

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

# Improving College Opportunity for Veterans

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The College Board is a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of over 6,000 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, the College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness and college success — including the SAT and the Advanced Placement Program. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators, and schools.

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*Robert Caslen, president of the University of South Carolina and former superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, delivered the following address at “Improving College Opportunity for Veterans and Service Members,” a convening hosted by The College Board and Ithaka S+R on February 10-11, 2020, at John Hopkins University.*

*Only one in ten student veterans is enrolling in the colleges and universities with graduation rates of 70 percent or higher. But the evidence indicates that many more can succeed at these institutions. Furthermore, student veterans enrich the educational experience for all members of the campus community, bringing their diverse life experiences and skills into the classroom and onto the college campus.*

*As President Caslen noted in his address, “As we come together today, we must remember the reason why we are here—to work together in discovering different and more effective solutions for our student veterans and ensure they have a place at our colleges and universities.”*

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Thank you, and welcome. I’m excited to be here with all of you and I’m particularly encouraged by this display of support for our student veterans and service members. By attending this convening, you signal your commitment to serve our student veteran population at our colleges and universities in better, more effective ways. From one old veteran myself, I can’t thank you enough.

And thank you to the teams from The College Board and Ithaka S + R who made this gathering possible.

Since our nation’s founding, more than 42 million Americans have donned the cloth of our nation, to stand in the gap between the American people and the values we hold dear, and the evil that is out there that would threaten those values. More than one million of them would lose their lives in service to this nation—faceless heroes who selflessly and continuously laid their sacrifice on the altar of freedom to allow us to enjoy the fruits of that freedom.

Those of you who have served—and those who serve today—come from various backgrounds and values, but all share a few things in common. Within each burned a love of freedom, and the moral courage to safeguard it. Whether career Soldier or Citizen Soldier, all answered the call of duty, and shouldered the responsibility of guarding freedom in its darkest hours—when tyrants and dictators threatened to extinguish it. Their sacrifice was both great and noble.

And yet, if you were to ask each one what led him or her to serve, what drove them to continue to fight at times beyond the limits of physical exertion, each would reply, “Because my friends counted on me.” They fought for the love of freedom, for the love of their Country, **and** for their comrades. They recognized their duty to serve their Country when their nation needed them the most, and they responded.

But let me take you back for a moment to September 2, 1945. On this date on board the U.S.S. Missouri, the Japanese delegation formally signed the instrument of surrender to General MacArthur, marking the official end of World War II and the return of American soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and coast guardsmen.

Standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC is the beautiful Reflecting Pool and at the opposite end of the pool, is the brand-new World War II Memorial, built in honor of the men and women who fought in this war, now known as the “Greatest Generation.”

This “Greatest Generation” came from a full range of backgrounds and values, and they too shared a couple of things in common. They also had a love of freedom, and the courage to secure it. And knowing of their humble beginnings and the societal challenges they came from prior to this war, their sacrifice was indeed immense.

This generation of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines grew up amid extreme poverty during the Great Depression, and with that experience, they left to serve in the war. They certainly faced challenges of survival and sacrifice during the war itself, and when it was time to return home, they gained and learned from their experiences and the teams they were a part of, the ability to overcome and find solutions to seemingly impossible challenges.

However, the environment they were returning to on the home front was not as assuring as they would have hoped. There was great uncertainty about the economic prosperity of America without the industry demands generated from the war. There was also uncertainty about their own job security, and even those who had been working on the home front also doubted their ability to keep their jobs.

But what they did find as they returned were rising engineering and manufacturing demands in the economic and industrial sectors of automobile manufacturing, aviation, electronics and many others. The demand for innovative solutions in these fields was also rapidly increased.

As author Stephan Ambrose said, “in fact these were the men who built modern America. They had learned to work together in the armed services. They had seen enough

destruction; they wanted to construct. They built the Interstate Highway system, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the suburbs and more. They had seen enough killing; they wanted to save lives. They licked polio and made other revolutionary advances in medicine. They had learned in the Army the virtues of a solid organization and teamwork, and the value of individual initiative, inventiveness, and responsibility. They developed the modern corporation while inaugurating revolutionary advances in science and technology, education and public policy.”

In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy described the men and women of his generation: “The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed.”

This generation knew the difference between right and wrong, and they didn’t want to live in a world in which wrong prevailed. So, they fought, and won, and we—all of us, living and yet to be born, must be forever profoundly grateful.

Besides the great character and virtue and work ethic this generation carried back to America after the war, these veterans faced the need of transforming the country by educating themselves—education made possible by the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, otherwise known as the G.I. Bill. Among other important provisions, the G.I. Bill granted stipends to veterans to cover tuition and expenses at colleges and trade schools.

That GI Bill provided the greatest generation veterans the opportunities to combine their profound leadership experience with education necessary to lead our nation into the future post-WWII. Quite simply, what we found was that when you combine that grit, determination, discipline, teamwork, perseverance, commitment, and vision with an education that provides the *intellect* to accomplish that vision, you have the American infrastructure, education systems, and economy that we have today.

Fast forward 55 years. I was in the Pentagon almost 19 years ago on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 when American Airline flight 77 hit the Pentagon within an hour after it departed Dulles Airport. As we evacuated and stood there watching the Pentagon burn, I knew life as we knew it was going to change dramatically. And it most certainly has, and what I have admired more over the last 19 years was the response of today’s generation of Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen, to what occurred to our Nation that day, and how they responded to the untold demands on them and their families.

Much like those past generations, **today’s** generation of young Americans understand what is at stake and continue to answer freedom’s distress call. Those who would cite

America as a declining power have not witnessed this generation in action. Rest assured—many of you in this room have witnessed their courage, their intelligence, and their determination firsthand, **and** many of you have personally demonstrated that and more. Because of your sacrifice and service, I can promise you that America’s future is in very good hands.

Often referred to as the “9/11 generation,” these young men and women represent America’s best. They are a generation of men and women that saw their nation brutally attacked and they have seen their country at war nearly their entire lives, and yet they volunteered to serve—knowing full well that they would be sent into harm’s way to confront the enemies of our nation on obscure battlefields halfway around the world. Yet they never waver or question; they quietly count themselves worthy to stand among the generations of Americans that have gone before them, quietly standing in the gap between the evils of the world and the values of our nation and our Constitution and the American people.

Many in our country do not yet fully realize the incredible value and impact that this 9/11 generation is having and will continue to have on our society. But that’s OK...they’d want it no other way, for they are a humble, resilient, and focused generation.

President George H.W. Bush once said, “If anyone tells you that America’s best days are behind her, they’re looking the wrong way.” I truly believe that our nation’s best days are ahead of us—because of the incredible men and women of this generation who wear the cloth of our nation, who say every day “Send Me!”

And despite the 9/11 generation that chose to serve after 9/11, today’s service men and women are equally amazing. Most who join today were not even born when 9/11 occurred, yet they still chose to serve despite the fact that their nation has been at war their entire life. And they too, despite the many other safer options available to them, they have chosen to stand in this gap and to continue to keep our country safe. They are an amazing group of men and women, and it is so important that our nation acknowledges their service and sacrifice and provides them opportunities to continue to serve by continuing to rebuild America with an unparalleled education.

Yet despite providing them opportunities, today’s 9/11 veterans must be prepared to meet the global challenges that face our nation and our world today—just as the Greatest Generation met the challenges they faced back in the 1940s and 50s and 60s. Today’s problems are equally challenging, but they come in different venues, like cybersecurity threats, climate change, global trade tension, threats to our national security, huge economic and trade deficits, and more. And I believe today’s 9/11 generation, with the intellect developed and refined with today’s higher educational opportunities coupled

with the immense problem sets and challenges faced on the battlefield, that this generation will lead America economically, politically, militarily, and diplomatically to new heights and new accomplishments. Many of our 9/11 veterans and service members are already at the forefront, and I am confident they will lead as their grandparents and great grandparents did as part of the “Greatest Generation.”

Quite frankly, you do not have to look too far to find our veterans already serving in amazing places. Whether it is in Congress, or local legislative representatives, mayors of major cities like Shreveport, LA, or CEO of the Florida Panthers, or professors in higher education and at flagship universities, or running for president of the United States, these men and women are remarkable, resilient, tough, smart, disciplined, and they know what it means to win and to win with character— to win with honor and integrity. More than 18 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us, as an Army, a number of things—most significantly, it showed us that our greatest contribution as an Army wasn’t conventional firepower, but rather, the intellectual firepower, if you will—our ability to put boots on the ground, to get in among local populations, understand the complexity of that environment and culture, and employ the interpersonal skills necessary to build trust and relationships with those people.

Let me share an example—in 2008, when I was a division commander in Iraq, one of my battalion commanders was a young lieutenant colonel named Dave Hodne—who, incidentally, today is a one-star general and on the road to even greater things. So, Dave Hodne was operating in the city of Balad, about 80 clicks north of Baghdad—an area of a lot of sectarian violence between Sunni and Shi’a militias. So, Dave develops a relationship with a couple local businessmen with some money and convinces them to open a bank and lend money to other local businessmen to spark the local economy. One of the businesses they lend money to is a local cannery that used to produce tomato paste, which was broken and dilapidated. Getting it up and running would give the local tomato farmers a place to sell their goods.

As the cannery begins to really take off with this new tomato paste line, before long, there’s a long line of trucks on the main highway leading to the factory, waiting to drop off shipments of tomatoes. So, another local entrepreneur comes up with the idea to build a parking lot off the highway, to give the trucks a place to park while waiting to drop off their shipments. Then another entrepreneur realizes that “hey, you gotta eat” and opens a restaurant by the parking lot. Another businessman opens a hotel, and before long, the local economy starts to really boom, as more and more businesses were formed and began to grow.

In the meantime, farming picks up again, and there’s a growing need for water to irrigate crops, placing a greater demand on the infrastructure which had been damaged as the

result of the earlier violence in the region. Those infrastructure demands from the farmers place pressure on the local government, who responds by making the needed repairs and at the same time, showing the legitimacy of the new regional government to the local population—a critical counter insurgency component necessary to win hearts and minds by creating a government that was believed to be “legitimate” by the people—simply because it was able to provide the essential services the people needed.

And in the end, this was a peaceful victory in a place that had seen so much violence and warfare—yet became transformed by the power of trust.

And this is all because *one* person had the *intellectual agility* to understand the environment, build relationships and most importantly, earn trust.

This incredible story illustrates the key qualities that veteran students contribute to our colleges and universities through their example and mentorship—and it is vital that we make space for their voices.

Speaking of trust, there is one other point I’d like to bring up, and that is where we as veterans fit within the profession of arms, and how we must help bridge the “gap” between our military and our non-military civilians—more commonly referred to as the “civ-mil” gap—or the gap of knowledge and experience between the military and its veterans, and civilians who have very limited knowledge of our military if any at all.

Years ago, when we eliminated mandatory military service to our nation, we created a very professional military force and a very trusting civilian sector that trusted its military providing it provided the competence to fight and win our wars, and the character to fight according to our national values and what standards our client, the American people, expected of us.

This “professional force” is also referred to as the “profession of arms.” As with any profession, whether it is the profession of doctors, lawyers, dentists, or higher education, there is a unique expert service that is provided to a client who has a relationship of trust between himself or herself and the professional in the profession. And within the Profession of Arms, our expert service is the lawful and moral use of lethal power and what makes it “unique” is that we are prepared to give our lives in its use.

Our client is simply the American people, and it is important that we have a relationship with them that is built on trust. Trust is a key word, because trust does not happen automatically, and it must be earned. And probably the best definition of trust and how it is earned, was written by Steven Covey in his great book, *The Speed of Trust*. He said, trust is simply a function of competence and character. But both are tremendously



important. You can be the number one person in your class, but if you fail in character you have lost trust and you have failed in leadership. Likewise, you can be a person of great character, but if you do not know how to use lethal force in a moral and ethical way, you will have lost trust.

And if you ever want to see what a breach of trust looks like between a military and its client the American people, go back and look at how America treated its military during the Vietnam war. We would never want to go back to that again.

So said another way, earning and keeping the trust of our client, the American people is difficult, but it must be done. And it is a responsibility all of us share—whether we're still on active duty, or whether we are veterans who have at one time worn the cloth of our nation in service.

Complicating the efforts to earn the trust of the American people is this “civ-mil” divide I mentioned awhile back; a gap created mostly because of the lack of knowledge of what most Americans know about the services, sacrifices, and work efforts service members go through. In some cases, the lack of knowledge creates a fear, that may even manifest itself in retaliation.

Some of you may know some of the challenges I personally experienced coming on board as president of the University of South Carolina with a military background. One can argue that some of the challenges do indeed illustrate misunderstandings between our veterans and the civilian workforce, and it is an example of the civ-mil gap within our society today.

And as a result, it became abundantly clear of *my* duty and *my* responsibility to bridge this gap, and to “earn their trust.” I did not see this as an expectation that colleagues, and constituents were going to reach out and welcome me because of my military background and veteran status. I saw it as *my* responsibility to reach out to *them*, to build bridges, to knock down walls, and to build relationships—all the while as an effort to build trust. Because that is what we must do within our profession—to build trust with our client the American people.

So, let me challenge you. As a veteran, I do not know what you're experiencing on your college campus, and I hope you are warmly welcomed wherever you go. Regardless, I encourage you to seek opportunities to build bridges and develop relationships and earn trust and confidence. You will not only do what is critically important in our Profession of Arms—and that is to build a trust relationship with our client the American people, but you will also make a huge difference bridging the civ-mil gap within our nation today.

Nevertheless, the University of South Carolina is doing exceptionally well serving our veterans. In the Fall of 2018, we had an overall enrollment of 1,353 service members, including veterans, reserve, active duty, and dependents. This group is diverse, with 42 percent of enrolled service members at our university from underrepresented minority groups. This group of students is committed to academic excellence, with an average GPA of 3.0 and top majors including mechanical engineering, public health, and computer science. They positively impact our university at every level and continue to raise the standards in our pursuit of excellence.

And even after completing their military service, our student veterans continue to give back to their communities through their service leadership. At our university, key organizations such as the Student Veterans Association and Veteran Alumni Council support the community through their outreach programs. These programs further the bond of trust between student veterans and the community and build foundational relationships that contribute to the shared success of our university and community.

At the University of South Carolina, we have veteran members leading and mentoring at all levels—from the classrooms to athletics and to our administration. By elevating their voices, we are learning from their immense store of experiential knowledge. We are also learning how to build trust—to build winning teams that are mission-driving, diverse and representative of all people on campus.

After graduation, veteran students obtain meaningful employment at a strong rate and often have a greater earning potential, due to their unique leadership skills. As alumni they also demonstrate a proclivity to give back to their universities philanthropically.

I have stood in the shoes of these service members, and I know personally the challenges they face upon returning to life post service. And now, as president of the University of South Carolina, our state's flagship university, it is my responsibility to ensure that our mission is focused on serving all South Carolinians, and certainly our population of veterans and service members.

And as we come together today, we must remember the reason why we are here—to work together in discovering different and more effective solutions for our student veterans and ensure they have a place at our colleges and universities.

Each of us here has a role to play in improving the conditions for veteran students' success at higher education institutions. It is important that we take this charge seriously and move forward with a commitment to build relationships of trust with veteran students; to create programs that support their transition into their post-service

educational journey; and to cultivate a climate of opportunity at institutions of high-graduation rate colleges and universities.

I encourage you to renew this commitment today and seek out the resources and partnerships provided by this great organization, so that you can return to your colleges and universities energized with a vision for greater opportunities for our student veterans.

Thank you.