

Helping Military Veterans Study Abroad

Veterans are a growing population on U.S. college campuses, and education abroad offices are finding ways to better understand how best to help them use their educational benefits to fund study abroad.

MORE VETERANS have started studying on U.S. campuses in the last five years due to the expansion of educational benefits outlined in the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which went into full effect in 2009. Veterans who served at least 90 days on active duty after September 10, 2001, or were honorably discharged from active duty for a service-connected disability are eligible for education benefits, which include tuition payments, a housing allowance, and a book stipend.

College and university representatives say that veterans are a population they are increasingly seeing in their education abroad offices.

In 2012 more than 900,000 veterans of the U.S. armed forces used their higher education benefits, an increase from 550,000 in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Both veterans and their dependents (spouses and children) are eligible to use their benefits for education abroad, subject to certain restrictions. However, no national statistics on the number of veterans using military benefits to study abroad are currently available.

College and university representatives say that veterans are a population they are increasingly seeing in their education abroad offices. "I realized we really needed to hone our process last semester after a handful of veteran students and veteran-dependent students requested letters detailing program costs so that they could apply their VA benefits. I really wanted to support this population of students by making the process clear and as easy as possible for them," says Kayla McNickle, education abroad program coordinator at the University of Connecticut.

Cross-Campus Communication is Key

Holly Henning, an education abroad adviser at the University of Alabama, also became aware of issues related to helping veterans study abroad when she encountered a veteran who wanted to use his federal military benefits. She began collaborating with the university's Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, initially to gather information about benefits. The relationship between the education abroad office and the veterans' affairs office has grown over the last two years.

"One of the things we've learned is that we need open and clear communication between our two offices. We've designated a liaison in each office to ask questions and get answers," she says.

Henning has worked closely with Jason Sellars, assistant director of the University of Alabama's Office of Veteran and Military Affairs. Sellars is also the School Certifying Official (SCO), responsible for keeping the VA informed of the enrollment status of veterans and their dependents and certifying tuition and fees.

SCOs can be an excellent resource for education abroad offices seeking more information on how to best serve veterans. Other institutions also advise that education abroad offices reach out to their campus SCO. "I would encourage the study abroad office to tap into the expertise of the School Certifying Official on their campus. For example as an SCO, I have direct lines of communication with the VA and I might know the right way to ask specific questions about study abroad instead of the student trying to navigate that process with VA," says Lori York, associate registrar and SCO at Augsburg College in Minneapolis.

At the University of Alabama, Sellars and Henning have worked closely to develop joint resources and cross-training for staff in both offices. "We have outlined some procedures that our offices can follow so that everyone in our office has a general understanding of how veterans' benefits may or may not be applied to study abroad," Henning says.

They have also added whether or not a student is a veteran to their study abroad pre-advising checklist, which also includes information about financial aid,



Apryl Jackson, a University of Alabama study abroad student, who is also a veteran.

preferred destinations, and scholarships. It has helped advisers better match veterans and their dependents to eligible programs. Sellars also flags a student's file in Studio Abroad, the web-based software that the University of Alabama uses to manage its study abroad applications, once he has certified a student to receive military benefits.

According to Sellars, one of the challenges for collaboration between education abroad and veterans affairs offices is that each unit often has its own shorthand and may not initially understand what the other is talking about.

"One major issue involves study abroad departments' use of jargon that possess the same names as VA jargon but with different meanings. A simple example is the word 'program.' To the study abroad world, a 'program' is most likely the specific study abroad program that the student participates in. To VA, however, 'program' can either be the academic degree program or the benefit program the student is eligible to participate in, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill program," he explains.

He said he experienced this firsthand when he first starting working with the University of Alabama education abroad office. "We didn't know it, but we were talking apples and oranges until we came to a mutual understanding of the term meanings," he adds.

In addition to helping education abroad offices deal with the financial side of veterans' benefits, VA offices can also provide guidance on how to address veterans' unique needs. Sellars notes, for instance, that active duty members of the military must obtain clearance prior to traveling out of the country.

Leah Spinosa de Vega, director of global initiatives and off-campus study at Augsburg College, adds that sometimes it's necessary to work with other offices on campus. "In some cases veterans with disabilities require accommodations and advising with the disability services adviser, study abroad office and faculty-leader, or program site director to ensure their needs are met," she says.

Spinosa advises making sure to have a long lead time when working with veterans. "Because they need to work with the SCO, gather all of the supporting documentation on cost and coursework, the study abroad process may take longer (for veterans) than it does for other students," she says.

One additional factor for education abroad offices to be aware of is that many students using veterans' benefits may not be veterans themselves, but may be the children or spouses of veterans. At the University of Alabama, in fact, most of the students they work with are dependents, not veterans.

“Many dependent students may also have parents that are already overseas actively serving and have limited contact with them while they are deployed. This can create communication issues and emotional tugs, especially if situations arise while a dependent student is abroad,” Sellars says.

York also recommends that education abroad offices reach out to graduate schools on campus. “Often graduate study abroad programs are run directly out of the graduate schools instead of through a central study abroad office. Reach out to those grad programs to be sure they are aware of the restrictions on benefits being applied to study abroad. Encourage them to work with the SCO to make sure that programs are accessible,” she says.

Breaking Down the Costs

One of the main tasks for education abroad offices to help veterans study abroad is to provide a cost breakdown of tuition and associated fees, which is then certified by the SCO. While benefits can be used to cover the cost of tuition, they cannot be applied to certain program fees or extra costs such as airfare.

“Veterans need to have really clear and detailed information about the costs (itemized cost breakdown that differentiates tuition costs from other program costs) and course work (how is it fitting into their degree progress),” says Spinosa de Vega.

McNickle says that she works closely with the VA office at the University of Connecticut when documenting program costs: “When a student requests a letter from our office with a breakdown of program costs, I send the student to the VA office with a draft before providing them with a final copy in order to ensure that the letter contains all needed information in order for the student to receive their benefits. I also confirm the veteran status of study abroad applicants with the VA office before confirming scholarship disbursements.”

Arizona State University has developed a cost breakdown form, which allows it to separate out programmatic costs from in-

structional costs, says Mandy Nydegger, international coordinator of faculty-directed programs.

“This enables the Pat Tillman Veterans Center to easily identify and help students understand what portion of the program fee the student’s GI Bill might cover,” she says.

Sellars says that while normal fees that any student would pay can be covered by VA benefits, additional fees that are specific to study abroad cannot be included unless the program is mandatory for the degree program, such as an MBA program requiring a study abroad component to complete the degree.

“In addition, regardless of a mandatory requirement, things like airfare or amenities cannot be included and...these charges (need) to be itemized and pulled out of the amount submitted to the VA,” Sellars says.

To help offset the extra costs associated with study abroad that are not covered by military benefits, some institutions offer scholarships to help veterans. The University of Connecticut, for example, offers the United States Armed Forces Veteran Scholarship for students who have served in the military and are registered with the university’s Veteran’s Affairs and Military Programs. “Veterans will be automatically awarded \$2,500 in scholarship support if they commit to a semester-long study abroad program and \$1,000 if committed to a summer program,” says McNickle.

“The vast majority of veterans who study abroad also accrue significant expenses beyond what they would pay for a normal semester of school that is largely covered by their GI Bill, which is why we started offering our Veterans Scholarship program,” she explains.

McNickle says students just need to indicate their veteran status on their study abroad application to be eligible for the scholarship, which can be applied to the costs of any type of University of Connecticut-approved study abroad program. It can cover program fees, tuition, and other study abroad-related costs as long as they are billed through the university.

Henning says that one of the challenges of applying veterans’ benefits to study abroad is that many of the rules issued by the Veterans Benefits Administration are unclear, even to SCOs. “The rules are unclear and they can be interpreted in a lot of different ways,” she says.

One of the major areas of confusion is in regard to the type of study abroad program that students may participate in. Sellars says that each state has a State Approving Agency that may be able to assist institutions with any new study abroad programs to make sure that they can be approved for VA benefits.

Henning says that at the University of Alabama, the easiest types of programs for students to do are faculty-led or exchange programs. If a student wants to enroll directly in a foreign institution, the host school’s programs must be VA-approved.

One of the other major restrictions is that veterans are not currently allowed to apply their military benefits to pay for programs organized by third-party providers.

“While I see the value that third-party providers provide to the study abroad world, the VA does not allow payment to go to these third-party providers, and as such, students cannot use VA benefits, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This is a legislative situation, as Congress only permitted payments to go toward approved programs at public and private [degree-granting] institutions,” Sellars says.

He explains that “third-party provider” usually refers to for-profit companies that support study abroad programs, rather than programs run through degree-granting institutions.

Sellars argues that the current restrictions on third-party providers are at odds with the public diplomacy message currently promoted by the U.S. government. “Congress needs to look seriously at the relationships with study abroad and GI Bill benefits as the current legislation does a poor job of adequately capturing all the relationships involved in the study abroad world...Third parties in this area play a pivotal role and there is an argument here that not allowing



Guidelines for Education Abroad Offices Working With Veterans Using Benefits to Fund Study Abroad

JASON SELLARS, assistant director of the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs at the University of Alabama, provides a quick overview of how veterans' benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may be applied to study abroad.

- The amount VA pays is determined by Active Duty service time of the sponsor and can range from 40 percent to 100 percent of the authorized tuition and fee amount.
- VA can pay tuition that is applied to an approved institution and its degree programs so long as the courses apply toward degree progression, but you must factor out any unauthorized charges, such as airfare, etc., in your cost breakdown.
- VA cannot currently pay third-party providers, either directly or indirectly using the school as a pass through.
- VA can either pay typical academic fees if the student is eligible to use VA benefits, or, if the program is not only applicable toward degree progression, but is also a required part of the program that the student must participate in, additional fees may be able to be included.
- If a foreign institution is billing the student directly, the foreign institution must have a School Certifying Official and VA approval of its program, and submit the certification to the VA using "guest student" status and with a drop down statement that says "Courses confirmed to apply to a degree program at [the home institution]."
- If the student is pursuing a degree program at a foreign school, then that program has to be approved by VA and the foreign school would submit the certification, if a School Certifying Official has been established at that school.
- In order for a foreign school to have its degree program approved by the VA, there has to be a VA-eligible student looking to participate in the degree program. VA will not approve a program without an interested student trying to participate in the program.

TO RESEARCH IF AN INSTITUTION ALREADY HAS the program VA approved for foreign study:
<http://inquiry.vba.va.gov/weamspub/buildSearchCountryCriteria.do>

SCHOOL CERTIFYING OFFICIAL HANDBOOK (PG. 60-61 for "Guest Student" situations, PG. 85 for Study Abroad):
http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/job_aids/SCO_Handbook.pdf

FOREIGN SCHOOL INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS:
http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/foreign_school_information_for_students.asp

FOREIGN PROGRAM APPROVAL INFORMATION:
http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/foreign_program_approval_information_for_schools.asp

VA STUDY ABROAD FACT SHEET:
http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/docs/factsheets/Post_911_study_abroad_fact_sheet.pdf

third-party providers who serve as liaisons between institutions and excellent quality programs is a barrier to higher education that can be removed without necessarily incurring exorbitant costs," he says.

Sellars adds that one of the main problems is that the VA currently lumps all types of programs together, rather than looking at different kinds of programs separately. An example of a program provider that falls into a gray area is the Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA) at Butler University. Because it is part of Butler University, IFSA is part of a degree-granting institution, but it also operates as a provider for other institutions.

"We at IFSA have been very keen to develop programming and scholarships for veterans and ROTC students, but have found close to zero consistency in the interpretation of benefit transferability to provider programs," says Michelle Tolan, IFSA field director for diversity access and research.

She adds that the current restrictions on military benefits are not consistent with other federal financial aid programming: "By transferring VA benefits to in-house and exchange programs only, it creates an inequitable system of restricted choice for veteran students. Students on *other* types of federal aid normally select from an aggregated portfolio of both in-house and affiliate programs...Veterans, conversely, suffer severely limited program options by having access to solely faculty-led or exchange programs—and these may not meet their specific academic or personal needs."

"Ultimately, I think this is going to take advocacy action on our part with the Department of Veterans Affairs...Each state has a VA education liaison, and each campus an eligibility specialist, so I think in the lack of explicit language from VA that it's all up for interpretation. Which is not to say VA is not supportive of international experiences—on the contrary—but it's not a familiar system to them," Tolan says. **IE**

CHARLOTTE WEST is a freelance writer based in Peru. Her last article for *IE* was "Assessing Learning Outcomes for Study Abroad" in the November/December 2015 issue.