

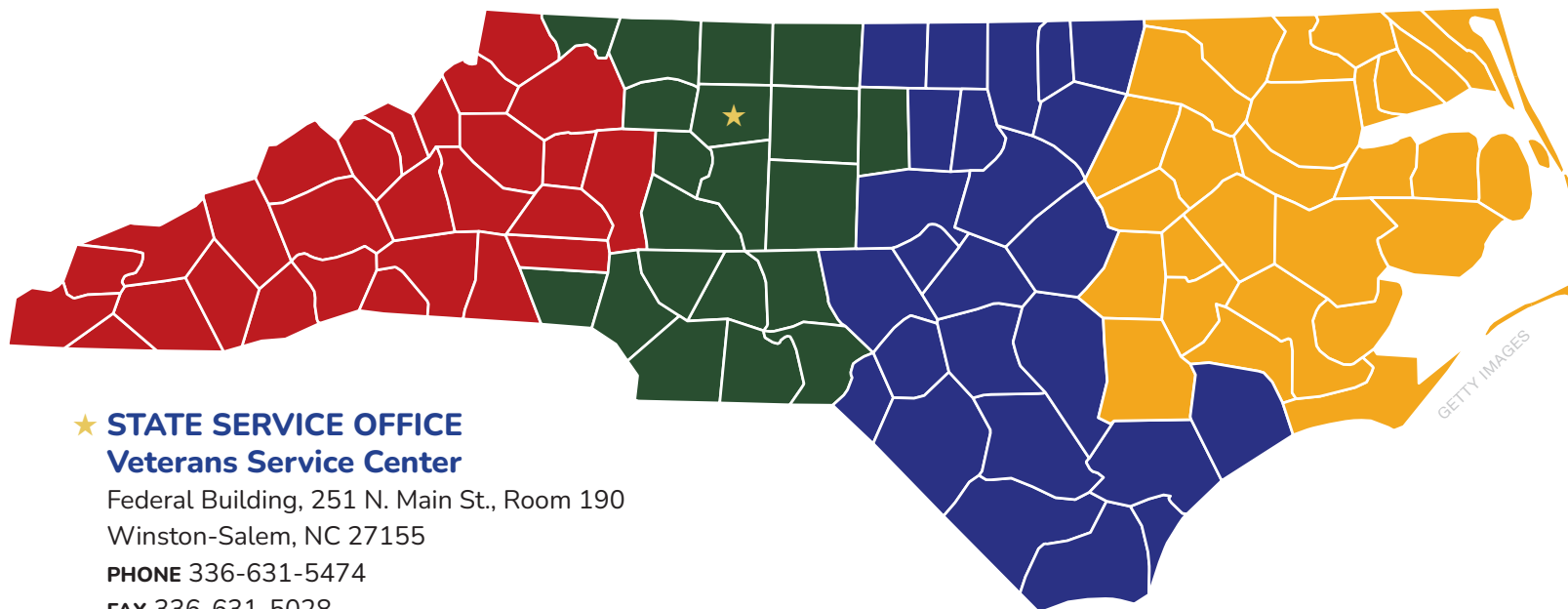
Spring 2026

THE NEXT MISSION:

Our Military-Connected Students
in North Carolina



State Veterans Service Centers



★ **STATE SERVICE OFFICE**
Veterans Service Center

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Winston-Salem, NC 27155
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FAX 336-631-5028

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1985 Tate Blvd SE, Ste 113
Hickory, NC 28602
PHONE 919-664-1040
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CANTON,
120 Main St
Canton, NC 28716
PHONE 919-664-1095
FAX 919-664-1096

MORGANTON,
305 East Union St, Ste A135
Morganton, NC 28655
PHONE 919-664-1055
FAX 919-664-1056

REGION II **(Piedmont)**

CLEMMONS,
3802 Clemmons Road, Ste C
Clemmons, NC 27012
PHONE 919-664-1000
FAX 919-664-1001

CHARLOTTE,
5500 Executive Center Dr,
Ste 132
Charlotte, NC 28212
PHONE 919-664-1080
FAX 919-664-1081

REGION III **(Central)**

GARNER,
Hartwell Plaza
1027 Hwy 70 West, Ste 202
Garner, NC 27529
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FAX 919-664-1161

FAYETTEVILLE,
225 Green St, Ste 903
Fayetteville, NC 28301
PHONE 919-664-1130
FAX 919-664-1131

WILMINGTON,
3205 Randall Parkway,
Ste 102
Wilmington, NC 28403
PHONE 919-664-1065
FAX 919-664-1066

REGION IV **(Coastal)**

ELIZABETH CITY,
1023 US 17 South, Ste 2
Elizabeth City, NC 27909
PHONE 919-664-1150
FAX 919-664-1151

KINSTON,
1136 US Hwy 258 N, Ste 101
Kinston, NC 28504
PHONE 919-664-1030
FAX 919-664-1031

GREENVILLE,
3740 S. Evans St, Ste A
Greenville, NC 27834
PHONE 919-664-1015
FAX 919-664-1016

WILSON,
1901 Tarboro St SW, Ste 202
Wilson, NC 27893
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UNDERSTANDING THE MILITARY-AFFILIATED STUDENT

Whether the student is a veteran, active-duty service member, military spouse or child, they enter the academic setting with a different lived experience and a wider worldview than the typical high school graduate coming into a freshmen class.

Developing an understanding of the military-affiliated student population is important not only for the students, the faculty and the advisors working with them, but also for the businesses that will look to employ them.

As of fall 2025, more than 23,000 students who identified as military-affiliated were enrolled across the University of North Carolina System. More notably for the business world, it's a cohort of students whose educational goals align almost perfectly with the workforce that North Carolina most needs to replenish.

Among service members who are looking to transition from military to academia within a few years, just ask what they plan to study and you'll likely hear one of four answers: STEM, health sciences, business or education.

Ask North Carolina's employers what fields are critically short on talent, and you'll hear the same four answers.

"We have a teacher shortage. We have a nursing shortage. We need supply chain logistics folks, business owners, health science folks," noted Bradley Wrenn, Program Manager for Military and Military-affiliated Student Success in the UNC System Office. "When you compare the majors that are most popular among service members with the critical workforce needs in North Carolina — they track almost identically."

This isn't a coincidence. Military training is structured around the kinds of problem-solving, teamwork and technical proficiency that fuel those industries.

Wrenn, who spent six years in the North Carolina Air National Guard, says one of the challenges with getting prior service members into the workforce is that employers don't understand how a resume with strictly military experience pertains to their field.

"We work with those employers to help demystify, sort of standardize and normalize,

what that experience looks like, and we work with the students to make sure their CVs and resumes accurately reflect the types of job duties that they did when they were in the service," Wrenn said.

"These are folks who are high speed. They perform on par with their civilian counterparts in terms of retention, persistence and graduation — and they typically graduate with lower debt than their civilian counterparts because of programs like the GI Bill."

That suggests military-affiliated students are not only academically competitive but that they are also financially resilient.

"It serves our business interests as a state to get these folks into our schools and successfully through to graduation — and then to incentivize them to stay in North Carolina and join our workforce. We see it as not only the right thing to do, but as a good business case for North Carolina," Wrenn said.

Most of the students he sees enrolling in the UNC System are military spouses and dependents, many of whom are relying on financial benefits from the GI Bill to help cover the cost of their education. The Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance benefit, Chapter 35 of the GI Bill, is the one Wrenn sees used most consistently by military-affiliated students. In the current academic year, 2025-2026, the Chapter 35 monthly benefit for a student enrolled full-time is \$1,574, and that applies equally for universities, colleges, trade or vocational schools.

From the mountains to the coast, schools in the UNC System are stepping up to meet the challenges of military-affiliated students.

Dependents: Coping with Current Events

Western Carolina University isn't near a military base so the largest military-affiliated population in its student body are dependents of veterans and service members. "They're your traditional college-age, straight-from-high-school

students, but their background is different because their parent was or is in the military," said Briana Ford, Director for Military Student Services at WCU. "A lot of them have moved around and many have parents who are actively serving, so our faculty needs to keep in mind their parent may be deployed. If you're talking about current events and that student seems to shut down, it could be because their parent is involved in the conflict you're talking about."

She reminds the faculty that, in addition to coping with those kinds of stresses, students who are dependents of active-duty service members may have more responsibilities at home, like helping to care for younger siblings.

WCU has roughly 1,000 military-affiliated students enrolled, and Ford estimates roughly 65 percent are dependents, 25 percent are in the National Guard or Reserves, and the remainder are veterans or active-duty service members who are taking classes online. The average age of students who are veterans is about 28, and for the National Guard students it's around 22.

If students in the National Guard are called up to serve, Western Carolina "doesn't have an official policy that says faculty has to excuse them from class, but we strongly encourage them to do so," said Ford, recounting the story from a few years ago when National Guard students were sent to Wilmington for a week to help recover from a hurricane and soon after returning from that trip they had to leave again.

"They got called up for the riots in Charlotte, so they had to miss class again. All but one of those National Guard students were able to keep up with their assignments — one student just got behind and couldn't catch up. The professors worked with their students, so they were able to complete the semester. I was very proud of both our students for being able to handle all that responsibility and our

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faculty for being able to work with them.”

About 10 years ago Ford began doing Green Zone Training to help educate faculty about the nuances and needs of military-affiliated students. Although she has not personally served, Ford explained: “I’ve been around the military my whole life; I’ve been a dependent, a spouse and a parent.” Her father was in the Army, her former husband was a Marine, and her son served 10 years in the Air Force. To bring an added layer of authenticity to the Green Zone sessions, she found that what has worked best is to include faculty and staff who do have military experience in the presentations.

“A lot of faculty don’t know anything about the military so we start very basic with the six branches of the military, common terms used and things they need to know about military culture,” Ford said, adding they keep it very conversational, with much of the dialogue happening at small tables of five to six people who are seated with a military-affiliated student.

Answering Every Need

Across the state, Bill Kawczynski, Director of Military Affairs at UNC Wilmington comes from a military family — his father served in the Korean War and both Kawczynski and his younger brother served in the Marine Corps. Now his academic family includes roughly 2,200 military-affiliated students at UNC Wilmington.

“Our role is to help our students understand all the different resources and services that are available to help them be successful and get through higher ed without many hiccups,” Kawczynski said.

The first barrier he sees with virtually every student is that they don’t know what they don’t know. His rhetorical ask: “If you don’t know the resources exist, how can you go seek them out?”

Challenges among the military-affiliated students are layered, complex and intensely individualized. It could be a single veteran transitioning into a new college town where they know no one; it could be a veteran with a spouse and children at home. Even in the best of circumstances, they typically enter academia with some degree of anxiety and apprehension.

“In the military, you’re keenly aware of your

daily routines, you know where to go for everything you might need. When you come into higher ed, it’s almost the exact opposite of what you just came from,” he said. “Maybe it’s been years since you had any classes, so you’re afraid you won’t be as successful as the 18-year-old kid beside you. Maybe you’re stressing that there isn’t going to be enough money for your family to live on while you’re in school.”

Students transitioning out of military service are often completely unaware of the multiple avenues they might pursue for financial support. “If they have a disability rating, they could apply for VR&E benefits [the Veterans Readiness and Employment benefit] and bank their GI Bill, or they can apply for financial aid and scholarships. That’s a separate pot of money that is available to students and if it’s grant-based or scholarship-based, they don’t have to pay it back,” Kawczynski said. “But each year they need to go back and reapply because financial situations change from when they were on active duty, making one amount of money, to the next year when they’re a college student, probably with less income.”

The plethora of resources on campuses that can help veterans navigate higher ed are important to check out, including the Disability Resource Center. “If they do have a disability rating, we have things in place to help them with whatever accommodations they may need,” he said.

But again, it’s not knowing what they need or what exists to help them that creates the biggest barriers to success.

“The number one disability for somebody that served is hearing loss, but most folks won’t go see someone for a hearing problem because they don’t want to wear hearing aids,” Kawczynski said.

It’s further compounded by the knee-jerk reaction of most service members: What most military people do is sit in the back of the room with their back against the wall. “It’s how they’re trained,” he added. A student with a hearing impairment who’s sitting at the back of a lecture hall is going to miss at least some of the lesson. “There are tools available, resources available, to help with those accommodations,” Kawczynski said.

It’s all the small details, the events service members experienced without flinching but that left them with unique challenges, that deserve to be addressed.

“Maybe they were exposed to artillery fire or explosions, had their bell rung, so to speak, and suffered a concussive event or mild traumatic brain injury. One of the things that affects individuals with those conditions are fluorescent lights — and in schools, mostly you have fluorescent lights,” he said.

Those can be easy fixes. Maybe the student is directed to spaces with natural light, areas that would reduce the likelihood of a headache or another symptom to surface. Or they can utilize small testing rooms with soft light where the door will be closed and it’s only the student in the space. If there are concentration issues, they can be allowed extra time for testing. Any accommodations are kept confidential and private, Kawczynski stressed, with the objective being simply to help each student succeed.

The State Steps Up Support

“Another thing worth mentioning is that we have a very military- and veteran-friendly legislature in North Carolina,” said Wrenn, pointing to recent legislation that was passed to better support the SMVF community.

“For folks who are on active duty, or in the Guard and Reserves, they get DOD tuition assistance, but it was capped at \$250 per credit hour so students would have to come up with the difference,” Wrenn said. “The passage of HB 373 allows schools to offer a differentiated tuition rate to folks on active duty so they can stay under the \$250-per-credit-hour cap.”

Senate Bill 118 offers in-state tuition to any student who is a veteran and “either graduated from high school in North Carolina on or after 2004, served more than 90 days consecutively at a North Carolina military installation, or received a Purple Heart,” Wrenn explained. “If they meet just one of those criteria, they get in-state tuition no matter where they live. They can attend one of our online programs and use the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which pays for full tuition and fees for an in-state student.”

Another policy allows that any student deemed in-state for tuition purposes is also considered in-state for admissions purposes.

Wrenn also highlights Project Kitty Hawk, a nonprofit that works with UNC System universities, as another opportunity for SMVF students. Project Kitty Hawk and its university partners develop “Flight Path” degree programs that are designed to support adult learners. ■

AFFORDABLE EDUCATION EXISTS

In the heart of military country, Fayetteville State University makes education 100% accessible for the SMVF community.

Nothing against small towns, but at age 14 Jacob Windstein knew he wanted a different life, and the best exit ramp from a landlocked rural setting with limited opportunities was joining the military. More importantly, military service was also the best runway to set him up to earn a college degree.

From Kuwait to Carolina

“My parents are missionaries and we lived in Romania for a while and then moved to Arkansas to live with my aunt, who served in Desert Storm. I grew up admiring her and the stories she told about being a Major in the Air Force. And the other thing I really liked was going to air shows in Texas with my dad,” Windstein recalled.

It was inevitable: March 2011 he joined the Air Force and never looked back. From basic training at Lackland Air Force Base he went to Edwards Air Force Base for his first duty station. “I was there for my entire enlistment, but I had the opportunity to deploy twice, first to Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, and the second time to the Kuwait International Airport (KWI). We provided security and defense for the planes that were landing and coming in and out of Afghanistan and Iraq. Both times were part of the global war on terrorism,” he said.

His enlistment entailed six years of active duty followed by two years in the inactive reserves. When he transitioned out, he followed his brother, who had left military service after 10 years in the Army but stayed in Fayetteville near Fort Bragg. That’s where Windstein and his wife landed.

“We’ve been here since 2017, love the area and all that it has to offer, I can be at the beach, in the mountains, in Charlotte or Raleigh – all pretty quick,” he said.

It was perfect in so many respects — except that Windstein, with six years of military service that had included significant levels of responsibility and leadership, found himself with limited work options, none that compared to what he had done in the Air Force.

First there was a job as a transportation and supply coordinator at an assisted living facility, then he went to work at Sam’s Club.

“During that time, I was also going to Fayetteville Technical Community College,” he said. But he didn’t have a plan. School was a sporadic commitment, until at some point he remembered why he’d joined the military. “It was for my education, so I went back to Fayetteville Tech to see what I needed to do to finish my degree. And the funny thing is, I had already finished. I had just never applied for graduation,” Windstein said.

He graduated Fayetteville Tech with not one but two degrees: an Associates of Science degree and an associate’s degree in general education.

The two degrees didn’t immediately lead to more career opportunities, but the experience did help to point him toward Fayetteville State University. And perhaps the most valuable lesson learned from his experience floating in and out of community college was how invaluable academic guidance could be.

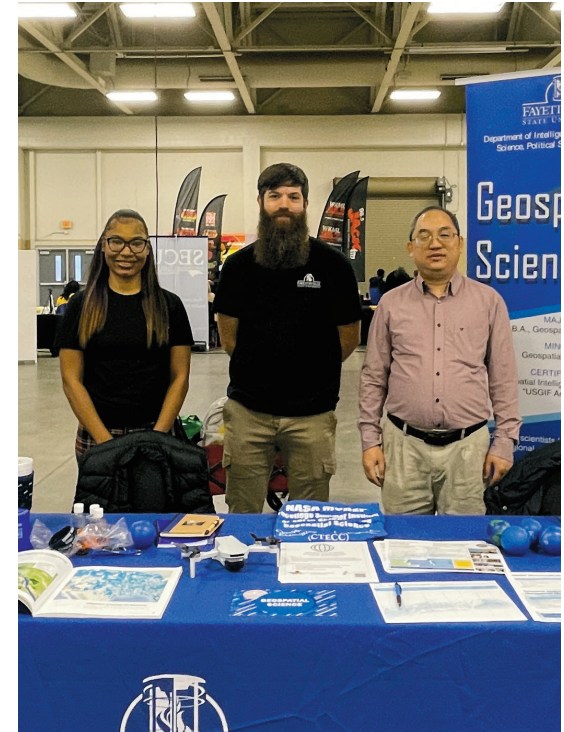
That’s what he got in the next chapter of his educational pursuit of a career path, when he met Dr. Cierra Griffin, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at Fayetteville State University.

Support for SMVF Students

Griffin and Windstein share the common bond of having served in the Air Force. She had joined the U.S. Air Force Reserve in 2006, and when that contract ended she joined the North Carolina Army National Guard.

“I had always been what we call a weekend warrior,” Griffin says. “When I first joined the Air Force Reserve, I was a student. And then when I graduated, I was still in the Reserve and I was working in higher ed.” That dual identity — educator and service member — shaped her understanding of how to best support the SMVF community.

At Fayetteville State University, Griffin has channeled her lived experience into one of



Jacob Windstein, Air Force veteran (center), is finishing a bachelor’s degree in Geospatial Science with a minor in Intelligence Studies.

the most comprehensive support systems for military-affiliated students in the University of North Carolina system. Fully a third of the school’s Fall 2025 enrollment were military-affiliated students, and those 2,526 military-affiliated students represented a 12.4 percent increase over Fall semester in 2024.

For the SMVF community, one of the most popular financial incentives at Fayetteville State University is the military tuition scholarship. “People think that it’s only for the service member,” Griffin said, “but it’s actually the military dependents, the children and the spouses who benefit from it most.” The scholarship covers the cost of tuition, which ranges from \$500 per semester for in-state students to \$2,500 for those classified as out-of-state. Recipients still pay fees and housing, but the tuition itself — the cost of the classes — is covered.

The in-state versus out-of-state question is one Griffin gets often, and the rules involve some nuance. Service members stationed in North Carolina are typically considered in-state residents. For family members using a VA education benefit, FSU can classify them as in-state upon confirmation of their certificate of eligibility.

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The university also offers meaningful perks that signal genuine commitment: waived application fees for service members and veterans, priority course registration and military-specific new student orientations designed for people whose life experience looks nothing like an 18-year-old's fresh out of high school.

Beyond the main campus, FSU maintains a dedicated team housed directly on Fort Bragg. That office handles everything the main campus does — recruitment, admissions, transcript evaluation, registration — and it also offers in-person classes taught by FSU professors on post.

For many veterans and service members, the GI Bill — specifically Chapter 33, the Post-9/11 GI Bill — is the cornerstone of their financial plan for school. At FSU, Griffin's office helps students understand how to maximize the GI Bill, which covers tuition and fees, books and a monthly housing stipend. But one of Griffin's most consistent recommendations is counterintuitive: Don't rush to use your GI Bill.

"Your VA benefit can be used on upper-level degrees," she explained. "So let's say you have a plan to get the bachelor's degree and a master's — I often encourage service members, save your VA benefit for the master's."

That was among the advice that helped Windstein, who anticipates pursuing a master's degree after he completes his last undergraduate semester in May with a bachelor's degree in Geospatial Science and a minor in Intelligence Studies. He's been utilizing the VA's Chapter 31, Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefit to pay for FSU.

The VRE benefit helps veterans find a job when they have a service-connected disability that limits their ability to work, and the benefit also includes supporting the training or education needed for employment. Specifically, the VR&E benefit will cover 100 percent of costs for tuition, fees and books for up to 48 months. Before going to work at Sam's Club, Windstein was enrolled in Chapter 31, but he was doing it for the job placement assistance not for school. To pay for his classes at Fayetteville Tech, he used the GI Bill.

"The VR&E program is almost like using your GI Bill," Windstein said. "The difference is that you can't just take classes all willy nilly. You have to research the career field you're going

into and show that the classes you are taking are necessary to accomplish your major and then get all the classes approved by your [Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor]."

Now he's working with his VRC advisor and FSU advisors to provide a transcript of the classes he took at Fayetteville Tech and determine if they apply to his current major at FSU. All of the community college credits had transferred to FSU.

"What they're going to try to do is refund that time back to my GI Bill so I can use it later, like for my master's degree," Windstein said. Basically, it would mean VR&E covering all the classes relative to his undergraduate degree. "Instead of having 17 months left in my GI bill, I might have the whole 36 months again. There's not a guarantee that I'll get all my time back, but getting some of the time would help."

Additional Resources

Another widespread misconception Griffin regularly addresses is the belief that using a VA benefit means a student can't also apply for financial aid. "But you can. If you qualify for financial aid, that's a completely different pot of money," Griffin said.

At FSU, where in-state tuition and fees run just under \$2,500 per semester, a student who qualifies for the federal Pell Grant may find that grant alone, which has a maximum annual award of \$7,395 for the year ending June 30, 2026, may cover their entire undergraduate education. And it's a grant not a loan. "So, you don't pay that back," Griffin emphasized.

But she remains a huge fan of the VR&E benefit, saying: "It pays for everything for the service member; it will even get them a new computer. And if the university has a health fee or something like that, they can utilize their VR&E benefit to cover that fee."

For active-duty service members, there's also the option to access the tuition-assistance benefit. "The TA benefit only pays for the cost of tuition; it doesn't cover the cost of student fees and FSU still has \$1,200 in fees that students have to consider. That's where financial aid comes in," Griffin said.

Regardless of the financial challenges or the benefits being discussed, what Griffin has found is that culture and personal relevance is key. "I developed a culture on this campus with our military folks so they can reach out to me in my office anytime, and they tend to keep in touch even after they graduate."

It's also important to have veterans sitting in the advisory roles, people who can relate to how overwhelming it is to transition from military service to civilian life and campus dynamics.

"Sitting down with the students works best, so we do a monthly benefits briefing because we found that many of the service members knew they wanted to go to school, but they didn't remember that they had different options to help them fund their education. ... What doesn't work is assuming that they know. It is no benefit to that student and it's no benefit to the university," she said.

Windstein echoes the sentiment that personal support carries considerable weight.

"Dr. Griffin laughs when I tell her she's my mentor, but she is and there are many people on campus that really show up and make a difference in your path and where you're going," he said. "Dr. Trung Tran, a professor in geospatial sciences, is another one of my mentors."

During his time at FSU, Windstein had an opportunity to pursue a range of experiential learning opportunities. Although he had secured an internship with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the offer was rescinded after federal funding was cut. His professor then connected him with NASA-funded research so Windstein could assist with disaster mapping of western North Carolina in the wake of Hurricane Helene. That research opened the door to several conference opportunities, including the North Carolina Geospatial Conference in Winston-Salem, and, most notably, he was selected to present his poster at the USGIF (United States Geospatial Intelligence Foundation) Annual Conference in St. Louis. All expenses were covered, giving him a fully funded professional conference experience.

Building on that momentum, he secured an additional internship through an HBCU Geo Immersion Program run alongside the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). Working with two partners, he analyzed trade data — specifically the imports and exports of Tanzania — and presented the findings at a conference hosted at Columbia University, for which he was compensated \$3,000 over 30 days. These layered internship and conference experiences reflect both the opportunities FSU made available and Windstein's initiative in pursuing them. ■

BRIDGING TRANSITIONS

LEARNING IN BEFORE DAY ONE

Helping service members understand the transition into higher ed begins with dispelling myths and helping guide them to their best school.

Bridging the chasm between military service and academia is something Nick Drake understands — it's what he does personally and professionally. For more than two decades he's served, and continues to serve, in the North Carolina National Guard, even as he also leads the Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services Office at North Carolina State University. Drake has been the Director of that department since its inception 10 years ago.

Across his time in the National Guard, he's deployed three times. In 2007 and 2008 he was part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. More recently, he deployed to the Middle East as part of Operation Spartan Shield and Operation Inherent Resolve. Each time, a temporary coordinator stepped into the NCSU position and kept things running on track.

Currently the Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services office is providing resources and support for more than 3,000 military-connected students. A little more than half, roughly 1,700 of the SMVF students are spouses or the children of service members or veterans, 330 are in the ROTC program and an estimated 950 are veterans.

Included under that veteran umbrella are active-duty service members, National Guard and Reservists as well as those who have transitioned out of service, either because they retired or their contract was fulfilled.

"Veterans in general are uniquely nontraditional students," Drake said. "They tend to be much older, our average age among veterans is 33. Many of them are married, have children and have mortgages."

His belief is that the support they provide to the veteran community needs to start well before they arrive at NC State.

"We try to lean forward on this, get out in the military installations and also work with the community colleges to help students before they make the transition because we do see a lot of challenges," said Drake. "We'd love to have them at NC State, but being a veteran first, we want to make sure they get to the

right school, so we have honest conversations about what competitive applicants look like."

He warns against misinformation that veterans may unwittingly follow, like the confusion around a joint service transcript, "the idea that any school is going to accept what you did in the military for college credit — that's not necessarily true. Or the suggestion that you should start at the most convenient college because all the credits will transfer. Again, not always true," he said. "Our service members aren't necessarily receiving incorrect information maliciously there's just a lot of misinformation that goes around. And unfortunately, a lot of students don't get in the right pipeline, so they end up wasting their benefits on courses that don't serve them well or that are not transferable to a four-year school. We try to get ahead of that stuff as much as possible and help coach them."

The biggest challenges veterans face have nothing to do with their ability or capability. Instead, they center around the culture shock associated with transitioning from a structured environment with clearly defined parameters into a setting where expectations and requirements may be vaguely outlined.

"For service members, it starts with not knowing exactly what the entry point looks like because they're coming from an environment where they've been given a right and left limit — not necessarily told how to do things but certainly given the tools to do whatever is required," Drake said. "Coming into the civilian world and higher ed, it can be difficult to understand how to start. Are they coming as a first-year student or a transfer student? If they're a transfer student, what do the competitive requirements look like?"

Job one is to help the student get in the door, then the work begins to help them adapt, understand all the programmatic details and build a campus community where they can be comfortable and thrive.

"The research shows — and we've seen it from our own practice — that [a sense of] belonging is central to the student's success here," Drake



Nick Drake leads the Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services Office at N.C. State University.

said. "Our retention strategy is to get them connected. If it's through programs in this office then great, but we understand that with 3,000 students it's probably not likely everyone will find a touchpoint within our programs."

What it ultimately comes down to is for students to embrace the cohort that they are part of — even when there are significant differences in ages and life experiences, there are likely common objectives in what they are envisioning for their futures.

"There's an opportunity while they're in college to take advantage of everything that the tuition and fees include. They should get involved through student organizations, through their specific college, through clubs," Drake advised. "The colleges here at NC State do a great job in terms of connecting students that have similar interests, and there are internships and job opportunities to consider. Our office houses 10 VA work-study students who are utilizing the GI Bill and helping us with day-to-day tasks, connection with students and general questions."

A bigger challenge may be how to ask questions about all the subtle nuances. As Drake pointed out, the "well-intentioned folks that are creating policies and processes at universities are not thinking of the diverse student body." ■

BRIDGING TRANSITIONS

ELIMINATING OBSTACLES

From certifying VA benefits to networking with employers, UNC Charlotte solves problems that arise to ensure SMVF students transition easily.

During the Green Zone training for faculty and staff at University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Chris Brasel typically tells his own transition story. He does this because his was one of the more atypical transitions.

Now, as Director of Military and Veteran Services, part of Brasel's job is to help folks at the school understand that every veteran transitioning into their campus comes with unique circumstances.

"There are a lot of different ways you can get out of the military — voluntary, involuntary, all kinds of transitions. In my case, it was both voluntary and involuntary," said Brasel, who had served for four years in the Navy and, with a newborn at home, he was ready to opt out. "The military was overmanned at that time, and I thought they'd let you out if you were going to school or had a job lined up. I dropped an early-out package with about a year left on my contract."

Months later, he was still on active duty with no response to his request. In December, just four months left on his five-year contract with the Navy, he got the call that he was getting out. Great news, except it was effective that day.

"I had no transition out of the military. I went to work in uniform that morning but at 5 p.m. I became a civilian," he said. "I didn't have a plan. My wife was unemployed because we just had our kid, and like boom, no income."

They were stationed in Virginia but had contemplated moving to Charlotte, which they'd driven through on their way home to Atlanta, but that was the extent of their connection.

His wife headed to Charlotte with a stack of resumes and Brasel stayed home with their eight-month-old daughter.

Eventually his wife landed a job with the Red Cross so they could afford to find a place to live in the Queen City.

"It was a terrible transition, but I'm not saying it was malicious on anybody's part. It's just the systems are the way they are and sometimes



Chris Brasel, Director of Military and Veteran Services at UNC-Charlotte (far right), at Quilts of Valor ceremony.

people fall through the cracks," said Brasel, whose saving grace was knowing he was eligible for the post-9/11 GI Bill. "With that, I knew I'd have some kind of money coming in, so I went to the biggest school in the area, UNC Charlotte, and said: 'I don't know what to do; I haven't applied, but I need to start school.'"

That was 16 years ago, and the people in that Veterans Services Office took care of him. He became a student, worked on campus and then got an admin job in that same office. His responsibilities grew and he continued to work in the Veterans Service Office for five years after graduating, leaving briefly for a job with a nonprofit but returning when the position came open for director.

As Director, he renamed the office to Military and Veteran Services, in part because military-affiliated students are roughly 55 percent of the SMVF student population and veterans are 45 percent. Overall, the number of SMVF students has grown from 799 when he started school in 2017 to 1,642 at the Fall 2025 enrollment.

He credits the increase to proactive and intentional recruitment. "We provide a car to the director of our outreach program, and she drives from base to base, goes to education fairs and career fairs, visits National Guard units and high schools," Brasel said. "She's out there spreading the word, showing how we're supporting these students and what the financial impact is."

The core function of their office is to certify VA benefits for their students. But they also do holistic wraparound services for students. The university's clinical and psychological services group conducts monthly workshops at the Military and Veteran Services office, and MVS offers academic advising and free tutoring services from other veterans.

"Once students reach their junior or senior year, we start getting them connected to employers and we work to facilitate [career] handoffs," he added.

After his own experiences, Brasel is committed to helping people who may be falling through the cracks, like the young woman transitioning into school who showed up four days before classes started. She was essentially homeless until the semester started and the dorms would open. Her plan was to sleep outside with all her belongings stacked alongside.

"The campus police found her and looped me in. They were not arresting her, but they could not let her sleep outside. University systems couldn't help her because she was not actually a student until her student ID was activated," Brasel said.

His solution was to ask the social worker at Veterans Bridge Home if they could cover four days of hotel for the student. "Thirty minutes later I had a check, and I took her to a motel where she could stay until classes started and she moved into the dorm." ■

BRIDGING TRANSITIONS

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

Former Marine Brian Pezzulo has transitioned military leadership skills into academic success and executive management.

“The military gave me a strong foundation in leadership under pressure, accountability and mission focus, but translating that experience into academia and then into a corporate career was not intuitive,” said Brian Pezzulo, who served eight years in the U.S. Marine Corps and is now Manager of Strategy and Analytics at Deloitte Consulting.

During his military service, he carried significant responsibilities: “I led Marines in high-risk environments, managed cross-border logistics in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and supported diplomatic missions overseas.”

When he transitioned into private industry and a job in operations and logistics, he discovered “a gap” between the leadership skills developed in service and those required in the business environment. “Concepts like financial analysis, market dynamics, organizational design, and long-term strategy were assumed knowledge in business—but they were not explicitly taught in the military,” he said.

That’s when his academic journey began, starting with community college, then an accounting degree followed by an MBA, both earned at N.C. State. “I didn’t pursue education to leave leadership behind, but to complement it,” Pezzulo said. “Academia gave me the language, frameworks and analytical tools to translate military leadership into business impact. It helped me understand why decisions work in certain systems, not just how to execute them.”

At Deloitte, his role leading complex federal health and analytics engagements is a natural fit, although he readily acknowledges learning to lead outside the military hierarchy is a continual process. But in many ways, Pezzulo said, “Consulting has felt like a bridge between the military and the private sector — it values teamwork, decision-making under uncertainty and responsibility for outcomes.”

While still living and working in Raleigh, he is currently pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration at the University of Florida.



Taking a break from Deloitte Consulting and DBA studies, Brian Pezzulo relaxes with his three daughters.

“The DBA is focused on people-first leadership in the age of AI; it represents a professional identity anchor rather than a career pivot and will allow me to integrate my lived experience with research, teaching and [helping] to develop those transitioning from structured institutions like the military into fluid, civilian environments,” he said.

His advice to veterans and the military-affiliated community is to learn to tell their

story in the language of the environment they’re entering and approach their education “as a sandbox where they can experiment, build confidence, and form relationships.”

As for moving into a civilian career, he emphasized the importance of aligning with an organization that “values character, adaptability, and learning, not just technical skill. The right fit matters more than the fastest transition.” ■

GETTING SCHOOLED ON FINANCIAL AID

Military-affiliated students and veterans find a wealth of support in the Registrar's Office at UNC Chapel Hill.

One of the leading authorities on how veterans can pay for their education didn't serve in the military herself, but Velma Smith, Compliance Specialist, Office of the University Registrar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, spends her days helping service members, veterans and their family members navigate the intricacies of VA education benefits. At UNC-Chapel Hill, 900 military-affiliated students are currently enrolled — and that doesn't begin to count the SMVF inquiries and hopeful applicants whom she helps understand the processes. Smith joined us for a conversation about the basics of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (PGIB), also known as Chapter 33, as well as other financial aids potentially available to veterans and military-affiliated students that will help pay for school or cover expenses during job training.

Where does a service member begin if they want to access their education benefits?

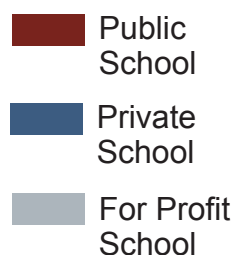
The first step for an active-duty person wanting to use their GI Bill benefits is to apply for their certificate of eligibility. And that's true for dependents and spouses as well. The certificate of eligibility (COE) confirms they have that benefit to use at an institution of their choice, and it also tells them the amount of their benefits and their benefit level.

The GI Bill is based on years of service so usually if someone applies for their COE while on active duty they may only be approved for a percentage of benefits because it's based on the number of years they've served. But as they continue to earn years of service, that benefit level can increase.

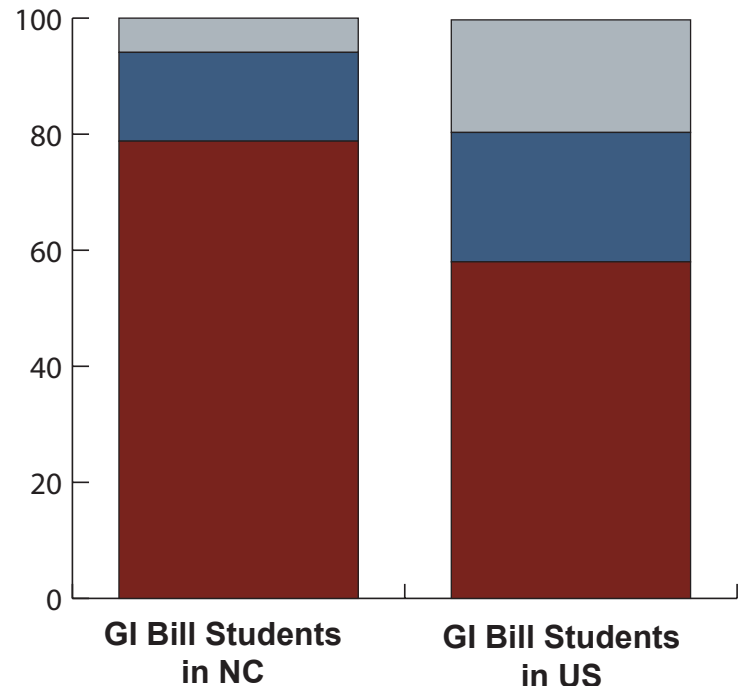
When do you recommend service members start the process of filing for their COE and applying to schools?

They should apply for their COE as soon as they know they will be transitioning out of the military and that they want to go to college. It can always be updated, but you want to get the process started early because it does take a while for them to receive the COE. The VA will always say it takes 30 days, but I've noticed it's been

NC Veteran Insights



Source: "North Carolina Veterans Insights Report," North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs



taking just a little bit longer than 30 days.

Do most veterans and service members qualify for the GI Bill?

As long as the veteran has been honorably discharged and not dishonorably discharged, most of them do get their GI Bill benefit.

There's another program, the Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E), that is for veterans and service members with a service-connected disability to address their education and training needs. VR&E, also known as Chapter 31, is separate from the GI Bill. You could have a GI Bill benefit and a VR&E benefit, but you can only use one of those benefits at a time.

Is there a general dollar amount that goes with the GI Bill?

It all depends on the student's benefit level. If the beneficiary has a 100-percent level, tuition and fees will be paid at 100 percent. If it's an 80 percent or 60 percent level, then that is the share of their tuition and fees that will be covered. They will get that amount



Velma Smith, Compliance Specialist, assists SMVF students at UNC-Chapel Hill.

of their tuition and fees paid regardless of where they're going to school, as long as it's an approved institution. All 16 of the UNC schools are eligible.

Can a veteran and their spouse or child use the GI Bill simultaneously, or can only

one person use it at a time?

Multiple people can use the same GI Bill at the same time. But they must make sure that they're managing the usage of it. Let's say two dependents have 18 months of GI Bill. With the Post-9/11 GI bill, the VA will give one dependent a certificate of eligibility with 18 months and the other dependent another certificate of eligibility with 18 months. If a parent and child are using it, they will have two different COEs, so each person could have 18 months. The maximum allowed is 36 months.

When do people begin talking with you?

All throughout the process they are reaching out to me about their benefits. Whether they're applying, have just been accepted or are just thinking about coming here, they want to know what the process is and what the benefits look like. They reach out to me at all stages because they're excited and want to keep understanding how to use the benefits.

Do they pay a fee to apply to UNC Chapel Hill?

Veterans do not, but their dependents and spouses do pay the application fee.

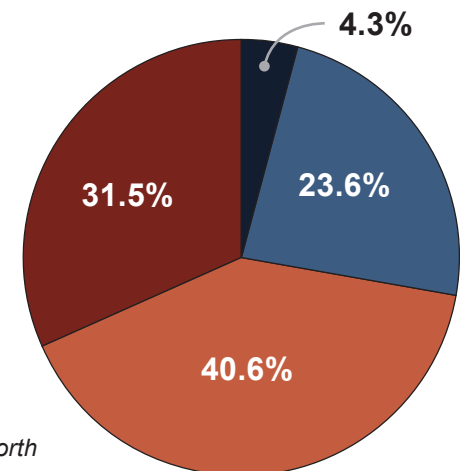
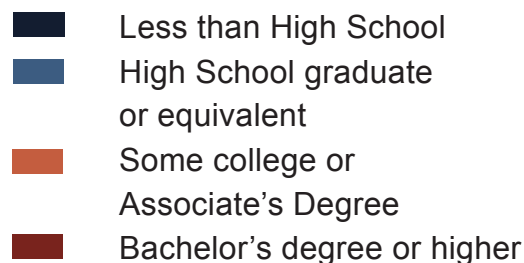
Once accepted, what's the enrollment process?

When a student is coming in, they forward me their certificate of eligibility and after they have registered for classes, I will certify their enrollment with the VA to get their benefits started. We submit an electronic form called the Enrollment Data form after they have

QUALIFYING — If At Least One Of The Criteria Below Is True, You Likely Qualify For The Post-9/11 Gi Bill:

- You served at least 90 days on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001 and were honorably discharged
- You received a Purple Heart on or after Sept. 11, 2001 and were honorably discharged
- You served for at least 30 continuous days, without a break in service, on or after Sept. 11, 2001, and were honorably discharged with a service-connected disability
- You are a dependent child using benefits transferred by a qualifying veteran or service member

Highest Education Levels by NC Veterans



Source: "North Carolina Veterans Insights Report," North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

registered for their classes, because I can't do anything until they have a schedule.

When do they receive the financial aid?

With the Post-9/11 GI bill they may get a stipend before school starts for their books. Then each month that they're enrolled they'll get their monthly housing allowance. It comes at the end of each month, because they must have attended before the benefits are paid. And then usually mid-semester is when tuition and fees will start coming in. That's another process I manage on the back end for students.

How do the students manage their cash flow?

They don't have to pay anything up front for tuition and fees. It is a process to get those funds into the university, so we defer their bills out. Like for the current spring semester, we deferred the bills for tuition and fees to March 31st, which allows those funds to come in from the VA. But as far as how students manage their personal funding, I don't know.

Do you hear the same challenges from everybody who comes in to talk to you?

I do get recurring questions, but it's mostly about Chapter 35 — that is a benefit for the veteran who is deemed to be 100-percent disabled and the benefit goes to their dependents or spouse. It pays a monthly stipend to them at the end of each month, but it doesn't pay [specifically] for tuition and fees or for books. They could use those funds however they see fit.

But Chapter 35 beneficiaries are where I have the most challenges and questions because they don't receive that funding until they've gone through the month. We still defer their

bill out to allow them to get their finances in order, but it is a challenge since they don't get their money until the end of the month.

Are you seeing any trends?

I'm seeing mostly younger students in our undergraduate [programs], typically the children or dependents of service members and veterans, and they're like most undergrads, coming right out of high school. And in our graduate programs, I would still say the trend is younger, like late 20s and early 30s, not the older veterans who retired out of service.

Are there particular career paths that you're seeing students pursue who are using the GI Bill?

As far as undergraduate, what I would say is trending are [majors] like biology, political science, neuroscience and data science.

But one that sticks out the most is the Ed.D. program in the graduate school. It's the Education Leadership program with a concentration in organizational learning and leadership. It's taken off within the past two years and is very popular with the SMVF community. It's online with an optional in-person immersion every spring semester. It's a 36-month, part-time program and does not require participants to have a Master's degree.

Students are using their GI Bill with the Yellow Ribbon Program, which can help pay for out-of-state university, private school or graduate school tuition and fees that the Post-9/11 GI Bill doesn't cover. A lot of students use this for the Ed.D. program because they have an online option. We just finished the Fall 2025 semester and 10 of our 26 out-of-state students were in that Ed.D. program. ■

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SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS,
AND THEIR FAMILIES

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