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EDITOR'S MEMO

Support the Troops ... *with Education*

It's the economic equivalent of sending troops into battle with unarmored humvees: Though one of the U.S. military's key recruiting tools is the promise of help paying for college, most New England soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan haven't a clue what educational benefits they are entitled to—and the government offers them little guidance.

"Before GIs get out of the service, their knowledge of many of their benefits is minimal at best," says Ron Koontz, director of veterans services for the city of Amesbury, Mass. "Then when they are getting out, 40 or 50 are brought to a huge room where a sergeant tells them about *all* their benefits, not only education, but health care and everything else. At that point, most of these GIs are just thinking about getting out of the service. One of the last things they are concentrating on is what this sergeant is telling them."

After that, the government maintains a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy when it comes to explaining education benefits, which vary by state and by a soldier's branch and type of service. "The philosophy has been that services for veterans are generally not advertised, and GIs and veterans have to go look for the information in many cases," says Tom Hargreaves, who offers employment advice to veterans in the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts. "They may have to dig for it."

Unfortunately, they needn't dig deep to find out that their service and sacrifice do not earn them what civilians who sweat it out in AP classes might refer to as a "full boat." The Montgomery GI Bill provides monthly stipends that can be used toward college, but service members must contribute a portion of their military pay to be eligible. Most states provide veterans with tuition waivers, but they generally do not cover "mandatory fees." At the University of Massachusetts Boston last year, full-time tuition was \$1,714, but fees were more than \$6,800. Some GIs are also eligible for loan repayment programs and work study paying \$6.75 an hour.

As is often the case, a community college is stepping up where others have fallen down. In August, Northern Essex Community College held the region's first "Veterans' Educational Stand Down" to help GIs and veterans navigate the maze of educational services available to them and gain a foothold in college. About two dozen returning soldiers, many fresh from Iraq and Afghanistan, showed up at the college's Haverhill, Mass., campus for one-on-one advice on everything from making sense of their benefits to converting military experiences into college credits. The college plans to keep veterans' reps on campus on an ongoing basis and has enlisted a local reservist to help faculty deal with special issues affecting soldier-students.

Most college programs represented at the Stand Down focused on obviously transferable military skills such as turning army medics into civilian EMTs. But one anecdote floating around the gathering was about a marine who while serving in Iraq began to get interested in why he was sent there. When his service ended, he quickly earned an associate degree in liberal arts, transferred to the government program at Georgetown and interned at the State Department, before earning a bachelor's degree and heading off to Texas to pursue a master's in public administration. One senses his experience and more recent credentials would make his a valuable voice in Washington when the next war is hatched. Other returning GIs might be uniquely positioned to bring an examination of the meaning of life back to its rightful place in the academy. A lot of them should probably be handed philosophy degrees when they step off the plane.

The misbegotten Iraq war's connections to education are endless, beginning with the trillion-plus that is not going into poor classrooms, school breakfasts or student aid. That we're not even playing straight about the educational benefits GIs are entitled to is just one more insult from those who love to talk about supporting the troops, but have a funny way of showing it.

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