



# Completing the Mission:

A Pilot Study of Veteran Students' Progress  
Toward Degree Attainment  
in the Post 9/11 Era

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## PREFACE

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In June 2008, the United States Congress passed legislation that has dramatically affected the transition of thousands of veterans who have served in the United States Armed Forces during the Post-9/11 era. Dubbed the “Veterans Educational Assistance Act,” but more frequently referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the contents of this initiative paint a new landscape for veterans and servicemembers who want to pursue a college education. The legislation is a stark contrast to previous education benefit programs and, in the minds of many, offers a generational change for veterans in a manner similar to the one created by the original GI Bill of Rights of the Post World War II era. In 1947, veterans made up 49% of U.S. college enrollment and 7.8 million veterans trained at colleges, trade schools and in business and agriculture training programs.

More recent education entitlements have not been as generous. The Montgomery GI Bill, signed into law in 1984, currently provides for a maximum of \$1,473 per month for living and education expenses, all but assuring that most students utilizing this benefit could not afford to pursue a four-year degree without additional financial assistance.

The VA reports that 523,244 veterans have taken advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill since August 2009 and \$3.6 billion has been allocated for this entitlement. The growth in enrollment is expected to continue as a result of a multitude of factors, including the drawdown of troops from Iraq, and an uncertain economic climate with limited job opportunities. Further, some 300,000 members of the military transition back to civilian life every year.

**“The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey is proud of its student veterans and grateful for their service to our nation. Providing educational opportunities for our veterans is a Stockton priority.”**  
**Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr.**  
**President, RSC**

**The most recent estimates from the VA are that \$3.6 billion has been issued to student veterans under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. (VA)** Those making this transition are faced with a disconcerting veteran unemployment rate, particularly for the youngest group of veterans. According to the Department of Labor, the total percentage of unemployed veterans in any age category recently jumped from 7.7% to 8%, while OEF/OIF veterans' unemployment exceeded 20%. Veterans without a degree face even more daunting barriers since the unemployment rate for high school graduates is generally about twice that of college graduates. The median income of a college graduate who worked full-time, year-round in 2008 was \$55,700, \$21,900 more than the median income of a high school graduate (2008, College Board).

**“What matters is not merely whether individuals are able to begin college, but whether they are able to finish college.”**  
**(Tinto, 2004)**

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## THE STUDY

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To begin the analysis of student veteran progress toward degree attainment in the Post-9/11 GI era, OCP is developing the nation's first multi-state, cross institutional veterans' Graduation Probability Indices (GPI)<sup>™</sup>. The GPI will provide for ongoing assessment of the progress of veteran students, while taking into account their unique needs as primarily non-traditional students. It is designed to begin the process of reviewing progress toward graduation, while recognizing that most recipients of the Post-9/11 GI Bill have not attended a four-year institution of higher learning long enough to gain requisite credits/hours for degree attainment.

This endeavor is a collaborative venture of Operation College Promise (OCP) and the Pat Tillman Foundation. Operation College Promise is a policy, research and information program supporting the postsecondary education advancement of servicemembers and veterans of the United States Armed Forces. OCP was founded by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) and was one of 20 recipients of the American Council on Education/Walmart "Success for Veterans" grants in 2009. Among its offerings, is the nation's first and most widely disseminated multi-state, multi-institutional training program for professionals working with veterans – the Certificate for Veterans' Service Providers (CVSP) program. OCP has also produced the first national resource publication, *The OCP Field Guide*, specifically designed for veterans' service providers.

The Pat Tillman Foundation is a national leader in providing resources and educational scholarship support to veterans, active servicemembers and their spouses. The Tillman Military Scholars program aids all veterans, specifically the ever-growing population of veterans and dependents of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Following Pat Tillman's death in 2004, while serving with the U.S. Army's 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment in Afghanistan, his family and friends established the Pat Tillman Foundation. The mission of the Pat Tillman Foundation is to invest in military veterans and their spouses through educational scholarships; building a diverse community of leaders committed to service of others. With the Tillman Military Scholars program, the Pat Tillman Foundation is dedicated to supporting educational opportunities for servicemembers and military families by filling the financial gaps left by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Funds awarded through the Tillman Military Scholars program cover not only direct study-related expenses such as tuition and fees, but also other needs including housing and child care. To date, 171 Tillman Military Scholars, representing 32 states and 59 academic institutions, have been awarded more than \$2.2 million.

**“Measuring the progress of student veterans toward their intended degrees is a vital step in assessing the success of the institutions, organizations and government programs that support this program. Together we can showcase the value of education as one of the most transformational steps for military veterans in transitions back into the civilian world and finding employment.”**

**Hunter I. Riley, Director of Programs  
Pat Tillman Foundation.**

Conducted in the summer and fall of 2011, the Graduation Probability Indices (GPI)<sup>™</sup> research project was initiated to set in motion a mechanism for evaluating student veteran progress toward degree attainment. This pilot endeavor is designed to serve as a starting point for further analysis of the student veteran population utilizing education benefits in the Post-9/11 era. It is not intended to be wholly conclusive, but rather will provide a snapshot of veteran student progression. Later studies will broaden the scope of this research to include additional institutions and students.

This report will assess the progress toward degree attainment for a cohort of students attending a sample of public four-year colleges and universities. Schools participating in the pilot are the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Montclair State University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Texas State University, Mississippi State University, University of South Florida, and Arizona State University. A total of 200 students were selected at random and evaluated during the 2010-2011 academic year. The students were either veterans or on active-duty and were included in the report as long as they were using a VA educational benefit.

College	Total Student Population	Veterans or Students on Active-duty
Mississippi State University	18,002	645
University of South Florida	47,867	867
Richard Stockton College of NJ	7,000	282
University of North Carolina	25,000	1,000
Montclair State University	11,000	280
Texas State University	8,000	1,700
Arizona State University	72,254	1,603

The goal of the GPI™ will be to assist OCP in gathering higher education retention and completion rates, particularly those institutions that have participated in either the CVSP program or have worked specifically with the Pat Tillman Foundation. OCP regularly tracks enrollment trends, and partner institutions continue to report growth even beyond expectations (median enrollment growth of the nine NJASCU institutions from fall 2009 to fall 2010 was more than 60%).

The collection of this data is timely as we assess the progress of students receiving optimal campus support. Moving forward, the project will increase the scope of the research to include additional campuses with varied amounts of specific support structure for this population. Quantitative analysis of CVSP participants will be instituted in subsequent workshops as a mechanism for OCP to collect additional data for further analysis in the ongoing GPI™ research project.

**“While it can be difficult for colleges to obtain data on their student veteran population, it is critical since the data will ensure programs and services that are being implemented are truly supporting veterans and helping them achieve their postsecondary goals.”**  
**(American Council on Education, 2011)**

For accessibility and consistency, the initial tracking work of the GPI™ will include factors commonly used to evaluate a traditional student cohort. The data includes veterans’ grade point averages; percent of veteran students earning all credits pursued; semester to semester retention rates; and the percent of veterans utilizing campus services. The definition of the last item, campus service utilization, is comprised of veteran-specific offerings such as academic counseling, participation in the Student Veterans’ Organization (SVO), utilization of the Veterans Student Center and other services as deemed applicable by the institution.

The GPI™ criteria were developed in concert with four distinctly different campuses which have representatives who have been certified through Operation College Promise’s model CVSP training program. Each institution employs, as appropriate to its campus, the basic principles of *OCP’s Framework for Veteran Student Success* – a matrix of empirical components to efficiently and cost-effectively meet the distinct needs of the burgeoning

veteran student population, particularly those of the Post-9/11 era. National input from the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Servicemembers Opportunity Consortium (SOC), as well as the input of

OCP partners contributed to its development. The *Framework* includes a blend of new programs, amended or expanded existing programs, and external partnerships and has many consistencies with ACT research on effective retention tools for a traditional student population and its report, “The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention.” ACT is a nonprofit organization which administers a college entrance exam in many states and performs higher education research.

**Baccalaureate-granting institutions should seek ways to more effectively engage student veterans in effective education practices and provide them with the supportive environments that promote success. (NSSE, 2010)**

As defined in the *OCP Field Guide*, the *Framework for Veteran Success* includes verification of whether the following components are presently available on campus:

- ◆ Designated office/coordinator;
- ◆ Student veterans organization or club;
- ◆ Member of Servicemembers Opportunity Consortium (SOC) or other military transfer policy;
- ◆ In-state tuition policy for non-residents/other scholarships;
- ◆ Separate orientation;
- ◆ Expedited readmission policy;
- ◆ Veteran-specific website/portal;
- ◆ Veteran acknowledgement ceremonies;
- ◆ Veterans housing – specific and/or preference;
- ◆ Career counseling/peer mentoring.

**“With guidance from my peers at other institutions, veteran service organizations, and workshops like Operation College Promise’s certificate program, I learned what was working for other schools and what our campus was lacking. With this knowledge and the input of my student veterans, I determined what was most needed and built my program one brick at a time.”**

**Logan Cason  
Coordinator for Veteran Students  
University of North Carolina - Charlotte**

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## METHODOLOGY

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For the purposes of this pilot, a simple random sampling of student veterans was collected during the 2009-2010 academic year. Students who were deployed during the academic year of the survey were excluded from this analysis. All institutions surveyed are public institutions and represent a broad cross section of demographics, including size, location and veteran enrollment. Student veterans in a NSSE survey were reported to be more likely to attend public institutions than nonveterans (NSSE, 2010). All but one surveyed institution were designated as being “moderately difficult” by Peterson’s College Guide in terms of selectivity and averaged a graduation rate of approximately 31% for a four-year course of study. The average annual tuition and fees was \$6,900.

This study takes into account that the student veteran population is best characterized as non-traditional in comparison to typical collegiate learners. New research by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has begun to track the varied components that characterize this population. Student veterans tend to be slightly older than their civilian counterparts with lower high school GPAs and often require additional preparatory remedial work. These students also characterized themselves as lower in “academic self concept” and higher in “leadership ability” compared to their peers (HERI, 2009). A 2007-2008 study further distinguished this population as more likely to be a first-generation college student, male, married, and with at least one dependent (Radford, 2008).

**First time combat veteran students spent twice as much time working  
and 6 times as many hours on dependent care than nonveteran peers  
(NSSE, 2010)**

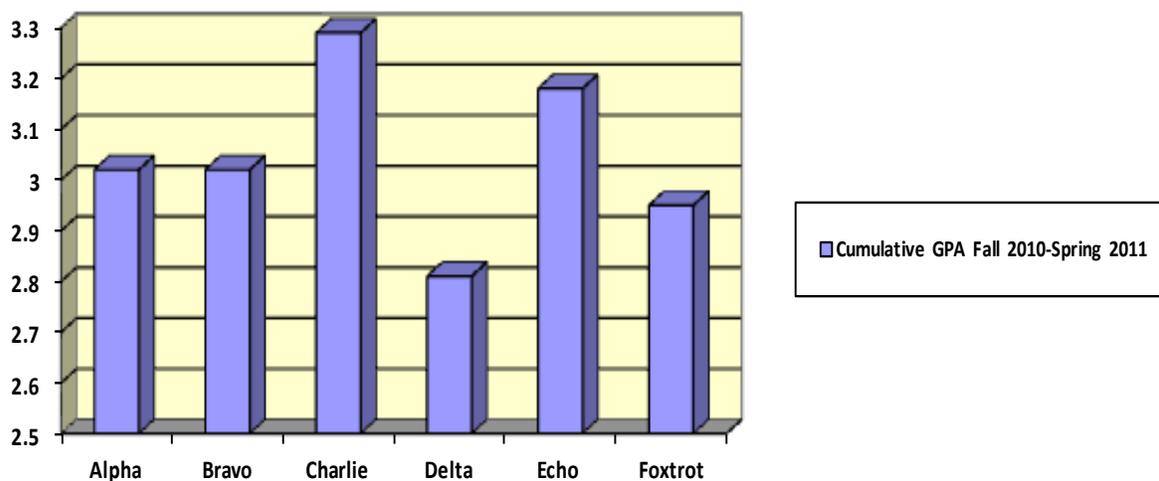
## FINDINGS

### Grade Point Averages (GPA)

The causal effect between a high GPA, retention, and progress toward degree attainment is well documented for traditional students and there is no reason that this would differ for a veteran or military student. Comparing GPAs of this population with a national average has little comparative value due to the many factors influencing grading on a particular campus. This does not, however, negate the value of reviewing GPAs as they correlate to retention and graduation predictors.

Research through a DePaul study of a sample of a first-year non-traditional cohort of their students found the highest retention – 85.6% – for students with a GPA greater than 3.0, 80% for those with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.49, and 46.9% for those with less than a 2.0. The report similarly documented the relationship between having a high GPA and graduation rates. In their study, DePaul students with higher than a 3.0 had the highest graduation rate at 77.4%, while those with below a 2.0 graduated at a rate of 13.3% (DePaul). The average GPA for this cohort, including both part-time and full-time students, is 3.04.

**My mother always encouraged me to pursue my educational goals. I didn't take her advice and regretted it. The Post-9/11 GI Bill gave me the opportunity I needed to finish my degree and I encourage all veterans to utilize this entitlement to attain their higher education objectives, Timothy D. Stroud, Army Veteran Director, Military Affairs Division ArmedZilla**

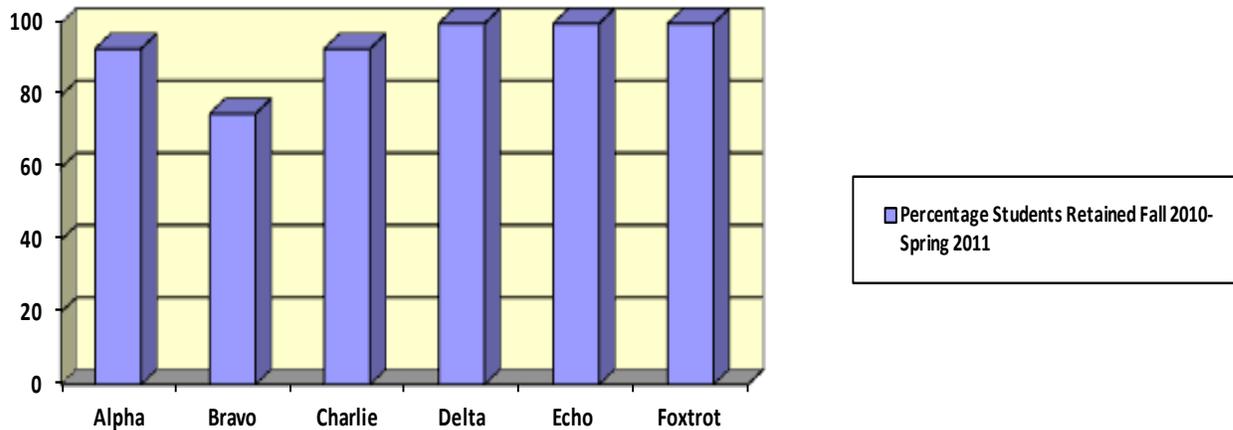


### Percent of Students Earning all Credits Pursued

Many college degree programs require between 120 and 130 credit hours for completion, and the average semester course load is around 15 credits. The Student Right to Know Law requires institutions to report six-year graduation rates or degree attainment within 150% of the “normal time to completion.” Around half of the nation’s students reach the six-year completion goal at the institution where they began, although students transferring in or out of institutions, and a variety of other populations, are not included in these reports. Among the institutions reporting, student veterans averaged 24 credits per academic year, putting them well within the six-year graduation rate and on par with what the College Board reported in 2008 as an average time to earn a bachelor’s degree – five years. Since this cohort is more likely to work and have family obligations, we would expect that the time to obtain a degree could be prolonged. Even among traditional students, three-fourths of today’s students no longer fit a

traditional model. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about half of today's students are financially independent; 49% are enrolled part-time; 38% work full-time; 27% have dependents of their own.

The success rate for this variable – measured by earning all credits pursued – averaged 71%.



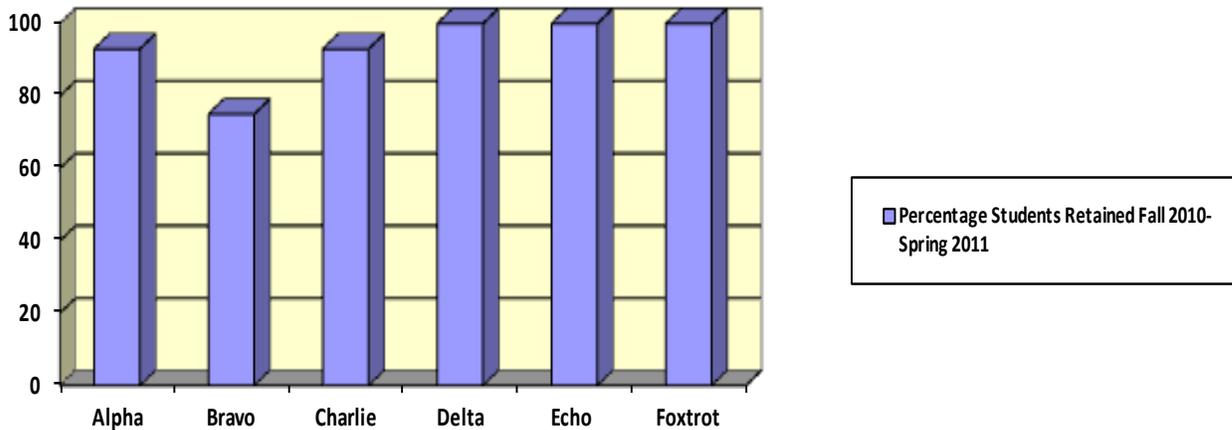
## Retention

Increasing retention is a ubiquitous goal for institutions of higher education. Identifying successful strategies for enhancing persistence rates among a traditional population has confounded institutions for more than 30 years, and stagnant graduation rates reflect this conundrum. Assessing retention is, however, a good indicator of student satisfaction with their overall college experience and, according to ACT, can be impacted by the following factors:

- ◆ Strong academic advising programs;
- ◆ Special orientation programs;
- ◆ Early warning systems to identify struggling students;
- ◆ Innovative program of education that meet the needs of students;
- ◆ Freshman seminar/university intro course for credit;
- ◆ Tutoring programs;
- ◆ Advising interventions with selected student populations;
- ◆ Mandated course placement testing programs;
- ◆ Comprehensive learning assistance/lab.

**“Environments that provide academic, social, and financial support that is accessible to students are environments in which students are more likely to be successful learners.”**  
(Tinto, 2004)

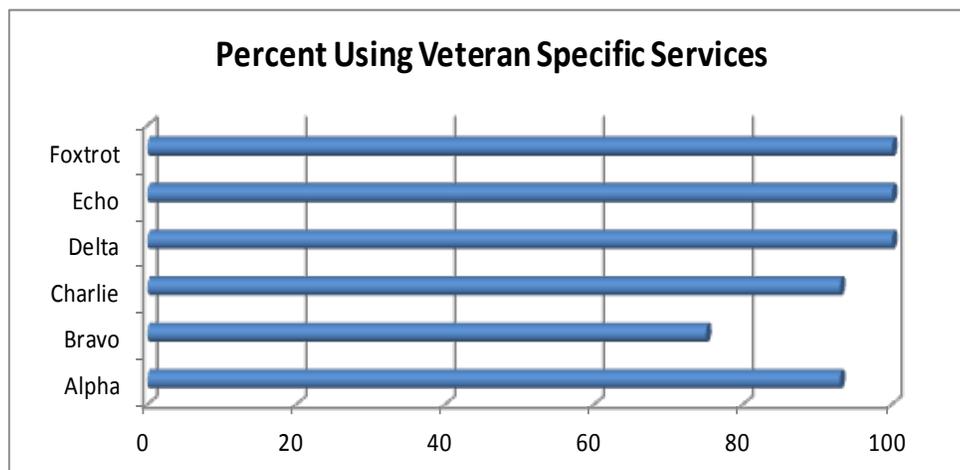
Students who transfer to another institution or return to their native schools “down the road” make the analysis of this data nebulous, but this is true for any student cohort. In an effort to consider how student veterans are progressing toward a degree, a semester-to-semester review was conducted. The aggregate average of 94%, exceeds the national average reported in 2009 by ACT of 65.7%.



### Programs and Services

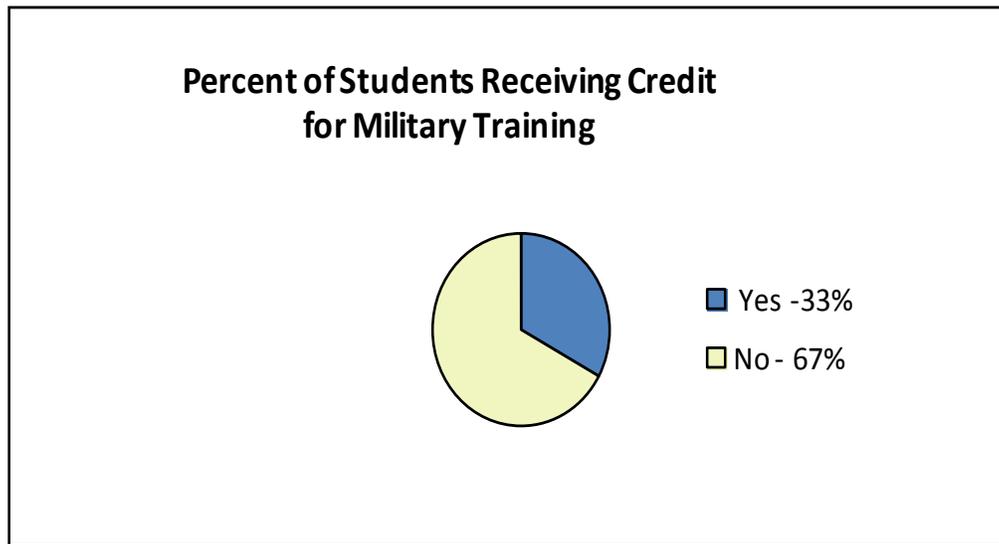
A direct correlation between the types of programs and services that most directly affect retention is hard to draw conclusively, although research suggests that certain academic support and student involvement in the school community do improve retention, as noted above. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found a direct link between campus involvement in both academic and non-academic offerings and retention. The 2010 NSSE survey highlighted the need for campuses to adapt the specific needs of a student veteran population while noting the student veteran respondents reported lower levels of campus support than nonveterans. Campuses participating in this survey had robust support services for their veteran clientele, albeit the use of them varied considerably. This is to be expected to some degree as college personnel continue to refine the options most sought after or required by military students and their families.

**The higher the student involvement level, the higher their grades are and the more likely they are to enroll for the next semester. Highly-engaged students are more likely to re-enroll than less-engaged students. (NSSE, 2009)**



Not coincidentally, a majority of the schools surveyed are active members of the Servicemembers College Consortium (SOC) or utilize the *ACE Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services* – a military-friendly policy that considers military training for credit toward a degree. Unfortunately, only about 1/3 of the students were receiving credit for their military training.

Students surveyed in this report utilized veteran-specific services at an average rate of 60%, with a median utilization rate of 86%.



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## CONCLUSION

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In the two years since the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect we have watched the impact of this new generation of servicemembers from Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and other conflicts unfold on college campuses. Professionals on these campuses, who are advising this rapidly increasing population of students, have striven to prepare for and support them with limited resources and, in some cases, minimal experience with a military population. Thus, it was a chief objective of OCP to develop a framework and program to assist these professionals in adapting and becoming acquainted with veteran-specific programs and services. OCP's *Framework for Veteran Success* is a model derived from extensive research and institutional feedback from across the nation.

**Montclair State University has taken great pride in developing programs and services that assist veteran and active military personnel to pursue a college degree. We are pleased that these efforts are working and that our students are achieving academically and progressing toward degree completion at a pace consistent with that of the University population.**

**Dr. Karen Pennington, Vice President  
Student Development and Campus Life  
Montclair State University**

Campuses included in this study are leading the way in answering the call to support military students, and their students are excelling.

Among the nine institutions surveyed, approximately 6,000 veterans, dependents, or service-members have taken advantage of education benefits, and the sample cohort revealed they are progressing toward degrees consistently or more rapidly than their traditional peers in the categories that compose the GPI™. Veteran students had, on average, higher GPAs and retention rates than their traditional student peers and their course loads were comparable. Furthermore, they were utilizing, albeit at varying degrees, services provided on campus which were designed to support their success. While an assessment of the entire veteran population is beyond the scope of this project, students included in this snapshot are attending schools with robust veteran-specific support services and policies and are progressing toward earning a degree consistent with their non-military peers. It is encouraging to witness the commitment of these campuses and the success of the military student population they serve. Institutions in the process of enhancing their veterans' policies and programs should consider the application of these principles.

**The Post-9/11 GI Bill has the potential to enhance the lives of a new generation of veterans in the same way the original GI Bill is credited as a transformative program that served to democratize higher education while shifting the college experience from a privilege to a right.  
(Alvarez, 2008; Field, Hebel & Smallwood 2008)**

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## **ADDITIONAL RESEARCH**

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A pilot research project of this scope is a useful mechanism for predicating broader and more conclusive analysis. This is particularly true when considering an emerging population that is non-traditional and necessitates the confluence of academic and non-academic support in varying degrees. It is also relevant as a sample population that can be tracked for progress toward a degree. With a population that is diverse in many variables, adapting the methodology itself may be necessary as data is reviewed further. Operation College Promise and the Pat Tillman Foundation will develop further research in the following five areas:

1. Expanding data collected at the pilot schools in this report and establishing a standardized student service definition;
  2. Including additional partner schools for the 2012 assessment;
  3. Surveying participants in future CVSP programs;
  4. Evaluating Tillman Military Scholars success toward a degree, compared to their peer military students;
  5. And assessing graduation rates for military-affiliated students with 60 months of enrolling with VA education benefits.
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