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Student Veterans of America  
1012 14th Street NW, Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20005  
[www.studentveterans.org](http://www.studentveterans.org)

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**TESTIMONY OF**  
**STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**OF THE**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**HEARING ON THE TOPICS OF:**  
**"ECONOMIC WELLBEING OF WOMEN VETERANS"**

**JULY 10, 2019**



Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for allowing Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony discussing the economic wellbeing of women student veterans.

Established in 2008, SVA is a national nonprofit founded to empower student veterans as they transition to civilian life by providing them with the resources, network support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and beyond. With over 1,500 Campus Chapters across the U.S. and in four countries overseas, serving 750,000 student veterans and military-connected students, SVA establishes a lifelong commitment to each student's success, from campus life to employment, through local leadership workshops, national conferences, and top-tier employer relations. As the largest chapter-based student organization in America, we are a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education, and SVA places the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid.

Edward Everett, our nation's 20th Secretary of State, and the former President of Harvard University was famously quoted as stating, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army." While we have the finest military that the world has ever known, the sentiment remains; the importance of education to our nation's national security continues to be critical. SVA believes student veterans are yesterday's warriors, today's scholars, and tomorrow's leaders. That ethos is embodied in the stories and successes of countless SVA Chapter Members and Alumni, like Alexandria Sawin.

Air Force veteran, Air Force spouse, mother, SVA Chapter Leader, biology major. All titles and identities Alexandria Sawin, Alex, used to describe herself before SVA's 11<sup>th</sup> annual National Conference, (NatCon). However, thanks to her tireless dedication leading the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Rebel Vets Chapter, as of this past January she can add "Student Veteran of the Year" to her growing list of impressive accomplishments. Alex is everything SVA looks for in a leader, and a true embodiment of the type of servant leadership student veterans bring to campuses.

The success of women veterans in higher education goes beyond one student veteran's story. Research consistently demonstrates this unique population of non-traditional students is far outpacing their peers in many measures of academic performance.<sup>1</sup> Further, this success in higher education leads to success in careers, in communities, and promotes family financial stability, holistic well-being, and provides the all-volunteer force with powerful tools for recruitment and retention when recruits know military service prepares them for success after service.

### **Demographics Of Women Student Veterans**

In partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the National Student Clearinghouse, SVA studied the individual education records of 854,000 veterans. This research included every Post-9/11 GI Bill user from 2009 until the summer of 2015 and provided valuable insight into the student veteran population with some information specific to women student veterans.<sup>2</sup>

Basic demographic information for the student veteran population as a whole show eighty percent are over the age of 25. Nearly half of are married while going back to school and some forty-six percent have

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<sup>1</sup> Cate, C.A., Lyon, J.S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B.Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C., [http://invest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://invest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Cate, C.A., Lyon, J.S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B.Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C., [http://invest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://invest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf).



children; fourteen percent of those parents are single parents. Fifty percent of student veterans work full-time while in school and an additional twenty-five percent work part-time.<sup>3</sup>

Most notably, the data show women student veterans are overrepresented in higher education compared to the overall population of women veterans in the United States. Women veterans pursuing higher education comprise twenty-six percent of all student veterans compared to 10 percent of the overall veteran population.<sup>4,5</sup> Even compared to the current active duty women population – about 17 percent – there is still an impressive overrepresentation of women veterans in higher education.<sup>6</sup> The rates remain similar when examining degree completion. In its first six years, the Post-9/11 GI Bill enabled over three-hundred and forty-thousand veterans to complete a post-secondary degree or certificate, twenty-three percent of whom are women.<sup>7</sup>

Women student veterans do more than show up on campus and graduate, however, they also have a propensity to lead while on campus. In the 2016 SVA census survey, forty-six percent of women student veterans reported being an SVA Chapter leader.<sup>8</sup> These Chapter leaders are on college and university campuses positively impacting their campuses and communities through leadership and a continued commitment to service, such as that shown by SVA's Student Veteran of the Year, Alex Sawin, mentioned above. As the Chapter President of UNLV's Rebel Vets, she oversaw the first Operation Battle Born Ruck March.

This eight-day, 370-mile march through Nevada brought together student veterans and supporters carrying close to 7,000 dog tags in honor of the Post-9/11 service members killed in action. The event was done in conjunction with a fellow Nevada SVA Chapter and local VFW posts, showing Alex's commitment to not only being a leader, but a member of a team. In fact, nearly half of SVA's Student Veterans of the Year have been women veterans and all share similar stories of impressive leadership on campus and in their communities.

### **Degree Attainment Among Women Student Veterans**

Women veterans consistently earn degrees at higher levels than their civilian peers, setting this cohort of students up for lifelong success and solidifying proof that these students are investment worth making. As the following charts illustrate, this positive trend in degree attainment is consistent across races as well, showing that women veterans are creating a diverse population of educated veterans, and future leaders, beyond their gender. Degree attainment at the advanced degree levels mirrors the success at the Bachelor level.<sup>9</sup>

## **African-American Women Bachelor Level Degree Attainment**

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<sup>3</sup> Cate, C.A., Davis, T. (February 2016). *Student Veteran Demographics: Select Results From Student Veterans of America Spotlight 2016*. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C., <https://studentveterans.org/images/SVASpotlightBrief-1.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Facts and Statistics about Women Veterans. Retrieved from: <https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/latestinformation/facts.asp>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. (2017). 2017 Demographics: Profile of The Military Community. Retrieved from: <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2017-demographics-report.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Internal information gathered by Student Veterans of America Research Department from SVA Leadership Summits and Leadership Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Student Veterans of America. (2017). Analysis of ACS data and NVEST data by Dr. Chris Cate on file with authors.

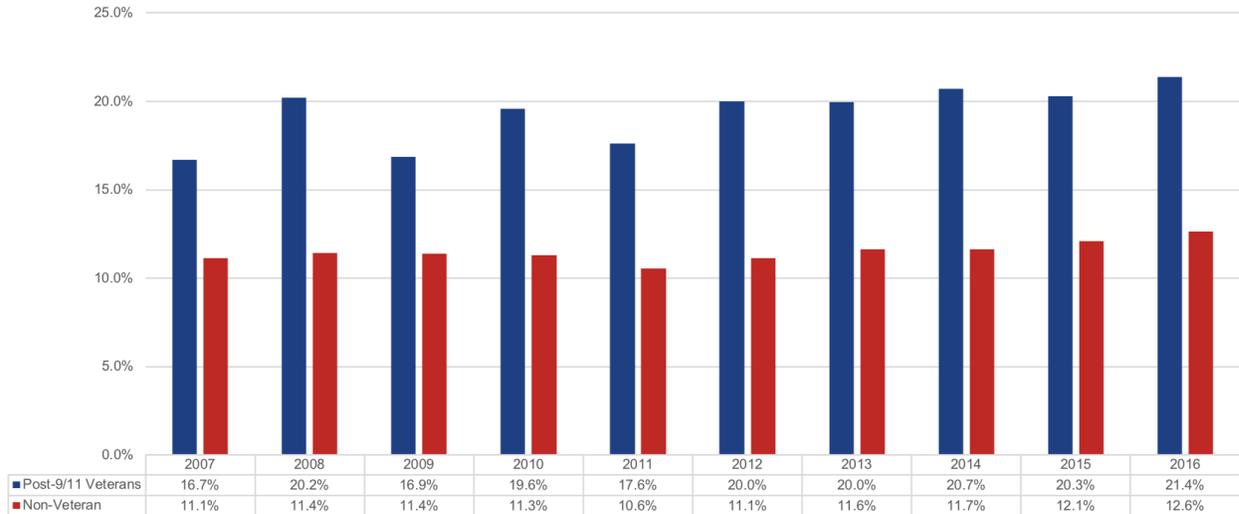


Fig 1. Student Veterans of America. (2017). Analysis of ACS data and NVEST data by Dr. Chris Cate on file with authors.

### Hispanic Women Bachelor Level Degree Attainment

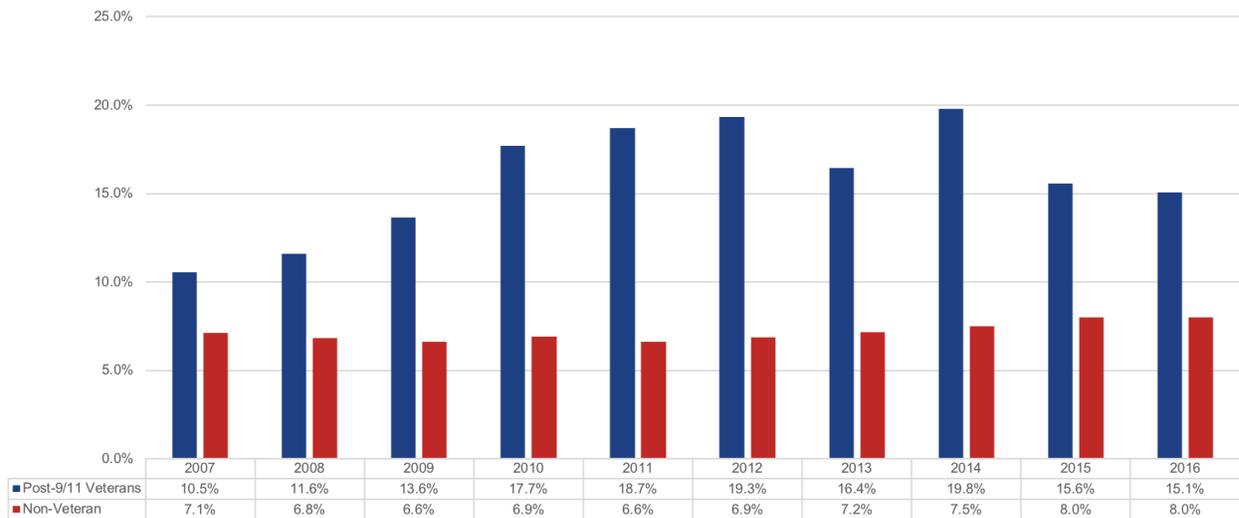


Fig 2. Student Veterans of America. (2017). Analysis of ACS data and NVEST data by Dr. Chris Cate on file with authors.

### White Women Bachelor Level Degree Attainment

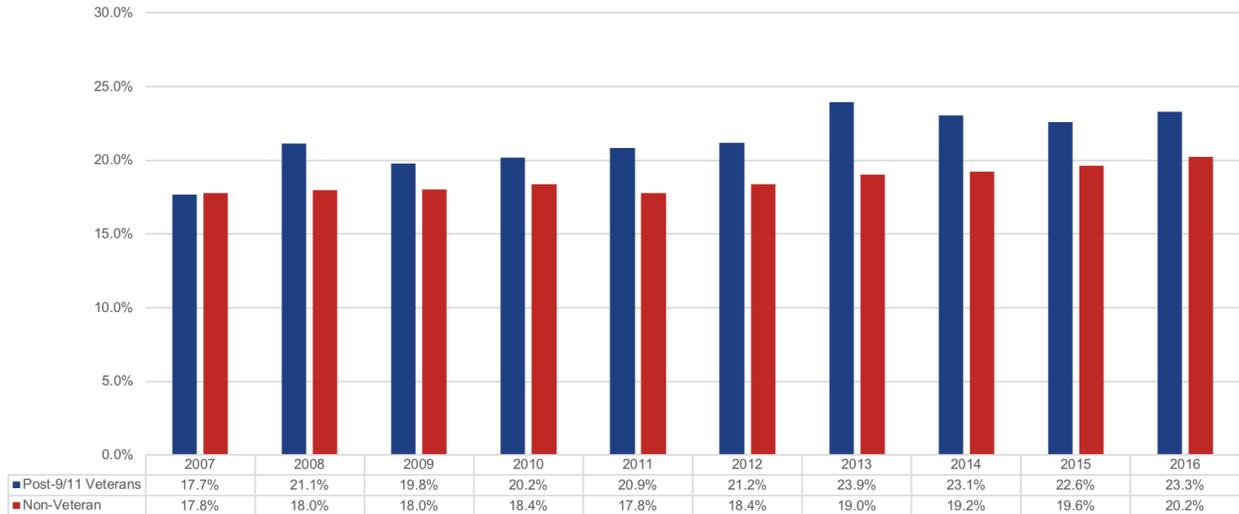


Fig 3. Student Veterans of America. (2017). Analysis of ACS data and NVEST data by Dr. Chris Cate on file with authors.

### Asian Women Bachelor Level Degree Attainment

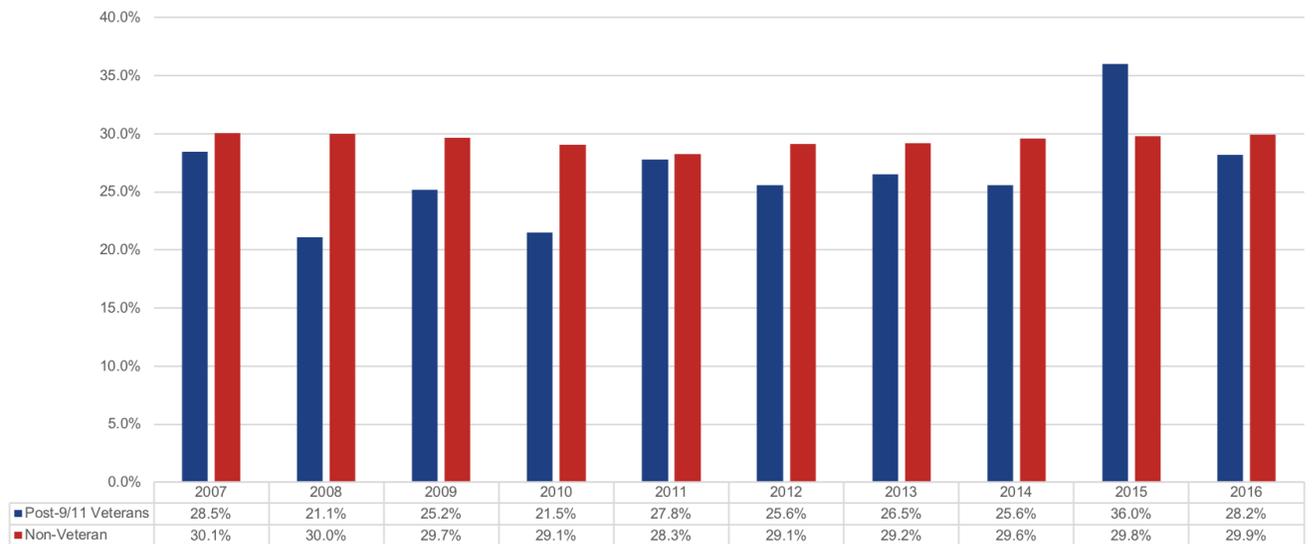


Fig 4. Student Veterans of America. (2017). Analysis of ACS data and NVEST data by Dr. Chris Cate on file with authors.

### Opportunities for Additional Support



While data show the impressive outcomes women veterans achieve while pursuing degrees, there are opportunities to continue supporting the needs of women veterans, both at the federal and institution level, which would better empower women veterans during their educational journey.

### *Assessments for Prior Learning*

Also, to promote efficiency and best account for the experience and training student veterans bring with them, SVA encourages consideration of the best process to award credit for prior learning while maintaining a high-quality degree to continue. Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) can be a tool used to help women student veterans and all nontraditional students maximize their experience and a need to complete a degree efficiently. A study from the Council for Adult & Experimental Learning found that use of PLAs led to greater graduation rates and persistence, and shortened completion time compared to similar students who did not use PLAs.<sup>10</sup>

Many student veterans face challenges using PLAs toward a degree program, with credits often counting as elective credits and not helping to achieve degree completion. It's likely institutions of higher learning struggle with how to adequately account for and assess military training, or that many student veterans are pursuing degrees with little to no relation to their military occupation. Regardless, a deeper study of how PLAs are affecting student veterans, to include women student veterans, and potential missed opportunities to award quality credit for prior learning should be reevaluated. All assessments for prior learning should also be coupled with safeguards preventing fraud, waste, and abuse.

### *Women Veterans in STEM*

Several studies show the propensity for veterans, including women veterans, to pursue degrees and careers in STEM fields. In work by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families funded by Google, 67.40 percent of Army veterans surveyed said they are interested in STEM for educational and career pursuits.<sup>11</sup> This research further indicates that veterans' military experience includes substantive STEM-related work or educational experiences. In the Army alone, 42.58 percent of veterans surveyed say their military occupational specialty (MOS) was STEM-related and 50.42 percent said that their MOS promoted their interest in STEM.<sup>12</sup>

Looking at education pursuits after military service, work funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) at Syracuse University, 64 percent of veterans said they had course work in engineering, science, or technology. In the same study, "[a]bout 40 percent of female service members reported that their military specialization is STEM related."<sup>13</sup> Student Veterans of America's own study with the Department of Veterans Affairs, NVEST, and ACS Census data show student veterans are attaining STEM degrees at high rates compared to their civilian peers.<sup>14</sup> As outlined above, women veterans, specifically, attain degrees at rates higher than their peers who have never served across degree levels.

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<sup>10</sup> The Council for Adult & Experimental Learning. (March 2010). *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524753.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Zoli, C., Maury, R., and Fay, D. (2015, November). *Missing Perspectives: Servicemembers' Transition from Service to Civilian Life—Data-driven Research to Enact the Promise of the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University.

<sup>12</sup> Steinberg, L.J., and Zoli C. (2011, February). *From Battlefield to Classroom: Findings, Barriers, and Pathways to Engineering for U.S. Servicemembers* (NSF Report, Directorate for Engineering/Division of Engineering Education and Centers #0948147). Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> Maury, R.V., Zoli, C., Fay, D., Armstrong, N., Boldon, N.Y., Linsner, R. K., and Cantor, G. (2018, March). *Women in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life*. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University. Available: <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/article/women-military-service-civilian-life-infographic/>

<sup>14</sup> Lofquist, D.A. (2017, August) *Characteristics of Female Veterans—An Analytic Look Across Age Cohorts: 2015*. [American Community Service Briefs ACSBR/15-03]. Available: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2017/acs/acsbr15-03.html>.



Women veterans also work in STEM occupations at twice the rate of non-veteran women.<sup>15</sup> The Institute for Veterans and Military Families reports the top three STEM occupations for women veterans are: Computer & Mathematical; Computer Science & Information Technology; and, Engineering, and the top three industries are Professional, Scientific & Technical Services; Public Administration; and, Manufacturing.

Finally, research funded by the NSF and by Google has shown women veterans may have characteristics, traits, and skills that uniquely prepare them to thrive in STEM and ETEE careers. Related research from the Institute for Veterans and Military Families demonstrates ten characteristics and traits related to military service that should enhance women veteran achievement in STEM, including persistence, resilience, and ability to apply technological skills to career opportunity.<sup>16</sup>

However, structural obstacles common to veterans, women, and non-traditional students in general, may be exacerbated in the case of women veterans when seeking STEM degrees. For example, non-traditional students are more likely to value efficient completion of their degrees.<sup>17</sup> Students who are not pursuing full-time degrees or those who transfer schools are less likely to complete a STEM-related degree in a timely manner, and more likely to switch into other majors.<sup>18</sup>

Classroom cultures, heavy course load, and time-intensive laboratory or group work may be an additional impediment to women veterans, as both women students and non-traditional students often have additional work and family commitments.<sup>19</sup> While NSF-funded research previously cited suggests that some of this may be lessened in the case of women veterans, it is likely that some combination of these factors continues to impact women veterans STEM degree-attainment. Those barriers could be considered when discussion STEM education and opportunities with leaders in higher education and hiring managers.

### *Maintaining Student Protections and Prioritizing Quality*

Key protections and quality measures that best support the success of non-traditional students would also better empower success among women student veterans. Specifically, the Higher Education Act includes several quality assurance principles; most notably, the borrower's defense to repayment (BD), gainful employment (GE), which was recently entirely gutted by the Department of Education, and the higher education triad, meant to serve as gatekeepers to federal student aid.<sup>20</sup> These provisions should create a reasonable safety net that allows students the freedom to choose the institute of higher learning which best meets their needs while simultaneously ensuring taxpayer funds are being used for worthwhile certifications and degrees.

### *Access to Childcare*

<sup>15</sup> Maury, R.V., Zoli, C., Fay, D., Armstrong, N., Boldon, N.Y., Linsner, R. K., and Cantor, G. (2018, March). *Women in the Military: From Service to Civilian Life*. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University. Available: <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/article/women-military-service-civilian-life-infographic/>

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Veterans and Military Families. (2012). *The Business Case for Hiring Veterans: Beyond the Cliches* [March 2012]. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University. Available: <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/article/the-business-case-for-hiring-a-veteran-beyond-the-cliches/>

<sup>17</sup> Grabowski, C. Rush, M., Fayard, V., and Watkins-Lewis, M. (2016). Today's Non-Traditional Student: Challenges to Academic Success and Degree Completion. *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse*, 8(03), 1-2. Available: <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1377>.

<sup>18</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *Barriers and Opportunities for 2-Year and 4-Year STEM Degrees: Systemic Change to Support Students' Diverse Pathways*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Available: <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/21739/barriers-and-opportunities-for-2-year-and-4-year-stem-degree>.

<sup>19</sup> Gayles, J. and Ampaw, F. (2014). The Impact of College Experiences on Degree Completion in STEM Fields at Four-Year Institutions: Does Gender Matter? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 85(4), 439-468.

<sup>20</sup> Mayotte, Betsy. (8 July 2019). What the New Gainful Employment Rule Means for College Students. *U.S. News and World Report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/student-loan-ranger/2015/07/08/what-the-new-gainful-employment-rule-means-for-college-students>



Finally, access to affordable, reliable, and flexible childcare continues to be a top concern among all student veterans, as 46 percent of student veterans have children and over half work full or part-time while in college. Challenges with childcare availability and affordability are not unique to the student veteran and nontraditional student population; depending on location, childcare costs can comprise seven to twelve percent of a family's income or even more for single parents.<sup>21</sup> The need for better access to childcare for student veterans goes beyond the need of care during traditional work hours. Student veterans often need childcare during unique periods of time, such as early morning or late evening class times or during exam study periods.

The federal government has attempted to address the need for affordable childcare on campus through programs such as the Child Care Access Means Parents In Schools (CCAMPIS), but historical challenges with underfunding and available childcare providers limit the scope and effectiveness of CCAMPIS.<sup>22</sup> SVA recommends replicating the pilot program established for childcare at VA medical facilities as a similar pilot program for student veterans -- and continuing the support for increased CCAMPIS funding as done in 2018. We also understand this is an issue that goes beyond access to childcare for any one specific population of veteran and must include a larger conversation around affordable and reliable access to childcare across all populations of our country.

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this committee, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

### **Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2018, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

**Lauren Augustine**  
**Vice President of Government Affairs**

<sup>21</sup> Jaschik, Scott. (February 2018). *Independent Students as the New Majority*. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from: <https://iwpr.org/publications/independent-students-new-college-majority/>.

<sup>22</sup> Kumar, Aakash. (March 2018). *How Unreliable And Costly Childcare Keeps People Off The Job*. Forbes. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/aakashkumar/2018/03/08/how-unreliable-and-costly-childcare-keeps-people-off-the-job/#292a31835e18>.



## **Student Veterans of America**

Lauren Augustine is the Vice President of Government Affairs for Student Veterans of America. In her role, she advocates on behalf of student veterans, their families, and military-connected students to empower them to, through, and beyond higher education.

After graduating from Virginia Tech in 2009, Lauren enlisted in the U.S. Army, quickly rising to the rank of sergeant, and served 12 months in Iraq with the First Infantry Division as an unmanned aircraft systems operator. She has worked as a senior legislative associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a legislative representative for the American Federation of Government Employees, and the director of government relations for Got Your 6. In these positions she advocated on behalf of veterans, their families, and the services and benefits provided by the VA.

In recognition of her advocacy work, Lauren was named a Top Lobbyist by The Hill in 2018, a HillVets Top 100 Veteran in 2015 and 2019, and was awarded the Excellence by An Up and Coming Practitioner award from the Women in Professional Advocacy in 2016. She was also appointed to the Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations for the Commonwealth of Virginia by Governor McAuliffe in 2016. She has also owned a CrossFit gym in Northern Virginia and is now co-owner of Revolutionary Fitness in Old Town Alexandria.