



## Empty Promise: Black American Veterans and the New GI Bill

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### ABSTRACT

“The 2008 GI Bill offers college funds for veterans. Yet Black male vets are not taking advantage of these benefits. This chapter examines personal and societal problems that hinder access to higher education for Black vets, and suggests some ways adult educators can advocate for these young men.”

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 expanding educational benefits for military veterans who have served since September 11, 2011, African American veterans are utilizing GI benefits less than other ethnic groups. Few longitudinal studies have addressed this phenomenon. Using anecdotal data from the experiences of OEF/OND/OIF returning veterans, Ottley examines why African American male veterans are utilizing GI benefits less than other ethnicities.
- After completion of military service, many African American veterans return to neighborhoods that do not have an abundance of the basic resources that all veterans need, such as access to adequate housing, quality healthcare, tertiary education, and sustainable employment. While higher education is paramount to the returning African American service member for self-improvement and economic stability, unless basic necessities, such as safe housing, employment and quality healthcare, are met, higher education cannot and will not be a viable avenue of opportunity.
- Previous researchers have shown that in past wars as well as the current war, African Americans and other non-White ethnic minority veterans have experienced forms of discrimination, particularly related to the distribution of VA benefits. However, under the Obama administration, there has been a significant increase in the number of veterans who have gained access to VA healthcare benefits. Access to such benefits is extremely important as mental illness from war trauma can significantly influence one’s educational pursuits.
- Improving African American veterans’ utilization of the Post-9/11 GI bill benefits requires addressing barriers and obstacles to higher education, including VA benefits and community understanding of the contributions and sacrifices made by service members and veterans.

## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

Institutions of higher education (IHE) must recognize that veterans have acquired life skills that can be assessed and worthy of academic credit. Furthermore, given that graduation rates are 2.5 times higher for students who earned academic credit from life experiences, IHEs should determine how veterans' prior learning can be applied for academic credit. An example IHEs could model in applying academic credit to a degree is the Veterans in Pursuit of Educational Readiness Program (VIPER) at Warren County Community College in New Jersey. Under VIPER, veterans can earn an associate's degree in a year, with veterans having the potential to qualify for up to 34 credits from military training and an additional 11 more credits from specific career training. Given that many African American veterans have training in some of the highest paid occupations that only require an associate's degree, employers should seriously consider returning African American veterans as potential employees, regardless of whether they have completed a college degree.

### FOR POLICY

The DoD and the VA might partner together to better ensure that African American service members are fully aware of their GI Bill benefits and know how to utilize the benefits before they discharge. Training on GI Bill benefits could be coupled with other amenities, such as emotional, physical, and environmental services, provided to assist with a successful transition and reacclimation to civilian life. Further, the VA might, as example: advocate for the veteran by ensuring that the housing, healthcare and employment needs of veterans are met; aggressively reduce the backlog of pending claims and work to address inconsistent and inaccurate benefit rulings; address the staggering percentage of African American and Hispanic male veterans who are homeless by improving awareness of the VA's veteran's housing benefits. Under the Obama administration, Congress passed a record budget for the VA and the largest budget increase in 3 decades which allowed more than 250,000 veterans who had lost benefits to reenroll. The federal government might continue such progress by making provisions that limit cutbacks to the VA budget.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is that anecdotal data was used. Anecdotal data is typically subjective and prone to untrustworthy findings. Future studies on this topic should improve the reliability and validity of the findings through the employment of both objective and subjective data. In addition to deeply analyzing the policies of and provisions made by the VA and the federal government, future researchers should conduct qualitative interviews with veterans to further understand their experiences and needs. Furthermore, subsequent studies would greatly benefit from both cross-sectional and longitudinal study designs. Such quantitative study designs will improve generalizability and representativeness while presenting a true picture of the complications African American service members face upon returning to the United States. Future researchers should also use qualitative frameworks to further examine the relationship African American veterans have with the GI Bill, in conjunction with the various socio-economic factors affecting African American veterans' health and wellness. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods would be beneficial in further capturing the effects discrimination and deprived communities have on post-9/11 veterans. Another limitation of this study is that Ottley focused exclusively on African American males. Researchers continuing this study should review the relationship between the post 9/11 GI Bill and African American women. Subsequent studies should include socio-demographic variables, such as age, educational status, family income, region, disability status, military ranking, and perceived social support.

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