants are evaluated on a number of criteria, including financial need, record of personal achievement, essay responses, demonstrated service, and education and career ambitions. To retain funding from year to year, scholars are expected to maintain a 3.0 grade point average and provide documented evidence of civic service or community action. Riley notes, however, that the foundation tries to be "flexible" about the grade requirements, acknowledging that some veterans work very hard and still struggle academically.

The foundation's scholarships are available to veterans and their families pursuing any degree at any institution, but students at the eight partnering universities are given special consideration. Of the 52 scholars in the foundation's inaugural class, 32 came from partner institutions. The eight partners are: Cleveland State University, Mississippi State University, Texas A&M University, University of Arizona, University of Arkansas, University of Idaho, University of Maryland and University of Oregon.

By selecting partner colleges, the foundation hopes to disburse its funding to different areas of the country, while also steering the lion's share of its funding toward students who attend institutions with significant military enrollments and specific support services for veterans and their families.

As one of the newest partner institutions, Cleveland State University, drew the Tillman Foundation's attention with a veterans' program that began rather organically on the campus in 2007. The Supportive Education for Returning Veterans or SERV program, was born after John Schupp, a chemistry professor, had a conversation with a veteran student who said she had struggled to maintain focus in classes since returning from a deployment to Kosovo years earlier. Troubled by this, Schupp visited patients at a nearby Veterans Administration (VA) hospital, asking

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them about the peculiar challenges they had faced in the classroom.

"The program started because a student called me up," said Schupp, now director of SERV. "I'm not a veteran. I'm not a psychologist. I teach chemistry."

The VA patients "didn't want to talk to me in the beginning," he added. "Finally they gave in after six weeks of bringing them coffee and doughnuts."

What the veterans told Schupp was consistent with what he'd heard from his student. Veterans felt isolated by the classroom experience and by sharing an environment with students who could seldom relate to what it was like to have served in the military. They had trouble maintaining concentration, and financial pressures sometimes exacerbated their problems.

Schupp left these conversations concluding the classroom experience had to be altered in a significant way, and he convinced Cleveland State administrators to let him pilot an "experiment." For much of 2007, Schupp recruited student veterans to take part in a year of veterans-only general education classes. Surrounded by students who could share their experiences — and often their anxieties — Schupp thought veterans would improve in performance and retention. In their second semester, the veterans would share a course with their civilian counterparts, and slowly ease into the broader tapestry of the campus.

The jury is still out to some extent on the success of the young SERV program, but Schupp likes what he's seen so far. On average, just 3% of college freshmen who are veterans graduated from bachelor's degree programs in five years or less — compared with 30% of all college freshmen, according to Department of Education data from 1995-01. Of the 76 different SERV students to enter the program since its inception, the average retention rate is 80%, and the average GPA is 2.75, according to data provided to the Tillman Foundation. Those numbers suggest SERV students will beat the odds, Schupp said.

Since SERV began at Cleveland State, other veterans-only classes have started at the University of Arizona, [Ohio State University](#), the University of West Virginia and Youngstown State University.

For students who have participated in SERV, the possibility of further funding through the Tillman Foundation comes as welcome news. While the Post-9/11 GI Bill has increased educational opportunities for veterans, SERV students note that there are still challenges given the hurdles they face re-acclimating to civilian life. The bill provides funding for 48 months, but Cpl. Nick Yurko says he has a year left of classes at Cleveland State and he's nearly exhausted his benefits. Yurko, 28, hadn't been in a classroom for five years when he returned to a community college, and it took some time to navigate his way back toward the life of a student.

"I was out of school for a while, so when I first got out (of the [Marines](#)) I was taking lower than college-level courses," he said. "The whole first year I was trying to work (the system) myself, and I ended up taking courses I didn't need or that wouldn't transfer."

Yurko had completed his general education courses before he connected with SERV, so he didn't experience the veterans-only classes. But he says he has benefited from the camaraderie that comes from spending time with fellow veterans in the SERV lounge or elsewhere on campus. While there's a fair amount of razzing between members of different military branches, York says SERV is "our own unit."

A handful of SERV students who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder have dropped out, and some have physical disabilities that create challenges. During a recent phone interview, Timothy Salay lamented that a non-service related injury had again landed him in the VA hospital and disrupted his studies; complications with a prosthetic leg recently caused an infection.

Salay says he is eager to return to his political science and international relations courses at Cleveland State. "This was a setback for me," said Salay, who was honorably discharged from the Air Force in 1976. "I had to withdraw from school. I'm bummed out."

One of the keys to SERV, however, is providing veterans like Salay with advocates who can communicate on their behalf when issues arise. The last time Salay had a prosthetic problem, he says "I worked with Dr. Schupp to talked to my professors, explained my situation and told them I'm doing my best in class."

Salay, 54, says he timed out on any education-related benefits he may have had years ago. Because of that, his education has largely been financed with credit cards, Pell Grants and student loans. Despite the expense, Salay now holds an associate's degree in Japanese and has an eye toward a government job in international relations. He believes he'll need a master's degree to get where he would ultimately like to be, and plans to apply for the Tillman scholarship to help reach that goal. While some extra help would be nice, Salay says he's already drawn inspiration from Tillman's decision to forgo riches in service of a greater cause.

"I've become more spiritual as time has gone on," Salay says. "And the crass materialism and just obtaining things, that's fine — but it doesn't mean anything unless I feel rewarded by what I'm doing."

The Tillman Military Scholars Program is open for applications March 15, and submissions are due by April 30. For more information, visit www.patillmanfoundation.org.

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