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Former National Guardsman Ricky J. Jackson is attending classes at Tidewater Community College. The college and others around the country expect an influx of returning veterans when the new GI Bill takes effect next year.

On the Front Lines

New GI Bill Has Colleges Bracing for a Surge of Returning Veterans

By John L. Pulley

On Mother's Day of this year, Sgt. Ricky J. Jackson, 28, returned to his hometown of Norfolk, Va., and hung up the Army National Guard uniform that he had worn for most of his adult life.

Becoming a civilian hasn't been easy for Jackson. He is weaning himself from habits developed during a decade spent bouncing from stateside service to overseas deployments. He reminds himself daily that he is

no longer in Iraq, that ignoring the speed limit is no longer acceptable, that tactical military judgments no longer inform his decisions. He reminds himself to keep his temper in check.

"It's the frustration of having to deal with the transition from a military lifestyle," Jackson says. "You have to understand that you're in a less hostile environment. You can't be so quick to react."

Hoping to hasten his adjustment, Jackson is taking advantage

of resources available to him as a student at Tidewater Community College. Upon his return home, college advisers steered him back onto the business-administration-degree track he had been on before military obligation intervened. They helped him choose a 16-credit course load and directed him to a tutoring lab. Jackson has taken advantage of the college's on-site counselors, as well.

"I can vent and they listen," Jackson says. "They point me in the direction in which I need to

go. They give good advice, and I listen."

As thousands of military veterans return home, among them men and women bearing physical challenges and emotional scars, community colleges will be on the front lines of moving former troops into civilian life. With the most extensive expansion of veterans educational benefits since World War II set to take effect next year, two-year institutions are bracing for the surge.

"We applaud the new GI

Bill," says Deborah DiCroce, president of Tidewater Community College, which is in close proximity to the world's largest naval base, the East Coast's largest jet fighter base and one of the world's largest shipyards. "Beginning life again by commencing or resuming collegiate study can be a powerful piece of the healing process."

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, popularly referred to as the "New GI Bill," expands educa-

tional benefits to veterans who have served since Sept. 11, 2001. Veterans with 36 months of service will be eligible for full tuition and fees at state colleges and universities, monthly housing stipends and a \$1,000 annual stipend for books and supplies.

Veterans who served less than 36 months, but who have at least 90 days of consecutive service, will receive a percentage of the full benefit. It provides Reserve and Guard members who have been activated for more than 90 days since 9/11 access to the same GI Bill benefits. The new law takes effect Aug. 1, 2009. Eligibility lasts for 15 years from the time of discharge or separation from active duty.

Veterans will have the option of using educational benefits at four-year colleges, but most observers anticipate the law will nonetheless increase enrollments at community colleges. In 2007, veterans using GI Bill educational benefits enrolled in two-year institutions more often than any at any other type of college or university.

Heading Home

"When you get out of the military, you want to go home," says Ken Betterton, a former Marine and consultant to government agencies who has developed a program to help veterans "better acclimatize to the civilian environment following their experience in Iraq and Afghanistan and other locations around the world."

The new law also allows eligible beneficiaries — those with more than 10 years of active duty — to transfer benefits to spouses and children. Raising benefits and widening the pool of users at a time of an economic downturn could further increase demand at community colleges.

"We are seeing more students coming to us using Pell grants and other forms of financial aid," DiCroce says. "That would encourage me to believe that students who have access to the New GI Bill would take advantage of it."

Notwithstanding veterans' preference for community colleges, the scope of available funds made available by the new law could also stiffen competition among institutions eager to tap the financial windfall, says Julian L. Alssid, executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center.

"I would expect that four-year and proprietary schools will aggressively court these veterans," says Alssid, whose organization works with education, workforce development, and economic development agencies to help students and workers succeed and regional economies



PHOTO COURTESY/LA CITY COLLEGE

New GI Bill will spur demand for workforce training, said Jamillah Moore, president of Los Angeles City College.

grow. "There will be plenty of competition for these folks."

In anticipation of enrollment growth, community college administrators are looking at bolstering ancillary support services.

"These men and women have gone to hell and back in a war zone, often at huge sacrifice, and they are put in a position of trying to pick up the pieces of life again, sometimes without a limb, sometimes with emotional scarring and trauma," says DiCroce. "They are looking to that very nurturing and very special brand of collegiate education to help them begin again."

Take developmental education, for example. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ground on, the educational attainment of incoming recruits has plummeted. Consequently, large numbers of veterans will become eligible for post-secondary educational benefits even though they lack a high school diploma. Community colleges may find it necessary to devote more resources to remedial education.

"We'll try to get an understanding of who these veterans are and what their needs are," says Marcia Pfeiffer, president of the Florissant Valley Campus of St. Louis Community College, which has five National Guard units in its district. "We are open



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Deborah DiCroce, president of Tidewater Community College, located in close proximity to major military installations, said the college is ensuring it has infrastructure to accommodate the coming surge of vets.

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In preparation, Tidewater Community College "is ensuring that we have the infrastructure in place to be responsive to veterans, and military personnel in general, and their families, to attend to both their educational needs as well as any related support needs that they may have as they transition out of the military," says DiCroce. "That brings with it, potentially, a host of emotional, psychological and physical disabilities that colleges have to be sensitive to when they look to

provide that infrastructure."

The New GI Bill will also require community colleges to participate in a program whose details are still being worked out by the Department of Veterans Affairs, which will pay tuition and fees directly to colleges. The VA will disburse housing and textbook benefits to students.

Lack of Clarity

"This is a fundamental shift in the way we administer the program," says Keith Wilson, director of VA's Education Service. "We're hoping to keep the reporting burden to an absolute minimum. We want to minimize the negative impact on schools, but we will have to have some additional information from them."

The program's lack of clarity concerns some college officials.

"We are waiting for those rules before we can anticipate some of the things we should be thinking about," says St. Louis Community College's Pfeiffer. "I think they simply don't know yet how they will go about implementing this."

Los Angeles City College is authorized by state law to promote economic and workforce development. Naturally, the college is considering the economics of the New GI Bill and the potential for veterans to walk through its door en masse.

"Historically, we do a lot of workforce training," says Jamillah Moore, the college's new president. "Additional federal resources that increase educational opportunity will increase access and accessibility. It's an opportunity for us to help businesses and communities to build their [economic and workforce] pipelines."

It's also an opportunity for two-year colleges to reach into the community, unite disparate interests and drive economic development.

"That's something where they will clearly outflank the four-year colleges," says Alssid. "This could prove to be a way to demonstrate the important role community colleges will play in solving the impending labor shortage."

Says Moore: "We are on the front line." ▲

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PRESIDENT, FLORISSANT VALLEY CAMPUS
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