

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## New GI Bill assistance offers tuition coverage

But it may not lure vets from more nontraditional schools

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P-I REPORTER

A new incarnation of the GI Bill means the U.S. government could once again be footing the full cost of a service member's college education, but it's not yet clear if that's enough to make discharged troops flock to traditional four-year universities.

Proponents of the new legislation say it will re-create the kinds of opportunities veterans had when the GI Bill was initiated for World War II veterans in 1944 – when a \$500 yearly stipend meant a veteran could get a degree from just about any university in the country.

But while modern service members will now be entitled to assistance equal to tuition at the University of Washington or any other public university in the state, it doesn't necessarily follow that universities will be flooded with returning soldiers.

The prospect of taking classes online while enlisted and having access to tailor-made counseling services might trump the desire to enroll at a more expensive school.

"A lot of the veterans go to the university, and they kind of get lost," said Tony Diaz, veteran affairs coordinator at Seattle Central Community College. He sees community colleges as a transitional place where veterans can reorient to civilian life.

Under a less generous version of the bill, veterans are more likely to enroll in community college or a for-profit school than a state university, and some suspect the promise of full tuition at any public university, the cost of books and a housing allowance might not change that.

Deployed service members and veterans alike seem to gravitate toward flexible programs offering online classes – most notably the for-profit University of Phoenix, which offers programs specifically aimed at military students, available online, on a physical campus or overseas.

An analysis of where students used GI Bill benefits conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education showed that nearly three out of five students enrolled at a community college or for-profit school and that students earning military benefits were significantly less likely to enroll at private schools than the rest of the nation.

The University of Phoenix's online campus enrolls by far the most students using GI Bill benefits – more than 17,700 in 2007, the Chronicle's analysis shows. American InterContinental University and American Public University System (two for-profit schools that market heavily to military students) are next on the list with almost 3,700 students each.

Community colleges located near military bases make up much of the lists' top 25 schools – possibly in part because of a recent push for military-friendly campuses throughout the country's two-year systems.

Community colleges are generally the only institutions where current GI benefits will pay the entire cost of a degree.

No definite data exist to illustrate how many veterans transfer from community college to a four-year school. But Diaz said more than 60 percent of veterans take that route after graduating from Seattle Central.

## Going online

Pierce College, with campuses in Puyallup and Steilacoom, has been part of that movement in Washington, using the government program eArmyU to reach those enlisted domestically and overseas.

"We've got soldiers who are Pierce College students taking classes all over the world," said Executive Vice President Bill McMeekin.

About 70 percent of the college's GI students, or roughly 5,000 a term, take classes online, he said.

Now the college wants to find a way for service members to get credit for skills they learn in the military. And they plan to beef up their counseling service for vets, who often suffer stress and anxiety after combat duty.

McMeekin recalls the sound of a jackhammer triggered traumatic flashbacks for one military student, who associated the sound with machine-gun fire. The student missed three days of class because of the incident.

But for some, things like specially trained counselors are just a perk.

Cost was the biggest factor in determining where Matthew Sharp enrolled after Coast Guard service. A stint in the Seattle area convinced him that this was where he wanted to put down roots, but the 29-year-old aspiring lawyer's current GI benefits wouldn't cover tuition at the University of Washington.

He enrolled in Shoreline Community College two years ago, lived off his GI benefits and paid tuition with his savings. Now, as he's gearing up to transfer to the UW later this year, he's running out of money.

"It lasted just about two years, and now I'm doing the student-life thing, eating peanut butter sandwiches," he said.

Sharp added: "Something like the UW would have been out of the question without loans."

Last spring, there were nearly 600 veterans enrolled at the UW, said Assistant Director of Veteran Affairs Diane Hanks. Only about 450 were receiving GI Bill benefits.

The university has seen the numbers of veterans enrolled on campus climb significantly this year, but Hanks said she's unable to speculate about the reason for the increase.

Congress passed the new bill – formally titled the Post 9-11 Veterans Education Assistance Act – in

June, and it won't go into effect until August of next year. Proponents have heralded it as a return to the GI Bill of 1944, which guaranteed veterans full-ride scholarships.

But the bill was controversial in Congress, where opponents said it would be too costly, funnel more money to wealthy schools and encourage soldiers to leave the military.

Under the new system, veterans three years of service could receive enough money to pay tuition and fees at the state's most expensive public university for 36 months.

The UW is Washington's most expensive public university, costing an undergraduate student \$6,800 for a three-quarter year this fall.

Dennis Davis, a Lake Washington Technical College student, was discharged from the Navy four years ago – and he's not likely to see the benefits of the new GI Bill. But he has a degree from the college's welding program and has started taking classes to become a motorcycle technician.

"It would be great to have it, but honestly, I feel good for the guys who are going to get it," he said. "I can't really complain. I have one degree covered, and I'm going to have most of my second degree done."

## **FIND OUT MORE**

The new form of education assistance applies to service members who served on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001. To receive the full benefit, you must have served at least 36 months or at least 30 continuous days on active duty if you were discharged due to a service-connected disability. Percentages of the full benefits are available for members who do not meet these criteria. The act generally provides coverage for 36 months of tuition and costs.

You are eligible for benefits for 15 years from your last period of active duty of at least 90 consecutive days. Benefits can be redeemed for apprenticeship and other on-the-job training, vocational schools, correspondence courses and some nontraditional programs.

Department of Defense officials may approve a policy that will allow a service member enlisted as of Aug. 1, 2009, to transfer education benefits to his or her spouse or children.

More info at [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov)

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs

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