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Student-Veterans Come Marching Home: A New GI Bill for Scientists

Alan Kotok
 United States
 6 June 2008

Since World War II, the U.S. government has offered education benefits to veterans through a series of "GI Bills" both as an incentive to encourage military enlistment and as a "gesture of gratitude" to young men and women who serve in the military. But, since the WWII era, these benefits have failed to keep up with the increasing cost of higher education.

A new bill--it has passed both houses of Congress but [enactment is uncertain](#)--aims to restore some of the scope of the original GI Bill for veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. If signed into the law, the bill could increase significantly the number of veterans studying science and related technical fields, including many members of groups underrepresented in science.

"This is a different kind of war." -- Representative Harry Mitchell

FROM THE GREATEST GENERATION TO 9/11

Among other benefits, the [original GI Bill of Rights](#) (officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) provided World War II veterans with a tuition stipend of \$500 a year--enough at the time for tuition at most colleges--as well as a monthly living allowance. Nearly half of the 16 million World War II veterans took advantage of these benefits, which, together with the GI Bill's unemployment insurance, home and business loans, and improved medical facilities, had an enormous impact on the lives of the veterans and their families and is credited with vastly expanding the American middle class.

The GI Bill also influenced American science and technology. Edward Humes, author of *Over Here: How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream*, writes that [91,000 scientists and 450,000 engineers](#) studied with GI Bill benefits after World War II, including [14 Nobel Prize winners in science](#).

The maximum amount paid out by the [current GI Bill](#), passed in 1984 and designed for a smaller post-Vietnam force, does not come close to covering [tuition costs](#) except at the most affordable American universities, let alone books, fees, and living expenses.

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Another problem with the current GI Bill is that it gives more generous benefits to regular service veterans than to reservists or National Guard members, a large number of whom have faced the same dangers and casualty rates as their regular-service comrades during long, full-time deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. As our companion article in this feature, "[Student-Veterans Come Marching Home: Their Return to Studies](#)" indicates, many National Guard members rely on tuition assistance from their state governments, using the GI Bill as a mere supplement.

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Despite the current bill's shortcomings, many veterans use its benefit--and those provided by companion funding programs--to defray their educational expenses. According to a [Department of Veterans Affairs report](#), as of February 2007, some 13,000 post-9/11 veterans have used the benefits to pursue graduate degrees, about 139,000 have studied for undergraduate degrees, and some 122,000 have enrolled in community colleges.

THE NEW GI BILL

"This is a different kind of war," says [Representative Harry Mitchell](#) (D-AZ), chief House sponsor of the [Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008](#), referring to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mitchell's bill covers regular-service forces but extends more benefits to reserve and National Guard veterans. "These people come home," Mitchell says. "They've been pulled from jobs, pulled from their careers, and pulled from school. And we believe this will help them readjust to civilian life even more."



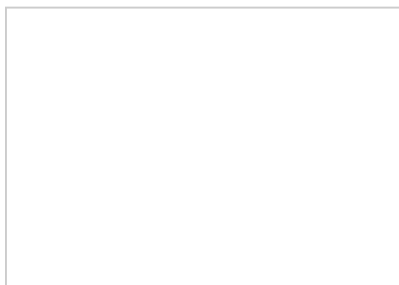
Rep. Harry Mitchell

To qualify for the new GI Bill, veterans--whether regular service members, reserve, or National Guard--must serve from 3 to 36 months on active duty, with the level of benefit payments dependent on the length of service. The new bill covers a veteran's tuition in a degree program up to the amount of in-state tuition charged by the most expensive publicly funded university in the state where the veteran resides. If a veteran enrolls in a college or university with higher tuition, the new bill enables the government to match the amount of the institution's financial aid, reducing the institution's burden by half. The new bill also offers a monthly housing allowance and an annual stipend of up to \$1000 to cover books and equipment.

These benefits are available for up to four academic years, so in most cases, they won't cover the costs of both undergraduate and graduate or professional education. But they will pay for graduate or professional school for veterans who already have a bachelor's degree. And the new bill allows more time--15 years instead of the current 10--to take advantage of its benefits.

The new GI Bill has a change from the current bill that anyone who has written a tuition check will appreciate: Like the WWII-era GI Bill, the new bill makes its tuition payments available as a lump sum for a semester, quarter, or term, which is how most institutions charge tuition. The current bill pays its benefits in monthly installments, so veterans have to pull together the cash for the tuition from their monthly payments or from other sources.

A LARGER IMPACT ON AMERICAN SCIENCE



Representative Mitchell, who also sits on the [House Science and Technology Committee](#), says the new GI Bill supports the goal of upgrading the country's science and technology skills. "This is just an ideal way hopefully to get these soldiers who are mature, who probably have a better idea of where they're going ... than the typical student coming out of high school."

Ben Latigo, dean of the [School of Engineering and](#)



Dr. Ben Latigo

[Applied Sciences](#) at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC)--the public university for D.C. residents, with a predominantly African-American enrollment--believes the new GI Bill will broaden the ethnic diversity of the sciences and engineering professions and bring more women into these fields. "I feel the new GI Bill will offer more enhanced opportunities in the 21st century for many to pursue college education," Latigo says, a conclusion he bases "on the experience of the original GI Bill after World War II that expanded opportunities for many, particularly in the technical disciplines."

In addition to making higher education more affordable, he notes, the new bill's provisions will allow more students to attend college full-time, a plus for students in rigorous programs such as science or engineering. Latigo is confident that veterans with technical degrees will have little trouble finding good jobs, noting that UDC's placement rate for engineers is "extremely high, maybe 100%."

Adds Mitchell, "[I]f we can help with these veterans, not only to encourage them through the GI Bill, but through other proposals that we've done, I just think it's vital."

STATUS OF THE NEW GI BILL

As of our publication date, the new GI Bill had passed both houses of Congress--H.R. 5740 in the House and S. 22 in the Senate--but it still has a way to go before enactment, according to Patrick Campbell, legislative director of [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#), a group that supports the new GI Bill. In an e-mail, Campbell writes: "The GI Bill was a provision of the war supplemental [funding bill that] passed both houses of Congress with overwhelming majorities. Since there are two versions of the funding bill, the House will be considering the supplemental again this week [2-6 June] and will probably vote early next week [9-13 June]." Campbell adds: "The bill [will] not be sent to a conference committee in order to avoid some procedural hurdles associated with conference reports. Instead, the bill will be ping-ponged back and forth between the House and the Senate till the same bill passes both houses."

Once a final bill is passed by Congress, it needs the president's signature, and President George W. Bush has threatened to veto the legislation. *Science Careers* will update the status of the new GI Bill on the [Science Careers Blog](#).

Alan Kotok is managing editor of *Science Careers*.

Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback [to our editor](#).

Photos. Top: courtesy of Cody Waters. Middle: courtesy of the office of Rep. Harry Mitchell. Bottom: UDC/Kim Johnson, Urban Oasis Studio

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