

Veteran Student Access and Retention at Tennessee Public Universities

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OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) is working with the Tennessee Postsecondary Evaluation and Research Lab (TN-PEARL) to improve how the state's postsecondary educational institutions serve veteran students. Tennessee is funding multiple initiatives to support veterans either through legislation or grants. Accordingly, the state's coordinating body (THEC), along with institutions serving this designated student population, are working to strengthen the capacity of the state and its institutions to effectively deliver outcomes desired by policymakers. Numerous challenges, however—including insufficient data, incomplete communication between agencies at both the federal and state levels, ineffective campus communication, and student unwillingness or inability to utilize resources—complicate these efforts to better serve veteran students. When campuses struggle to identify veteran students, for example, this affects the capacity of THEC to deliver on policy intent and to implement strategies that promote veterans' higher education success and completion. Through an examination of current policies, institutional actions, and identification strategies, this project aims to inform future efforts to support veteran student success in Tennessee.

ANALYSIS

State policy in Tennessee addressing veteran student needs is oriented for access and initial transition of veteran students in Tennessee. The retention and ultimate success of veteran students and veteran dependents rests with the institutions, and ultimately, the students. Our analysis of qualitative and available quantitative data shows insufficient accounting of actual veteran student and veteran dependent enrollment at Tennessee universities (see Figure 1). This is evident when analyzing the Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) reporting compared to information available in the THEC Student Information System (SIS) (see Figure 2). Furthermore, VETS designation does not necessarily mean an institution prioritizes their militarily-affiliated populations. This is evident in the capacities present at Austin Peay State University (APSU) and Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) versus what is present at UT-Knoxville and the UT System at large. At the institutional level, the background characteristics of the administrators working with veterans is paramount to veteran students' willingness to engage with centers. Further, the consolidation of veterans' services in "one-stop" centers seems to decrease the overall campus knowledge essential to effectively supporting the needs of veteran students. Overwhelmingly, veteran students desired greater professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to learn about veteran students. Institutions largely operate in isolation from one another, and the lack of networked veterans' offices limits the transmission of best practices between institutions.

This is evidenced by the development of MTSU's veteran's data system (solely at this institution) that affords the institution real time enrollment and completion information of all identified veteran students. Retention and attainment are still an issue, but without accurate identification measures, the scope of these problems is unknowable.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

THEC needs to determine and simplify definitions for veteran students in Tennessee. Simply stated, there are so many iterations of the GI bill, types of military service, and dependent affiliations that THEC needs to either create a broad definition that incorporates all these students, or limit the definition to particular – but defined – subsets. Institutions define veteran students differently, and the confusion around what types of students should be included in definitions of veteran students differs all the way up the higher education ladder and into THEC itself. This confusion manifests to the students, as some students who were in the military but did not deploy refrain from identifying themselves as veterans and therefore miss key communication of benefits and programs.

02

THEC needs to scale the MTSU veteran student data system to all campuses. This system – akin to the Georgia State University system – allows decisions to be made in real time with knowledge of all the currently identified military affiliated students on campus.

03

Current policies are oriented on the access and initial transition of veteran students onto campus. Retention and attainment need additional supports on campuses and THEC needs to focus future Reconnect grants and veterans' initiatives towards improving outcomes.

04

Greater professional development is needed across campuses that equip more people with knowledge of veteran students and the supports they need. This will decrease the current burden on campus administrators who are sometimes supporting hundreds of students in their caseloads. Distributing development opportunities to each discipline can ensure there is a departmental liaison in each academic department a veteran student is enrolled.

05

Veteran dependents occupy an underserved space on campus. These students share an overlap of life experiences with their veteran student counterparts and often come to veteran centers for help and community. Better providing services to these students will help establish a sense of place for these students who have often had their lives disrupted by military service.

06

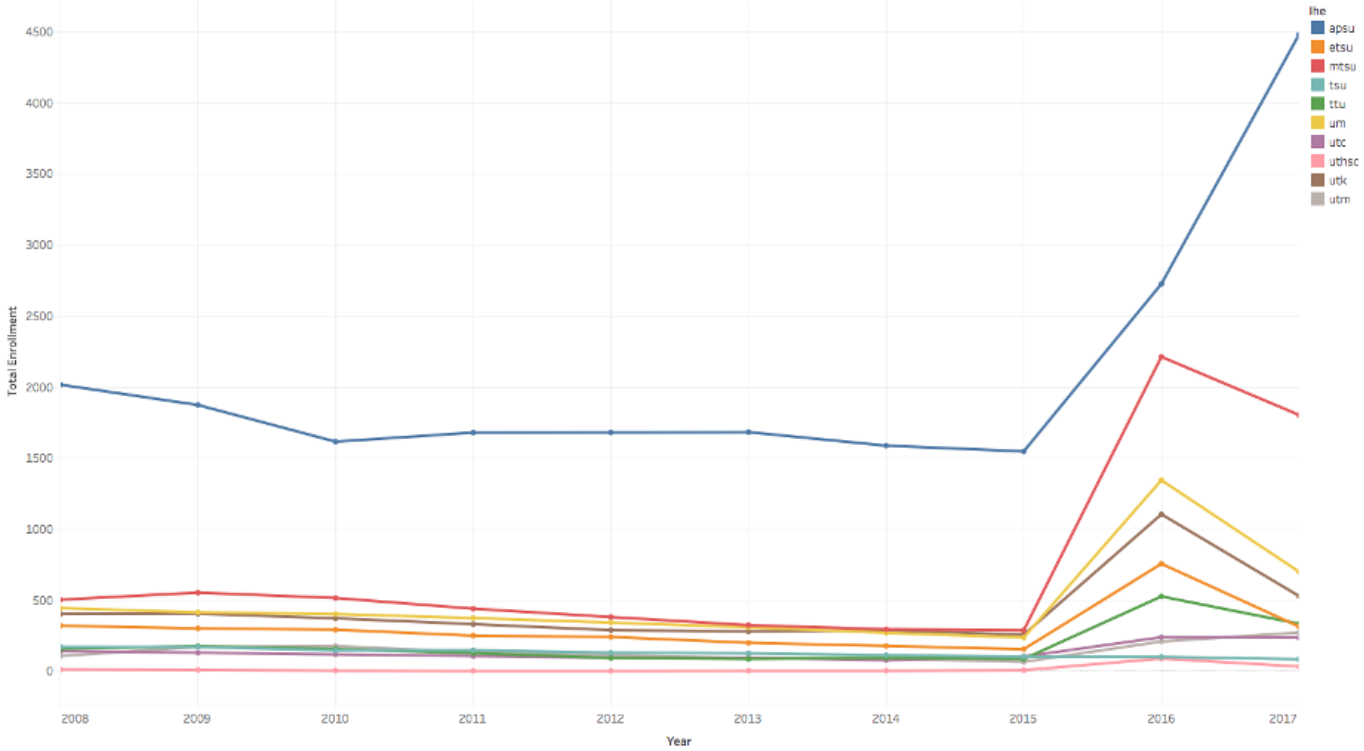
Not all veteran students choose to use the GI Bill for undergraduate studies. Due to changes in recent iterations of the GI bill, some veteran students are refraining from using their GI bill until they pursue graduate studies or are leaving it to their dependents. These students may not identify for services in order to avoid being questioned regarding why they are not using their GI bill.

07

The THEC Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) initiative may be ineffective at the universities. The most common academic discipline enrollments of veteran students are in business, political science, engineering, social sciences, and the humanities. Simply stated, PLA operates on an assumption that what a student did in the military will be what they wish to study in college. According to data from VETS, this assumption may not hold for university enrollment. Therefore, PLA may need to work towards block credit hour awarding for general subjects like management, logistics, or electives at the university level.

FIGURE 1- Enrollment Trends for Veteran Students/Dependents Including 2016-2017 VETS Reporting

VETS Enrollment at Tennessee Four-Year Public Universities



The Total Enrollment at Tennessee Four Year Universities.
*2015 is the year after VETS legislation was passed

Veteran Students/Dependent Enrollments

FIGURE 2- SIS vs. VETS Reporting for 2016

