



# FROM TO SOLDIER STUDENT

**While new changes in the GI Bill** allow many returning from combat the chance to complete their education, veterans coming back to campuses find new challenges and opportunities in transitioning to the classroom.

Story by Mimi Wiggins Perreault

**F**or former Marine Brian Verslues, adjusting to college life has been a challenge.

“Those life experiences make going to college different,” said Verslues, 25, from Jefferson City, Mo., who attends **Southwest Baptist University (MO)**. “It’s sometimes harder to connect with people too. Because of my four years in the service, sometimes my maturity and life experiences make it hard to identify with other students. I find myself just talking with professors a lot.”

Verslues said he’s found other “non-traditional” students on the campus, including a good friend in Mike Weeks. The two became acquainted after Verslues saw Weeks had a Marine Corps sticker on his truck. Weeks is older, but Verslues said he has more in common with him than the majority of the students in his classes who came to college right out of high school.

While he perceives a distance between him and other students, he feels farther from his responsibilities in Iraq as an infantry 81-millimeter mortar man. Although the adjustment has been difficult at times, Verslues is grateful for the opportunity to attend college. He’s also glad the updated GI Bill will reward veterans even more for their service.

Last summer, he was one of approximately one thousand other veterans part of Student Veterans of America, a national organization

dedicated to helping veterans returning to college, who attended a conference in support of the new GI Bill. Veterans met with several representatives, including former Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska. The bill, which goes into effect in August 2009, will make attending college after military service more beneficial to soldiers, their spouses and children.

Verslues, who is studying education and political science, began attending SBU after attending night school. He was trying to find a full-time university in a location where his wife, Ashley, could get a job teaching. They are both from the southwestern Missouri area, and have been married since June 2007. Verslues said attending college would be impossible without his wife working full-time. One of the reasons he supported changes to the GI Bill was that it will make attending college easier on single veterans as well as veterans with families by providing more money for living expenses during college.

“I entered service for several reasons,” he said. “One was to get more money for college. [I also wanted] to see the world and serve my country.”

## GI Bill Changes and Developments

Since the creation of the GI Bill in 1944, the U.S. government continues to modify and extend assistance to veterans after additional military occupations and wars. The most recent modification to the GI Bill comes as a result of military enlistment since Sept. 10, 2001, including service in Operation Iraqi Freedom and the War on Terror, Chapter 33. In addition to Chapter 33, veterans may also qualify for Vocational Rehabilitation under Chapter 31 or the Reserve Educational Assistance Fund, Chapter 1607. The GI Bill provides funding for eight semesters, or 36 months of benefits. The amount of money

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Campuses who are part of the “Yellow Ribbon Program” will receive additional funds from the Veterans Administration to better cater to returning veterans.

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allotted is worth up to \$47,000 or the amount of tuition based on a monthly full-time student rate of \$1,321 for the 2008-09 school year.

Verslues receives funding under Chapter 30, or the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), and Chapter 31, or the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The MGIB can be used to pursue either undergraduate or graduate education for two or more years of active duty. Chapter 31 is a program that helps to provide training for veterans who are not able to work because of a service connect disability. These disabilities, which are determined by the Veterans Administration (VA), are often a result of traumatic experiences and are both mental and physical.

According to the VA, the majority of veterans receive this assistance. In addition, survivors of dependents of those in the military may also qualify for Chapter 35, or the Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance Program (DEA). The DEA provides training or education for the children and dependents of veterans who are permanently or totally disabled due to a service-related condition or injury. This program provides up to 45 months of assistance to those who qualify.

The newly updated GI Bill provides additional money to fund education and a longer period of time the money is available, now up to 10 years after completing military service. It benefits any veterans who served at least three years of active duty after Sept. 10, 2001 who have not already begun to attend college. For private colleges, including those within the CCCU that the VA has coined "yellow ribbon schools," the government will pay the amount of the highest undergraduate state institution within that state and an additional 50 percent of the charges the private school requires.

At public colleges, the VA will pay \$10,000 to the veteran's university or college and the institution will provide a grant of \$5,000, which the VA will repay to the institution. Some veterans are eligible for additional benefits, including a housing allowance,

supplies stipends and possible money for disabilities associated with their service through the program.

Within the CCCU, **Indiana Wesleyan University (IN)** provides discounts that apply to active duty military personnel, including those in the Reserves and National Guard and military spouses.

Those who enroll in the university's Leadership Education for Adult Professionals (LEAP) program are eligible for these discounts. The LEAP program was created 23 years ago in response to the needs of working professionals and was designed with working professionals of all types in mind. IWU has many online students who are in the active service, and so the discount applies to online and on-campus tuition.

### Adjusting to the Academic World

John Credille, Southwest Baptist University registrar and advisor of the Student Organization for Veterans chapter at the school, said the school has around 50 veterans enrolled, most under the age of 30.

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Brian Verslues, student,  
Southwest Baptist  
University (MO)



Credille said all of these students receive money either from Vocational Rehabilitation or the GI Bill.

“The biggest challenge is the timeliness of letting us know that they want to receive GI funds and getting them enrolled on time,” Credille said. “What can cause a headache is since the Veterans Administration changed their policy and now the students have to tell us they want to receive benefits, it takes more communication between us and the student than it did in the past.”

According to Credille, students can save some of the funds to pursue higher degrees by telling the government how much money they wish to receive. He said this is a benefit because some students want to save their money for summer classes or graduate school.

A recent *The Chronicle of Higher Education* article<sup>1</sup> stated that veterans often have difficulty getting their financial aid from the VA the first year they attend college. Sometimes it can take three months or so for their availability to be processed, creating a strain on the veteran and also on the university. While some schools offer course credit for military training, the majority do not. This can become frustrating to veterans who plan to enter a field in which their training might count for experience.

Credille understands the GI Bill's importance; he was in the U.S. Navy and served in the Vietnam War, attending college on the GI Bill at Southwest Baptist in 1976.

“I grew up here; my father was an employee at the university,” he said. “SBU has been the home of the Credilles for a long time.”

In addition to the financial challenges, Credille said mostly veterans have difficulty getting acclimated to the rigors of academics, because unlike in the military, they have to figure out how to schedule their lives and manage their time.

“There's nobody to tell you what to do, whereas in the military you don't have much choice,” he said. “In college, they don't do that—it's all about you working alone to get the end result.”


While Verslues himself will not benefit from the new system, his older brother Nathan and thousands of

soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan each day will. Nathan is serving his second term in the Army in Iraq and is a certified carpenter. Although he does not plan to use the GI Bill to pursue a college degree, Brian said Nathan's wife might.

Verslues also works in the registrar's office certifying veterans at the school and has organized a social group for veterans.

“They just tell me they want to use their benefits, and I verify that they are enrolled, and then electronically submit their names and hours to be taken to the VA, who processes it,” he said. “I am currently working on getting a link for our SBU Web page for this, as it would make it much easier for everyone.”

He said the social group is just in its preliminary stages of formation, but he hopes it can be a social group where veterans can bond and support each other. The student organization receives money from the student fund through the campus's student government organization. He said the goal is to use that money to help others in the service in addition to providing programming for fellow veterans.

“One of the first things we're going to do here is compile a list of students and alumni overseas, and spouses, and send care packages,” Verslues said. “We have a responsibility just like others to give back to those serving our country.” 

<sup>1</sup>College is for Veterans, Too”

Nov. 21, 2008 *Chronicle for Higher Education*

By Douglas Herrman, Douglas Raybeck and Roland Wilson.

## GI Bill Resources

For more information on the GI Bill, please visit these Web sites:

[www.military.com/money-for-school/gi-bill/learn-to-use-your-gi-bill](http://www.military.com/money-for-school/gi-bill/learn-to-use-your-gi-bill)

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

[vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp](http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp)