



“A Win-Win”: Broader Access for Veterans in Higher Education

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INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Catharine Bond Hill, Dr. Michael Fried, and Emily Schwartz discuss the underrepresentation of veterans in colleges and universities that have high graduation rates. They share insights and strategies from working at Ithaca S+R that encourage broader enrollment in such schools, with the aim of increasing the rate at which veterans are able to complete college degrees. We discussed the importance of several factors that can support enrollment in high-graduation-rate schools, including fully communicating veterans' achievement and skills to admissions offices, veterans' education being a priority of high-level college leadership, flexible credit transfer policy, and social belonging in supporting veterans' access to high-graduation rate schools.

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As managing director of Ithaka S+R, Dr. Catharine Bond Hill promotes research on access and success in higher education, including a focus on the college experience of veterans. Before joining Ithaka S+R, she served as the 10th president of Vassar College, following appointments as a faculty member and then the provost at Williams College. She was educated at Williams, the University of Oxford, and Yale University, where she completed her Ph.D. in economics. She has also worked at the World Bank, Congressional Budget Office, and headed the Harvard Institute of International Development's Project on Macroeconomic Reform in the Republic of Zambia. Dr. Michael Fried is a senior researcher at Ithaka S+R. He focuses on student learning and success as well as the evaluation of initiatives. Before joining Ithaka S+R, Michael's work focused on institutional and academic assessment and curriculum planning. He has also worked in several student-facing roles in residence life, new student orientation, and academic advising. He has a Ph.D. and a Master's in higher education, the former from New York University and the latter from the University of Pennsylvania. Emily Schwartz is a principal at Ithaka S+R, where she focuses on the overall mission of improving bachelor's degree attainment, particularly for underrepresented students, including low-income students and veterans. She takes primary responsibility for their American Talent Initiative (ATI; <https://americantalentinitiative.org/>) work, which is a collaboration across many high-graduation-rate schools that are committed to doing more in terms of access for low-income students. She has a Master's in Public Policy from Georgetown University.

Located in New York City, Ithaka S+R provides research and strategic guidance to help academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, demographic, and technological change and works with leaders in higher education, academic libraries, museums, foundations, and publishers on a national scale. Their work aims to broaden access to higher education by reducing costs and improving student outcomes. Moreover, it is part of a not-for-profit organization helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways (Ithaka S+R, n.d.).

In this interview, Dr. Catharine Bond Hill, aka Cappy, Dr. Michael Fried, and Emily Schwartz speak about strategies to broaden veterans' access to colleges and universities with high graduation rates. This interview can be read as a companion piece to Cooper and Ray (2024), which provides a student and faculty perspective on support for veterans in higher education.

TM: Cappy, Emily, and Mike, it is an honor and a delight to have this opportunity to talk with you about veterans' access and success in higher education. Cappy, please start us off by telling us about Ithaka S+R and what drew you to work there after your presidency at Vassar.

CBH: Much of the work at Ithaka S+R is focused on improving educational attainment, which is completely aligned with what I was doing at Williams and Vassar. I had been asked to be on the Board at Ithaka S+R and served there for 4 or 5 years while I was president at Vassar. So, when I stepped down from the presidency, it just seemed like a great next step to be able to continue to focus on that work.

TM: And what prompted you to make veterans' college education a priority in your career? For example, I'm familiar with your innovative program to bring veterans to Vassar College in partnership with the Posse Foundation (<https://www.possefoundation.org/>). So, I'm guessing there's a longer story in terms of your work with veterans than just the past few years.

CBH: Yes. At Williams, even though we had been meeting full financial need and being need-blind for many years, somehow, we still weren't getting very many low-income students. So, we adopted initiatives to improve that so that we could live up to our mission. When I got to Vassar, it was similar. Vassar had a long history of being an inclusive institution. It was founded for young women to get access to an education that was being offered at institutions that didn't take women at the time. But, in fact, it was not very diverse in terms of race or income, and so, we really made a big push to enroll underrepresented students. At that time, the post-9/11 GI Bill came into being, and we decided to sign up to be a Yellow Ribbon school. But we ended up with no veterans in our applicant pool. So, we realized that you had to do more than just say you were welcoming to veterans. You actually had to go out and do something to find them and encourage them to apply. So, we pitched the idea to the Posse Foundation. It seemed like a good idea because it would be a cohort model, in which veterans would have a community that would support each other. There is a lot of evidence that cohort models work. Posse jumped on the idea. We implemented it and got 11 students the first year. I think it was a huge value added for them. They were graduating at high rates. But also, it was a huge value added for the college and for the broader public by bringing together veterans with our traditional group of 18- to 23-year-olds.

TM: Thanks Cappy and thanks for introducing me to your colleagues. Emily and Mike, I'd like to ask each of you what has drawn you to work on veterans' issues in higher education, and your hopes for the impact of your work.

ES: Sure, thank you. A lot of the work that I'm doing is in the context of the American Talent Initiative. We now have 140 high-graduation-rate schools involved across the country, working to enroll and graduate more lower-income students. Many student veterans fit this profile demographically, and veterans are a widely underrepresented group at high-graduation-rate schools (Braun et al., 2024). We talk with schools about the financial support available via the GI Bill for veterans. From an institutional perspective, it's an opportunity to serve well-qualified students with financial need and do so in a way that's a smart financial decision for the institution because these students are coming with generous GI Bill funding. We work really closely with presidents to facilitate practice sharing at the leadership level, and we collect and report on data.

MF: I came to this work largely through Emily and getting involved in some of the work that she was doing with the ATI veterans' community of practice. In working with veterans, there's a population of students in win-win situations where there's a benefit for the student and for the institution. Earlier, Cappy alluded to my work as a practitioner and as an administrator. I was working to help all students in many ways where there was not a lot of very specific, demonstrable impact of my work. So, there's something really attractive about the opportunity to see the impact of our work with this population that can contribute so much to and benefit so greatly from the institutions where they enroll and succeed.

TM: Cappy, do you have anything you'd like to add in terms of observations and lessons you have carried with you from your personal experience with veterans that have informed your work at Ithaca S+R?

CBH: I think we're at a moment in time where the selective schools are losing the public trust. We're kind of in the doghouse with people across the political spectrum, on the right and the left, being unhappy with us for a variety of reasons, and I think it's partly because there's been kind of an assumption within these institutions that things are fine. We've got lots of applicants. We have a lot of money. The public has never really gone after us, but that world has changed and is changing, and I think, in fact, the selective and high-graduation-rate and well-endowed schools are at risk of bad public policy affecting their ability going forward. So, it's a moment for schools to step up and demonstrate that they're serving the public good, which most of these institutions do ultimately believe that they should be doing. They just haven't broadened the definition of how to do that. Better serving veterans is a way to better serve the public interest, and I think the education we offer would be really valuable for student veterans themselves, but

also in terms of the public seeing how these institutions are serving our country, particularly as the veterans' groups have everybody's ear in Washington, D.C., not just on one side of the political spectrum.

TM: Given the emphasis on access to high-graduation-rate schools, Emily, can you share some statistics that stand out as illustrating the current situation in terms of veterans' access? What do the trends look like? Also, I think it's worth pointing out here at the outset that high-graduation-rate schools, with at least 70% of students graduating, include a wide range of colleges and universities that are both large and small and both public and private. Our readers who are interested in graduation rates of particular schools can find them on the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>).

ES: I can't answer this question without stating that we need better data. This is my soapbox that I live on lately. The most comprehensive, national, publicly-available data, which comes from the Veterans' Administration, focuses on GI Bill beneficiaries, which is not a student-veteran specific group as it may include dependents. There's very limited veterans-related data in the Integrated Postsecondary Data System, IPEDS (<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds>). There's very little outcomes data anywhere, and very little qualitative survey data to understand what veterans are thinking. However, with the limited data that we have, there are some trends at high-graduation-rate institutions that are promising. We published a piece on this last fall (Schwartz et al., 2023), where we shared our analysis finding that veterans or GI Bill beneficiaries, to be more accurate, are shifting their enrollments away somewhat from the for-profit institutions. Just to share a statistic from the paper, in the 2020–21 school year, 18% of GI Bill beneficiaries enrolled in for-profit institutions, while back in 2015–16, that was 24%. One thing we see in the data is that the veterans or the GI Bill beneficiaries that are enrolling at four-year institutions are still more likely to enroll at four-year institutions with relatively low-graduation rates. They're underrepresented at the institutions with graduation rates above 70%, with 22% of GI Bill beneficiary enrollments compared to 38% across all enrollments, and GI Bill beneficiaries are overrepresented at institutions with graduation rates below 50%. To distill the trend, noting that these data are a few years old at this point, we see a shift from for-profits to four-year, public and private, not-for-profits. But that shift is not yet getting those students to the highest-graduation-rate institutions.

TM: So, let's explore some of the challenges we need to address to expand access for veterans to schools in the high-graduation-rate sector of higher education. These

issues include how prospective students' records are interpreted by admissions offices, transfer credit policies, the complexity and importance of creating a sense of belonging for student veterans, and lack of good information about student-veteran outcomes after graduation. In my own work, I have used data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (<https://cccse.org/>). This data set is quite large; for example, in 2018, CCSSE has survey responses from approximately 130,000 community college students. Veterans and active-military students are well-represented in this sample as they account for six percent of the sample, which corresponds to their representation in higher education overall, and approximately 40% of veterans in higher education attend community colleges. In short, this is a sample, with national scope, that is representative of many veterans. I have been particularly intrigued by the gain from high school grade point average (GPA) to college GPA shown by the CCSSE data. This gain is quite large for veterans and active military students, from 2.7 in high school to 3.2 in college, on average. At the same time, there's very little gain from high school GPA to college GPA for civilians, from 3.0 to 3.1, on average. This raises the question of whether or not admissions officers are aware of the gains made by many veterans beyond their high school years.

ES: You ask about whether admissions officers are aware of the gains made by veterans. Yes, at schools where they have veterans. We hear all the time that these student veterans are incredible. We want more, we want more. But schools without a critical mass of veterans are not going to have that realization. That's the really challenging part. So, this becomes an information, communication sort of issue.

CBH: When we were looking at the Posse applications for veterans, if we had just looked at their performance in high school, we probably would have rejected all of them. You have to look much more broadly than the high school transcript. For example, there's a lot of information that you can get from the military on talent and skills and performance in training. I also think this ties to the issue of transfer credit. If enlisted veterans have come home and enrolled in hard courses in community colleges and done well, then they're demonstrating that their high school record is not a good indicator of how they're going to do when they go to college, and I think those GPA data are reflecting exactly that and you know these are also young men and women who have committed to serve and learn to be disciplined and work hard. All of that pays off when they come back into higher education.

TM: What do you think about the potential of community college attendance as a path to a four-year degree for

veterans? Are there particular circumstances in which enrolling at a high-graduation-rate college is more likely to work out for a veteran who has studied at a community college?

CBH: I think that the high-graduation-rate schools need to be looking at transfer students across higher education more generally. One of the reasons transfer students sometimes don't fit in very well is because their schools tend to admit very few, so they don't always feel like they belong. We can think of the community college pathway to a highly selective school as a good pathway for those students. But the schools have to be willing to admit them. This is an area that Ithaca S+R is working on as well. Often, if students transfer to selective four-year institutions having done 2 years at community colleges, it may take them 3 years to get through these selective schools. But that would be a pathway to a bachelor's degree that would be preferable to many other alternatives that either take a longer time to degree or result in no degree at all. I think schools need to evolve and double down on figuring out how to make transfer from community college work for student veterans. I think this is really important. For example, Posse has actually paused its veterans' program because they were having trouble developing a deep enough applicant pool. This was basically happening because Posse was telling veterans they had to start as first-year students and most enlisted veterans have accumulated some credits while in the military, and when they come home, they're often not ready immediately to pick up and move someplace to pursue a four-year degree. So, they take some courses in a community college and they don't want to waste those credits. Maybe not all of their credits will transfer, but many of them could. Also, if young men and women enlist at age 18 because high school didn't go all that well for them or they don't have the resources to pay to go to college, they can demonstrate through a year or 2 years of community college coursework that they have the talent and the ability and the drive to succeed in these selective institutions.

TM: Much of the literature on veterans in higher education involves trying to measure academic success. Quantifying academic success is a tricky business, as many outcomes are intangible or only realized with significant passage of time and yet there is strong demand for quantifiable outcome measures to justify decisions about programmatic and financial support for veterans. The fairly common finding that veterans' GPAs meet or exceed those of civilians is a point of pride in the veterans' community, very understandably. In the CCSSE data, this finding holds true even when we control for age and other demographic

characteristics. Rates of degree completion and future earnings come to mind as two other measures of academic outcomes in your experience. Do we have adequate sources of data on outcomes to answer questions that admissions offices and other college administrators have about how well student veterans will be served by their institutions?

MF: In my time as an administrator at the institutional level, getting post-graduation outcomes data about your students is an enormous challenge, even with the growing use of first-destination surveys. There's still quite a lot that we don't know about what any students do post-graduation and beyond. The lack of information is even more exacerbated when you try to cut the data by certain types of populations, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and veteran status. The kinds of studies that might start to get at that would be very large-scale, longitudinal studies that track students, veteran and non-veteran, through their educational journeys into at least the first several years post-graduation. But that's a large undertaking that requires quite a lot of institutional support and funding support to get enough data by the time students have graduated. The federal government is not in a position to support that kind of data at this time, so it would take private enterprise to do it, and you know I don't see the money there for that kind of purpose, at least not yet.

CBH: If we want to see the impact of high-graduation-rate schools on veterans, they actually have to take some veterans and then be willing to provide administrative data. In other words, with surveys like CCSSE, the outcomes are all self-reported by the students filling out the survey, which may result in different data than if data were available directly from the schools. In an incredibly small sample, we see the Posse students graduating at high rates, whereas veterans starting at community colleges and going to very large regional publics are not. Is that difference a result of self-selection into those types of schools? Maybe. But it's harder not to graduate from high-graduation-rate schools because there is so much support. You know that certain things will lead to students dropping out, but they're not going to fall through the cracks in the way they can at institutions that don't have the same resources to invest in student support.

ES: It's certainly necessary that admissions offices have the information they need about prospective student veterans, but that's not sufficient. If the priority of enrolling and supporting veterans is not coming from the top leadership, the prospective student-veteran's record doesn't really matter that much. A prospective student veteran wants to go somewhere they're wanted,

and that has to be institution wide, which happens when the priority of welcoming and supporting veterans comes from the top.

MF: Last year, when we did interviews with the veteran support leadership at a variety of high-graduation-rate institutions, one of the things that came up was the importance of having an internal person, whether in the admissions staff or elsewhere in the institution, to help with some of the translation of military experience in ways that admissions officers would understand and appreciate. It's important to educate admissions officers, but also the veterans, on how best to present themselves as applicants. There's a lot of opportunity to improve education on both sides of the send button on that application.

TM: Really interesting. Thank you. Let's switch gears to explore the subject of learning mindset. I'm using that as a catch-all term for various psychological attributes that may affect academic success. These can include, for example, a growth mindset or the belief that ability to succeed and learn can grow with practice, a secure sense of social belonging, good relationships with faculty and fellow students, and recognition of alignment of course material with the student's own values and aspirations. My reading of the literature on learning mindset for veterans versus civilians is that we see a mixed bag of results in the sense that veterans do not consistently have more or less positive mindset attributes than non-veterans. The 2018 CCSSE survey includes a special set of questions on mindset, including the extent to which the respondent has "good relationships with others at this college" and "feel(s) welcome and respected at this college." Interestingly, the responses are essentially the same, on average, for military and civilian students. Promoting mindset, of course, can be beneficial for all students, though effective interventions to support mindset may differ somewhat for veterans and civilians and may differ among veterans. Mike, you've written about the importance of social belonging for veterans (Fried, 2023). Can you share what you've learned from this work?

MF: Sure. I would just underline what you stated in the question, which is that you know veteran students are students, and they come with the full constellation of challenges and opportunities that all students do. All of the research on student retention and success says that the more you are connected to the community, the more likely you are to persist and ultimately graduate. Schools that are effective at supporting students generally will also be effective at supporting veteran students. Our interview work with those who are supporting student veterans at the high-graduation-rate institutions highlighted a veteran-specific take on imposter syndrome, which is basically

the idea that ‘I don’t really belong here, and somehow I’ve managed to fool everyone into allowing me in, and I could be expelled at any moment.’ This is a common experience for many students, particularly at institutions with a reputation for rigorous academic expectations. We learned that within the veteran community, there can be a particular flavor of imposter syndrome attached to whether or not the student veteran had seen combat. Non-combat veterans sometimes have imposter syndrome about being worthy of the title of veteran and feeling not fully part of the veteran’s community. As active combat operations have lessened over the past few years, there’s an ever-growing share of student veterans who may feel this way. For those who are supporting veterans’ communities, the potential for non-combat imposter syndrome is an important thing to be aware of.

TM: This nuance about the potential for imposter syndrome among non-combat veterans underscores the wide range of preferences among veterans in terms of their identification as veterans in higher education, as documented, for example, in Hinton (2020). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to promoting a sense of social belonging when some student veterans appreciate being identified as such and others don’t. At the same time, in general, student veterans have in common the issues related to access that we have been discussing. Before we leave the subject of social belonging and veteran identity, I’m wondering about the student-veteran experience in schools that have very few non-traditional age students and very few veterans. Do you see a risk of students feeling isolated, stereotyped, or treated as “tokens” in such environments? If so, how might this concern be addressed?

ES: There is a risk of students feeling socially isolated at any institution they attend, which is why belonging matters for all students, and veterans are no exception. Seeing peers, instructors, and administrators who share identities with themselves is certainly a boon for student veterans. But schools that enroll few veterans can still help foster belonging with intentional efforts of staff on campus. Support systems typical of high-graduation-rate schools can meet student veteran needs not only initially with the admissions staff but with faculty and staff all the way through to graduation. Part of our work is aimed at building a critical mass of student veterans at these kinds of institutions so that this particular facet of community for student veterans can be met as well.

TM: As we wrap up our conversation, Cappy, I’d like to ask about your efforts in bringing various organizations together to work toward the goal of enrolling more veterans. I know

that you had a conference you put together a few years ago with the College Board and various other organizations (Ithaka S+R, 2018) to promote access for veterans to high-graduation-rate colleges and universities.

CBH: If one institution makes a change, it has a little bit of an impact. But if we can get the sector more broadly to change and adopt a change, it can have a much bigger impact. I always thought the problem was that schools just weren’t admitting veterans, but it also matters whether the veterans think they belong at these institutions, and if selective, high-graduate-rate institutions aren’t admitting veterans in any significant number, then veterans aren’t going to apply. They’re going to say, ‘This isn’t a sector of higher education that’s welcoming to us.’ So, a collaborative push can have a larger impact. Going back to the sense that selective higher education is not very respected at the moment, I think collaboration could really make a difference here. We’ve seen some movement on it. But I think we have a window to see significantly more movement, and again, I do think that it has to be combined with solving the transfer issue because veterans’ demand for these kinds of institutions is going to be heavily impacted by whether the credits that they’ve worked really hard to get elsewhere are respected by those institutions. Again, it’s a sense of being valued and their work being valued and respected.

TM: We have seen, in the course of our conversation, that valuing and respecting student veterans happens best when that attitude and priority comes from top leadership at colleges. We have seen that valuing and respecting consists of making efforts in admissions offices to go beyond high school records by using indicators of skills and achievements from years in the military and by finding ways to give transfer credit where that can reasonably be done. We have seen that valuing and respecting means recognizing the various ways in which veterans want to express their veteran status as they seek belonging in college. We have seen that good data, innovative approaches, high-level leadership, and collaboration in sharing ideas and information all have important roles to play. With such efforts, high-graduation-rate schools have the potential to attract the critical mass of student veterans needed for others to see these schools as attractive and viable options for themselves. Cappy, Emily, and Mike thank you so much for this conversation and for your service to veterans and to the higher education community.

Afterword: This interview took place on a Zoom call on September 11, 2024.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The interview is submitted with the consent of the interview subjects.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Therese McCarty is the John Prior Lewis '41 Professor of Economics Emerita at Union College in Schenectady, NY. She served as Dean of the Faculty and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Union from 2005–2016, as well as Acting President in 2013 and Interim Dean of Studies in 2018, each for a few months. Her background in public sector economics, together with her administrative experience, has prompted her interest in learning more about veterans in higher education.

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