Prioritizing Student Veterans: Tennessee’s Policy Initiatives to Support Higher Education Attainment for Veterans

State Transformation in Action Recognition (STAR) Award Submission by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission

1. How long has the program operated? What was the month and year of initiation? Has the program been in operation for nine months to three years?

The earliest components of the Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Act went into operation on July 1, 2014. (Legislation was enacted in April 2014, but program activities did not begin until July.)

2. Why was it created? What problems or issues was the program designed to address?

Tennessee's veterans education initiatives provide support and campus programs for student veterans enrolled at higher education institutions in the state. The programs were designed to address the following:

- **Support veterans transitioning into a career post-military and provide pathways to success for veterans seeking a degree or credential.** Prior to the implementation of these programs, veterans in Tennessee frequently faced a complex web of requirements and resources to get a degree or credential at postsecondary institutions in the state. At many institutions, veterans had to navigate multiple departments during the admission and enrollment processes and weren’t able to connect with resources tailored to their needs. Most campuses in Tennessee lacked a targeted office or staff member to guide veterans to and through higher education.

- **Create consistent processes for admission, enrollment, and prior learning assessment (PLA).** The process for obtaining credit for prior learning can be complex, time-consuming and, in many cases, inconsistent across institutions. Even with the Post-9/11 GI Bill available to assist in funding their educational goals, many veterans were faced with using those benefits to take entry-level courses that duplicated their military training. The scope of the problem made state-level coordination necessary.

- **Grow the educational attainment rate for veterans in Tennessee.** In 2014, there were 267,000 working-age (25-64) veterans living in the State of Tennessee. The American Community Survey indicates that 67% of these veterans have earned less than an associate degree. Only 11 other states have a lower educational attainment rate for veterans. Data also showed that over 83,000 working-age veterans had some college credits but no degree.1 Particularly for veterans who have some college but no degree, there was an opportunity to reach these veterans, help them reconnect with a college campus, and make the experience easier for them once they enrolled.

---

1 American Community Survey (2010-14) 5 yr. estimates. Public use microdata.
• **Connect skilled and credentialed veterans with jobs in high-demand fields.** Indicators show that when veterans go back to college, they typically complete at high rates, especially if the right supports and resources are in place.\(^2\) Tennessee has a demand for employees possessing demonstrated skills in technical fields. With postsecondary credentials in these high-demand fields, veterans can help fill the skills gap in Tennessee’s workforce.

• **Gain local policy champions and facilitate buy-in from campus faculty and staff to create change necessary to support student veterans.** The VETS Act, Veteran Reconnect, and other initiatives were created to promote change statewide, regionally, and at the campus level. Through partnerships between the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), University of Tennessee (UT) System, and private institutions, these initiatives were implemented at the campus level to develop resources and advocates for student veterans at institutions across the state.

• **Develop a suite of statewide policies to demonstrate multi-level commitment to veteran education attainment and employment.** At the state level, Tennessee’s General Assembly provided the necessary leadership to demonstrate that veterans were a policy priority in Tennessee while also creating structures to incentivize local action.

3. **What are the specific activities and operations of the program?**

The primary components of Tennessee’s veterans education initiatives were the Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Act and the Veteran Reconnect program.

**VETS Act**

The original Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Act, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris (R-Collierville) and House Speaker Pro Tempore Curtis Johnson (R-Clarksville), was signed into law as Public Chapter 612 and the programs created as a result went into effect in July 2014.

The Tennessee VETS Act was designed to promote enrollment and degree completion by veterans in higher education, while also encouraging campuses to develop services and resources for student veterans. The VETS Act contained two primary components:

- **In-state tuition for veterans** enrolling at public postsecondary education institutions using the Post-9/11 GI Bill or Montgomery GI Bill, as of July 1, 2014.

- Creation of the **VETS Campus designation** program to recognize public colleges and universities that demonstrate significant commitment to student veterans. An institution receiving the VETS Campus designation not only prioritizes outreach to veterans, but successfully delivers the services necessary to create a supportive environment where student veterans can prosper while pursuing their education. **As of May 2017, twenty-one institutions in Tennessee have met the criteria to receive the VETS Campus designation.**

In passing the VETS Act, Tennessee led the nation in establishing mandatory in-state tuition for veterans effective July 1, 2014, one year ahead of the federal mandate of PL 114-136, the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014.

---

Amendment to the VETS Act

In 2015, the original VETS Act was amended through Public Chapter 219 to include the following:

- Required the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and University of Tennessee (UT) System to adopt or revise their policies related to the assessment and awarding of academic credit for certain military education, training, or service. Policies went into effect on September 1, 2016.

- Updated in-state tuition to include dependents pursuant to federal guidelines, which went into effect in April 2015.

Veteran Reconnect Grant

The Veteran Reconnect grant was developed as part of Governor Bill Haslam’s Drive to 55 initiative, focused on increasing educational attainment in the state. The program provides funding to public and private colleges to develop and scale resources for student veterans. Veteran Reconnect developed the following:

- The first round of funding for Veteran Reconnect came through state appropriations in the 2015-16 budget. The first round funded programs at eleven campuses, with program activities beginning in August 2015. The programs launched at campuses through Veteran Reconnect included the following:
  - Development of standardized systems of tracking the enrollment, retention, and graduation of student veterans;
  - Formation of veteran success committees on campus composed of staff, faculty, and students focused on the continued evolution of best practices in veteran education;
  - Providing dedicated student veteran coordinators on each campus to serve as a sole point of contact for student veterans and all of their needs;
  - Building and furnishing veterans centers or lounges on campus to provide study space, social interaction, enhanced academic support, and other resources; and
  - Increased internship and employment opportunities for student veterans through new annual career development training sessions and enhanced relationship-building with corporate partners.

- The second round of Veteran Reconnect was provided in the 2016-17 budget. Program activities began in September 2016 at the five campuses funded through the second round of the grant. The second round of the grant included a defined focus area of developing employer partnerships to support veterans transitioning into the workforce.

Public Chapter 31

Finally, with the success of implementing the prior bills, Tennessee’s General Assembly took the next step in developing a comprehensive suite of policies for student veterans. In March 2017, Public Chapter 31 was passed to further extend in-state tuition benefits to veterans and dependents. Additionally, the legislation directed THEC to develop an online web platform to assist veterans in mapping out PLA opportunities at Tennessee’s public institutions. Public Chapter 31 was comprised of the following components:
• Initiated **development of a groundbreaking web-based tool to help prospective student veterans in planning prior learning assessment opportunities before enrolling.** With this database, a veteran will be able to see how their military occupational specialty (MOS) equates to academic credit at Tennessee’s public higher education institutions. After the web portal is deployed, prospective students can easily determine how much academic credit their military service provides. Veterans have expressed significant frustration with the current practice where a prospective student would be required to submit their service record to any and all institutions through an inefficient and time-consuming review. The tool represents a quantum leap forward in supporting potential students who have served our country as they transition to higher education.

• Updated original VETS Act to **extend in-state tuition for veterans and their dependents.** In-state tuition would now apply to active duty service members and their dependents, dependents of service members killed in action, and anyone else using VA educational benefits if they are currently living in the state, regardless of their “Home of Record.” This not only met federal requirements, but went beyond them and made enrollment timelines more flexible following discharge. The amended VETS Act removed those barriers. Now, regardless of residency status or date of discharge, a veteran or eligible dependent will receive in-state tuition.

4. **What equipment, technology and/or software (if any) are used to operate and administer the program?**

   The current statewide initiatives do not use any specialized equipment, technology, or software to administer activities or programs.

5. **What are the annual operational costs of the program? How is it funded?**

   The cost of the VETS Act is minimal and absorbed through operational costs within existing programs. Cost of the in-state tuition was largely mitigated within a year of implementation after federal policy followed suit in requiring in-state tuition for all veterans utilizing federal veterans education benefits.

   The Veteran Reconnect grant program, which is administered through the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, has received $2 million in state appropriations since 2015. The program has provided two rounds of funding, each totaling $1 million, to thirteen campuses for a total of seventeen projects. A third round was recently approved for 2017 based on equivalent state appropriations and will further support campus-level work on prior learning assessment.

6. **Has the program been effective at addressing the problem or issue? Please provide tangible results and examples.**

   Through programs such as the VETS Campus designation and some campus initiatives funded through Veteran Reconnect, higher education institutions in Tennessee are developing a culture of support for student veterans. Since 2015, the programs initiated by THEC have resulted in:

   1. Over 40 orientation sessions offered for student veterans.
   2. 21 institutions have initiated annual surveys to identify student veteran views, needs, issues, and suggestions.
3. Over 15 separate grant-funded trainings for faculty and staff on military culture and challenges facing returning veterans.

4. 23 institutions revised policies for granting academic credit to student veteran degree programs.

5. 21 institutions facilitated mentoring and support programs for student veterans.

The greatest successes of Tennessee's veterans education initiatives are demonstrated at the campus level, where individual institutions have localized state policy initiatives to provide direct support for the veterans on their campuses.

(The campus profiles, included as a separate attachment, highlight how individual campuses are implementing strategies initiated through the VETS Act and Veteran Reconnect.)

7. **What measurable impact has the program had? Has it created significant change in your state?**

Through the VETS Act, the updates to the legislation, and Veteran Reconnect, thousands of student veterans in Tennessee benefit from the state’s innovative policy adoptions:

- Annually, approximately **10,500 Tennessee veterans enroll in higher education** using federal veteran education benefits. Each of those students will directly benefit from implementation of the PLA bill to allow for an easier transition process to higher education, and many may benefit from cost and time savings through earned credits.

- The **VETS Campus institutions educate over 8,000 veterans** annually. Each student veteran at a VETS Campus institution has benefited from both the services offered to veterans on the campus, as well as the supportive campus environment demonstrated through the VETS Campus designation.

- In just the past year of the Veteran Reconnect program, **540 current student veterans and 241 prospective student veterans have received direct services** supported by grant activities. Each of these students received services they would not have otherwise received without funding from Veteran Reconnect.

Beyond numbers, the programs have also created a new level of understanding for policymakers and higher education administrators about the needs of student veterans on Tennessee’s college campuses. With the implementation of the VETS Act and through the development of standardized PLA for veterans, faculty members at Tennessee’s public – and many private – institutions have begun to understand the unique challenges and opportunities for student veterans. To be eligible for a VETS Campus designation, institutions must demonstrate that they have provided training to faculty and staff specific to student veterans. To date, 21 campuses have made that commitment and become a VETS Campus, and many of the Veteran Reconnect campuses have used the funding to develop programs aimed at creating a positive campus environment for student veterans.

In addition to changes and services at the campus level, the programs spurred the passage of Public Chapter 31 in Tennessee’s General Assembly with broad bi-partisan support in March 2017. The legislation gained wide support because of the success of the earlier initiatives with the VETS Act, its subsequent amendments, and Veteran Reconnect. With the development of uniform standards for military PLA, veterans needed a way to easily access the newly-standardized information. Through programs such as
Veteran Reconnect and the VETS Campus designation, higher education institutions have begun to prioritize resources for veterans and could more easily come together to source the new veterans PLA database.

While the program initiatives are still underway, Tennessee has already seen early signs pointing toward success for students and a culture change around supporting student veterans at Tennessee’s colleges and universities.

8. Did the program originate in your state? If YES, please indicate the innovator’s name, present address, telephone number and email address.

- Senator Mark Norris (R-Collierville), Senate Majority Leader, Tennessee General Assembly, 301 6th Avenue North, Suite 9A Legislative Plaza, Nashville, TN 37243, 615-741-1967, sen.mark.norris@capitol.tn.gov
- Mike Krause, Executive Director, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 404 James Robertson Parkway, Suite 1900, Nashville, TN 37243, 615-741-7561, mike.krause@tn.gov
- Scott Sloan, Chief of Staff and General Counsel, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 404 James Robertson Parkway, Suite 1900, Nashville, TN 37243, 615-741-7571, scott.sloan@tn.gov

9. Are you aware of similar programs in other states? If YES, which ones and how does your program differ?

Tennessee is the first state with a thorough and comprehensive approach to veterans education and a suite of policy initiatives dedicated to promoting educational attainment among veterans. The state policy initiatives have created incentives at the state level that allow for localized action at the campus level. Tennessee's veterans education initiatives are the first to use this policy model to make student veterans a priority in higher education and inspire a change at the campus level statewide.

Tennessee is also the first state to have a campus designation, created through state law, to recognize higher education institutions that have made student veterans a priority. Through the VETS Campus designation program, Tennessee created a policy approach to recognize campuses that prioritize resources to student veterans, while also sending a message to all colleges and universities in the state that student veterans represent a critical community on each campus.

In building out its policy approach to serve student veterans, Tennessee did look to other states to guide development of some components of the comprehensive initiative. To inform legislation on PLA for student veterans, Tennessee looked to states that had begun to build out tools and resources. Specifically, Tennessee studied the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, which operates a database that translates military experience to academic credit.3

10. Is the program transferable to other policy areas or states? What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter when attempting to adopt this program?

Tennessee has built a suite of services and policies for veterans that are transferable to other states. Tennessee developed a catalog of best practices and policies that would evolve to meet the needs of the state's veterans. The development, passage, and implementation of the legislation for each program

brought together core constituencies to make the programs successful: campus faculty and staff, legislators, students, and state agencies. At each step of developing the legislation and programs, the expertise and needs of campuses and student veterans were considered and incorporated.

Tennessee's veterans education initiatives were developed by building state policy that incentivized and enabled local action. Through targeted legislation that was informed by past successes, Tennessee spurred campus-based action that met the needs of faculty, staff, students, and veterans on those campuses. The programs were also tied back to a larger statewide educational attainment initiative with strong brand recognition. The veterans education policy model has transferable structures that can be applied to other policy areas both in Tennessee and in other states. Tennessee has seen similar success by applying this model to other areas, such as workforce development.

The development of programs and services for student veterans in Tennessee brought to light the importance of scaffolding the development of each program. States that attempt to enact sweeping programs may run into issues if they are not willing to build on successes with iterative legislation or updates to policies. In Tennessee, the VETS Act has been updated multiple times to build on successes and address the challenges seen in implementation. The Veteran Reconnect grant has been amended for each round of funding to promote action in the areas where the prior grants or legislative initiatives have been most effective. Sweeping legislation and policy initiatives can only be truly transformative if they allow for growth and flexibility in the long term.

Tennessee's policies around veterans education recognized that strong work was happening at local campuses and created levers at the state level to scale those successes. The Tennessee General Assembly, the Governor's Office, and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission saw that institutions were innovating and developing community-based policies. The VETS Act and Veteran Reconnect created a balance between developing structures that incentivize action statewide while still allowing for creativity and innovation to meet local needs. Long-term success will take time; students who enrolled using the resources and benefits created through the policy initiatives are mostly still enrolled and working toward a degree. Tennessee has seen early signs pointing toward success for students and a culture change around supporting student veterans at Tennessee's colleges and universities.
Middle Tennessee State University
(Public, Four-year University)

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) has become a model campus for implementation of the VETS Act and the Veteran Reconnect grant. In just three years, the university has used the resources provided by the State of Tennessee to transform and expand the supports it has offered to student veterans, while building upon initial state support to leverage new resources from within the university and through private partnerships.

As a VETS Campus, MTSU has demonstrated and grown its support for veterans across the campus. The university, which calls its student veterans “soldier scholars,” provides advising services to the students while also providing support to the educators that work with the soldier scholars. The university recently revamped its advising program for veterans and created a data system to track student veteran academic progress and provide tailored advising and academic support. The university has developed recognition programs to highlight its students with military experience and to raise awareness of veterans among the student body. For example, in the days prior to graduation each term, the university holds a stole ceremony to recognize graduating student veterans. The campus also honors student veterans at popular athletic events. Veterans with a 4.0 GPA are honored at baseball games, and the university dedicates one football game each year to recognizing student veterans.

In 2016, MTSU launched the Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center to support student veterans and their families. The purpose of the Veterans Center is to provide education support, employment resources, and assistance with federal veterans education benefits and claims. Musician Charlie Daniels and his wife Hazel provided significant financial support for the center, and the university also used funding from Veteran Reconnect to fund services within the center. Within the Veteran Center, a dedicated staff provide services specific to the nearly 1,000 student veterans on the campus.

Through the creation of the transition manager position, funded through Veteran Reconnect, the center is able to assist students with employment after graduation as well as initial transition and enrollment in the university. The institution’s transition manager will also help to implement the upcoming PLA initiatives created through legislation by the General Assembly this spring.
Chattanooga State Community College (Public, Two-year College)

Chattanooga State Community College has built a strong culture of campus-wide support for student veterans through its programs supported by Veteran Reconnect funds and as demonstrated by its VETS Campus designation. The community college has developed programs that provide students throughout the campus the chance to hear and recognize the experiences of their peers who are veterans, while also ensuring that campus veterans are provided with the supports they need to be successful.

Chattanooga State developed a Veteran Support Center in January 2016, using Veteran Reconnect funds. The center provides enrollment and academic support, mentoring, and other resources to student veterans. The college created a Veteran Success Committee, which includes faculty and staff from around the school, in an effort to both develop additional supports for student veterans and increase buy-in across the campus for increased resources for student veterans. The college has developed a number of peer support systems for student veterans, including a Veterans Club and an experiential learning trip to Washington, DC, during which student veterans and traditional students were able to learn from each other’s experiences. Within the first year of the Veterans Club, its popularity grew so quickly that the meetings had to be moved out of the Veteran Center and into a larger space to accommodate demand.

Chattanooga State also created a campus culture of recognizing its student veterans. Through its partnership with the national non-profit The Telling Project, student veterans were able to share their military stories with the entire campus community at events held in fall 2016. The partnership and events were supported by the Veteran Reconnect grant. Chattanooga State holds an additional graduation reception and ceremony for student veterans and their families. The school has also ensured that student veterans are recognized on Veterans Day by holding a luncheon to recognize their contributions to the campus and their military service.

Lipscomb University (Private, Four-year University)

Lipscomb University, located in Nashville, became one of the first private universities to receive the VETS Campus designation after the VETS Act was amended in 2016 to allow private institutions to be eligible. Lipscomb, a recipient of the Veteran Reconnect grant, has demonstrated the effort that a liberal arts institution can put into welcoming student veterans to its campus. The campus’s Student Veterans Office currently serves approximately 150 students, providing intensive services to recognize those students and create a welcoming campus and academic environment.
Lipscomb has placed an emphasis on two areas: supporting student veterans in the transition process to campus and training faculty and staff in the needs of student veterans. The Student Veterans Office, using Veteran Reconnect funds, hosts events for both veteran and traditional students throughout the year to encourage dialogue on the military experience of students. The Office also holds various ceremonies and activities for student veterans through the year, including a Student Veteran Orientation, but emphasizes the events to the entire campus, to ensure that all students at Lipscomb are supportive of their peers who have served. The Office also places an emphasis on communicating with and recognizing student veterans, through monthly newsletters, sharing student testimonials, and celebrating veterans’ academic successes.

The campus has also placed an emphasis on training faculty and staff to support student veterans and recognize their unique experiences and needs. A Medal of Honor recipient, Charles Hagemeister, conducted leadership training for the faculty, and faculty members are heavily encouraged to participate in the annual student veteran orientation. In partnership with the faculty, the Student Veterans Office developed a tutoring program specific to student veterans. Staff in the career office have also been trained and partner with the Student Veterans Office to provide career and resume workshops that are tailored to student veterans and their professional experiences in the military.

---

**East Tennessee State University**  
(Public, Four-year University)

East Tennessee State University (ETSU), located in Johnson City, has worked to build out personalized support of student veterans and connect them to employers in the East Tennessee region. ETSU is a VETS Campus and a recipient of a Veteran Reconnect grant. Through the Veteran Reconnect grant, the campus was able to hire a veterans affairs director and built out campus programs designed to support and recognize its student veterans.
ETSU has worked to create academic supports for its veterans through tracking of academic progress and GPAs. The campus has data on retention, graduation, and GPAs of all student veterans and is able to determine the academic areas in which they are most in need of additional support. The campus also identifies student veterans who may benefit from academic interventions and works with their instructors to connect them with learning resources specific to veterans. The Veterans Affairs Office has developed tutoring programs specifically for veterans to support them in their academic work.

The university has placed a heavy focus on transitioning its veterans into careers after graduation. ETSU has been an exemplary model for creating partnerships with local business and industry, many of whom are enthusiastic about the prospect of hiring veterans. The university has created an internship program specifically geared to veterans and placed nine interns at two organizations in the program’s first two semesters. The veterans affairs director has also pursued partnerships with three local Chambers of Commerce to build out new relationships for its internship and employment programs and to develop a mentorship program to pair military-affiliated students with local business leaders and employers.

*Student veterans and families receiving support through the Veterans Affairs Office at ETSU*
VETS Campuses in Tennessee
What is a VETS Campus?

As laid out in the 2014 Tennessee Veterans Education Transition Support (VETS) Act, a VETS Campus must:

1. Conduct an **annual campus survey** of students who are veterans to identify the views, needs, issues, and suggestions of veterans;
2. Provide **information to faculty and staff** about military and veterans’ culture, including combat-related mental or physical disabilities or other challenges;
3. Administer **orientation programs** for students who are veterans;
4. Facilitate **mentoring and support programs** for students who are veterans;
5. Develop **outreach and communication strategies** for military bases located near the campus, for the purpose of assessing veterans’ educational goals and meeting their identified needs;
6. Create and maintain a **process for the assessment of prior learning** that grants academic credit to veterans for transferable training and experience attained through service in the armed forces of the United States; and
7. Provide, on the campus website, **information on the availability of prior learning assessments** and potential program credit for skills, training or education obtained during military service.

To be designated a VETS Campus, institutions must demonstrate that they provide each of the services above in a written request to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). Institutions that are designated VETS Campuses must submit annual data to THEC on the number of veterans enrolled on campus, their programs of study, and completion rates of veterans.

VETS Campuses as of May 2017

---

**Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris (R-Collierville) speaks at Lipscomb University VETS Campus designation event**

**Former Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey (R-Blountville) speaks at Northeast State VETS Campus event**

**Chattanooga State Community College VETS Campus designation celebration**

**Presentation of the University of Memphis VETS Campus designation during halftime at a Memphis v. Navy football game**