

Improving Opportunities for Veterans: Conference Summary

Panel 1: The Student Veteran Experience at Selective Colleges

New York Times columnist David Leonhardt interviewed four student veterans about their experiences applying to and attending top-tier colleges. Aimee Chartier (Marine Corps, Brown University), Vincent Garcia (Army/National Guard, Rutgers University), Nicole Leadenham (Army, Vassar College and Smith College), and Piragash Swargaloganathan (Navy, Cornell University) shared the challenges of applying to higher education institutions as a veteran. One of the greatest obstacles, they said, was lack of information: Swargaloganathan pointed out that flyers he saw in military education offices were all from online or for-profit schools, and both Garcia and Chartier said much of their college research took place on Google without any outside guidance. Swargaloganathan credited Transition Assistance Program for showing him he had greater options than he realized, while Leadenham said the Posse Foundation did “a lot of the legwork” for her. All panelists emphasized the value of programs that offer support to veterans in transition; other programs that earned shout-outs were Warrior-Scholar Project, Service to School, and the USMC Leadership Scholar program. Another of the greatest challenges in transitioning was lack of confidence: Leadenham explained that the personal confidence developed during military service “doesn’t necessary translate into academic confidence.” Several panelists explained that as students who had not graduated from high school with the qualifications to attend a top college, they didn’t immediately realize that their military service and the experience, skills, discipline, and leadership developed there had expanded their options. They emphasized the importance of information, guidance, and encouragement, asking service members and student veterans to push their peers and share their stories. When the conversation turned to how to get more veterans at top schools, the panelists asked educators to find a way to reach out to and recruit them. “Give them an option,” said Garcia. “They think they have nothing else.” Chartier added that student veterans, as well as educators, should go directly to service members and tell them “you can come to these schools.”

Panel 2: Institutional Perspective: The Benefits of Veteran Student Presence on Campus

Politico journalist Kimberly Hefling interviewed Nick Armstrong (Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families), Antonio Farias (University of Florida), and Kedra Ishop (University of Michigan) about how—and why—colleges should recruit and support student veterans. All three panelists highlighted the maturity and leadership skills veterans bring to campus, their academic success, and their potential to diversify campus culture and enrich classroom discussions. Ishop pointed out that other identities schools recruit, such as first generation, low-income, and minority students, are frequently represented in the diverse

veteran population. When the discussion turned to student support services, panelists shared how they are tackling the “navigation challenge” of higher education bureaucracy. Farias described the value of a “one-stop shop” to guide veterans to resources, while Ishop explained how the University of Michigan provides each veteran with a “point of contact” to help him or her navigate benefits. Panelists returned to the idea that veterans are like other subgroups: they experience many of the burdens of being underrepresented and they need targeted supports. Moreover, said Ishop, much of the research showing how to better serve students of color, first-generation students, and non-traditional students can be applied to student veterans. As for recruitment, all three panelists emphasized the need to identify barriers, set goals, and commit resources. They shared initiatives taking place at their own schools, including reaching out to potential students to start the application process while they are still in the military; hiring more veterans as faculty and staff; extending in-state tuition to veterans or active duty military service members; and working with outside organizations. As Armstrong explained, the private and philanthropic sectors have long been invested in helping veterans transition to education, but it is time for higher education institutions to engage equally, for their own benefit as well as that of the students they serve.

Panel 3: New Commitments to Student Veterans

Moderator and keynote speaker Brigadier General (Ret.) Loree Sutton, MD (commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services) united Deborah Bial (Posse Foundation), David Coleman (The College Board), Andrea Goldstein (Service to School), Tim Groves (The Coalition for College), Ted Mitchell (American Council on Education), Jenny Rickard (The Common Application), and Eric Spina (University of Dayton and Steering Committee member of the American Talent Initiative) to discuss how new commitments put forth by these organizations will increase access, opportunity, and success for student veterans. These pledges include supporting expansion of resources for veterans on campus; targeting underrepresented groups within the veteran population; and developing and strengthening communities for students who have served. Improvement begins with efforts to successfully and effectively place veterans within the college pipeline, starting with the application process. Rickard pointed out that student veterans have not seen themselves represented in this portion of the process, but the Common Application’s creation of a new transfer application will help nontraditional students feel visible and supported. These inclusivity efforts aim to encourage student veterans to share their stories and convince them that “they can.” Goldstein offered similar commitments, stating that students who use Service to School are up to eight times more likely to be admitted to participating institutions than their traditional counterparts. Panelists discussed that with a shift in the population of students who attend institutions of higher education, institutions must alter their policies to reflect the students they serve, including student veterans. “The next hundred years are really all about helping American higher education understand at its roots that the college student of today is not the college

student of 1952,” stated Mitchell. “I see our job at the American Council on Education bringing that new reality to life in the world of policy and in the world of institutional practice.”

David Coleman closed the panel, first sharing three College Board commitments: to provide a dedicated website page with clear, high-quality advice for veterans, to publicize more broadly the credit-gaining opportunities offered by CLEP exams, and to involve CLEP in the college search process so that students who take it, particularly veterans, can be seen by organizations and schools. He also acknowledged that tools like the SAT “miss talent” and that the College Board needs to do more, like providing its new context dashboard, to ensure that such tests are being used to clear a way for more opportunities, not to lock students out. He emphasized the need for organizations and schools to work together to create more higher education opportunities for veterans. Coleman also thanked Ithaka S+R for their leadership in the field, as well as the colleges who have committed to working with veterans and nonprofits who work with veterans and military-connected families. “Anything we do that is good,” he explained, “will be done in partnership.” He ended with a call to action to “help show and remind the country that higher education remains, for all people, including those who serve us and defend us, the great way towards opportunity.”

Panel 4: Identifying, Recruiting, and Admitting Veterans With Strong Potential for Success

Liz Willen from *The Hechinger Report* moderated a conversation about what institutions, particularly top programs, are doing to recruit, build pipelines, and ultimately enroll veteran and military students. The panel drew on the expertise of Clark Brigger (Penn State), Stephen Handel (College Board), Deborah Marconda (USMC Leadership Scholar Program), and Michael Schultz (University of Pennsylvania student and retired Coast Guard). There is a concerning trend of marines exiting the Corps, but not attending top universities. The Scholar Program combats this by identifying marines with academic potential early—only two years into their military careers—to put them on track to college. Brigger described how Penn State strategically hires veteran staff and encourages large cohorts of veteran students. Penn has a dedicated office and student organization for veteran students, which allows for mentorship and sharing of resources. As far as pipelines, community colleges were highlighted as an accessible, affordable, and rational pathway to more selective universities. Speakers agreed, however, that the admissions process needs to provide more opportunities for military students to tell their stories and highlight the value of their military experience. Institutions and organizations can make strides by informing veteran students about admissions requirements, the concept of holistic review, and how it can benefit them. Panelists mentioned the importance of targeted recruitment and putting more resources behind veteran efforts. In addition, panelists discussed the need for credit transfer policies to be reasonably expanded and for more dean-to-student communication around which credits can be applied towards a degree. Lastly, the conversation emphasized just how valuable veteran students are on campuses. Once enrolled, their academic performance is above average, and veterans’ unique

perspectives add to the diversity of campus communities. It is up to institutions to help get rid of real and artificial barriers that prevent veteran students from applying to top schools.

NOTE: The Department of Defense's Voluntary Education Partnership [Memorandum of Understanding](#) outlines the specific requirements for education institutions that want to receive tuition assistance. Instructions for requesting bases access can also be found at the same DoD MOU [website](#). These procedures must be followed by ALL schools.

Panel 5: Transition and Support for Student Veterans at Selective Colleges

Moderated by Jared Lyon, president of Student Veterans of America, the final panel of the conference addressed the support student veterans need during the transition from service to institutions of higher education and the need for this support to continue through graduation day. Deborah Bial (Posse Foundation), Andrea Goldstein (Service to School), LeNaya Hezel (Georgetown University), and student veteran Tyronda Brown (Navy, American University) began by discussing the assumptions student veterans encounter when entering higher education. Lyon disputed stereotypes of veterans as “broken” or less capable, pointing out their high postsecondary success rate. He also noted that 63 percent of student veterans are first-generation college students, and that this intersectionality adds another layer of obstacles for these students. Hezel described how Georgetown University uses this information to focus efforts to support student veterans through a methodical, clear process. Panelists highlighted the value of peer and mentor supports, in addition to institutional support. “If you engage faculty in a deliberate way that’s programmatic and structured, you’ll begin to build a community of mentors that allows your students to feel like they’re socially integrating into the community,” said Bial. Goldstein and Brown, both veterans, reflected on their experiences with mentorship and social integration, sharing stories of how mentors altered and enhanced their path to higher education. Brown recalled hesitation to fully embrace being part of a community of students and civilians after a life inside the “military bubble.” Although service had provided her with valuable leadership skills, she found she still could learn and gain value from school: “I had to start over and I had to be humble about starting over.” As the panel concluded, speakers focused on opportunities for institutions to serve the veteran community more effectively and efficiently. Andrea explained, “It’s not a silver bullet. There are a number of systemic factors that we all have the power to affect.”