



**“Increasing College Success for Student Veterans and Today’s Students”
Student Veterans Panel
Feb. 22, 2018**

On February 22, 2018, Veterans Education Success hosted a panel of student veterans who shared their experiences, ideas, and proposals for improving higher education policy in America. In a packed room at the Cannon House Office Building, five current and former college students discussed a number of issues, including ways for policymakers to improve America’s college persistence and graduation rates, ensure veterans have a smooth transition to the civilian workforce, and help today’s students succeed in college, given the extra hurdles they face as older students who are working, paying their own bills, and juggling more than just school.

A full video of the panel can be found [here](#).

During the panel, several common themes emerged:

- **Gratitude:** Veterans offered thanks for the chance to share their experiences with policymakers about using their hard-earned GI Bill benefits to pursue higher education and their appreciation for the benefits that make it possible to do so.
- **Military-Civilian Divide:** Veterans often feel certain stigmas from both colleges and also society that prevent some from feeling capable of or wanting to pursue higher education: "We get seen as dumb, like all we can do is shoot a gun."
- **Low Academic Self Confidence:** Veterans generally lacked academic self-confidence for a number of reasons, like struggling in high school. Wesley, a current undergrad at Georgetown University, said he suffered a lack of confidence at the beginning. "People telling you, 'You can't do this.' Community college was key to me because I realized I could do this. The first “A” I got on a paper really built me up."
- **Challenges During Transition:** Veterans say with current levels of information and support, their transition from military service to college life can be difficult: "I hope people understand that this is really hard. The military tells us exactly what you need to do. And then you have 2 weeks to figure college out on your own," and "It was a culture shock, to be honest. The military is a very straightforward culture."
- **Challenges in Age Difference:** Veterans who enter college later in life often remark on the difficulty of connecting with younger students who have little real-world experience and share few of the same interests. "I'm 29 years old with a bunch of 19-year olds. They're talking about going to a party and I'm thinking about

my 4-year old child," and "Being a single mom, it's hard to get involved in campus activities. I have to ask things like, 'Is there childcare?'"

- **Informed Choices:** Veterans mentioned their desire for training to make better informed college choice, including better information during their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) that contain specific warnings about consumer fraud by bad actor institutions: "Schools like Kaplan taking your GI Bill and defrauding veterans? That has to be stopped. We need some help. I'm fighting for 6 years and then I'm given 2 weeks to figure out if a college is any good?" and "In the military, we get lots of warnings about predatory loans. Why don't we get any warnings about predatory colleges? The GI Bill makes us look like dollar signs to these predatory colleges."
- **Pre-enrollment Advisement:** Veterans want better pre-enrollment counseling about the various programs available to them as they get ready to use their hard-earned education benefits. One veteran said she was not even aware of the Pell Grant for the first 2 years of her college career, during which time she struggled financially. Another veteran said she did not know about the Yellow Ribbon Program.
- **Higher Quality Standards:** Veterans say online college is convenient, but there needs to be higher quality standards for government approval. Veterans lamented about the problem of bad actor colleges and schools being able to receive federal money, despite the poor-quality education they provide.
- **Stricter regulation:** Veterans want better regulation of for-profit colleges and for all colleges approved by the federal government to offer high quality education: "These colleges are approved by the government, you think they must be good, but they're not," and "You see school recruiters on base, and we assume they have been properly vetted."
- **Financial Difficulties:** Panelists shared how some of their colleagues are forced to drop out of college due to financial challenges and that even with the GI Bill, making ends meet while in school is challenging. A lack of a BAH housing allowance during school breaks, such as over the winter break, is one example of financial hardship caused by legislative benefit gaps. "When you have \$700...Are you going to pay your rent or buy your books?"

Five student veterans joined the panel.

Omar Andrews, a United States Marine enrolled at the University of Southern Maine, told attendees, "The way I see, the military needs to make sure that we have the information to go forward, and to make the right decision on school. It shouldn't come down to, "Am I going to go to a school that's going to take my money and not give me a degree on the back end?" Every investment in veterans especially student veterans, is a success. It's a force multiplier." *Photos, video, and tweets [here](#).*

Wesley Hughes, served in the U.S. Army and is now enrolled at Georgetown University, said "I had a friend who worked with Service to School who was one of my buddies at Ft. Hood. He started telling me, "You can do this, man.

Go to community college. Get your rep up.” What I came to realize is that, community college is so important for me because it gave me the confidence. When I got my first A on a paper, I was shocked. I never got an A on a paper, ever., because I didn’t care. I didn’t want to write well. And so the first time I got an A, I was like, “Oh my goodness, this is real, I can do this.” *Photos, video, and tweets [here](#).*

Francheska Salazar, served in the U.S. Army and is attending Anne Arundel Community College, “I decided to choose a community college. I did not want to go to a 4-year university where I sat in a room full of 120 people in a classroom, and I wanted to have that kind of sense of community. I’m very fortunate that I found Anne Arundel community college, because I think a lot of times there’s a stigma from that as well. I constantly hear it a lot of times from my fellow Veterans, “I’m only at a community college.” You know what, everyone starts somewhere, and we all start at different places. I’m up here, and I’m at community college. You can’t underestimate your drive and ability to do what you want to do.” *Photos, video, and tweets [here](#).*

Rachael Milam, an Air Force veteran now attending Northern Virginia Community College, told attendees, “I’m a very new student. I just hit my one-year mark out of the Air Force, where I served as Military Police. It’s been a very interesting ride going from Feb 2017 into March of 2017 into a full-time student. So all of these things are very new to me. Things like the “Yellow Ribbon Program.” I have a very long journey ahead of me, and so the programs that these institutes offer have been wonderful, and I’m really just looking forward to seeing how I can help influence the policies that are going to directly affect me, my peers, and friends that are getting out.” *Photos, video, and tweets [here](#).*

Jamie Hubert, a Kaplan College, a Navy veteran who attended Kaplan University, told the audience, “I served for six years in the Navy, starting on a flight deck carrier, and then I switched over to Military Police. And I got out in a couple of years, and then I decided I needed to go back to college. I decided I needed to go back to college. So I looked for a different college environment than what was in my mind of the typical college environment. Because I felt out of place, I had a lot of anxiety with PTSD, and I was older than what I expected a lot of other students. I found Kaplan College in El Paso, TX. I enrolled there, they were qualified to take the GI Bill, so I had hopes and dreams that if the government says it’s ok to take this government money, then it’s a good place. They made a lot of promises that they did not follow through on.” *Photos, video, and tweets [here](#).*

Veterans Education Success Policy Director, [Tanya Ang](#), remarked, “Like many of today's students, military-connected students have various obstacles to overcome like caring for dependents, financial obligations, employment, and other factors. The diverse group of student veterans on this panel clearly articulated the challenges they face in pursuit of higher education and ways they have overcome them to successfully navigate their post-secondary education. VES is fortunate to be able to conduct these panel discussions to empower students and elevate their voices into the policymaking process.”