

The Battle at Home: African American Veterans in Higher Education

Dymilah Hewitt

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The G.I. Bill had the potential to aid the progress of African American veterans after World War II. While this benefit made it possible for veterans to pursue higher education, this paper will look at some of the obstacles they had to overcome to enroll in and ultimately graduate from college. After World War II, most veterans attended historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), because of discrimination. This paper will provide an historical overview of African American veterans in higher education; examine the factors that impact their enrollment and success; and explore for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) and their dependence on G.I. Bill money.

Keywords: higher education, veterans, African Americans, historically black colleges and universities, for-profit colleges and universities, G.I. Bill.

The objective of this paper is to explore the historical challenges that African American veterans have faced in their pursuit of college degrees after military service. Many veterans served their country only to face another battle as they sought an education to advance their social status (Humes, 2006). The G.I. Bill offered useful benefits, but racism made it difficult for many veterans to use them. One positive outcome of African American using the G.I. Bill was the increase in enrollment at historically black college and universities (HBCUs) (Herbold, 1994). When these institutions were the only option, enrollment was not the problem that it is

today on many campuses (Smith, 2013). Broader access at traditional colleges and the proliferation of for-profit institutions, has led to an exodus from HBCUs. Even with increased options in the education marketplace, African Americans still face challenges. This paper will answer the following questions: What are the social, political and economic factors that have impacted the college enrollment of African American military veterans after World War II and after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? How has their access to higher education and its many benefits, evolved over time?

Evolution of the G.I. Bill

Veterans and lawmakers had to fight for benefits that veterans were promised. After World War I, veterans received \$60 and a train ticket home (Education and Training, 2016). The World War Adjusted Act, also known as the Bonus Act, was passed in 1924. It was supposed to compensate veterans based upon the number of days they served, but it took up to 20 years for many veterans to receive it. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also called the G.I. (Government Issue) Bill, was passed to provide benefits for returning World War II veterans. These benefits were available for active duty veterans who were honorably discharged, and they included low cost mortgages, low interest business loans, one year of unemployment insurance and financial assistance to attend high school, vocational school or college. Harry W. Colmery was a former national commander of the American Legion and he introduced the G.I. Bill on January 10, 1944 (Education and Training, 2016). It was eventually passed and signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and it provided a monthly stipend of \$50 for single veterans and \$75 for married veterans as well as the payment of tuition, books and supplies up to \$500 (Turner and Bound, 2003).

The G.I. Bill was updated in 1981 by former Mississippi Congressman Gillespie Montgomery and it became known as the Montgomery G.I. Bill (Education and Training,

2016). The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill currently provides educational benefits that are more extensive and flexible than previous bills and allows service persons to transfer unused benefits to spouses or children (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, also known as the New GI Bill, has led to an increase in veteran enrollment on college campuses (American Council on Education, 2008). The outstanding educational benefit of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is available to individuals who served “at least 90 aggregate days on active duty after September 10, 2001” (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013) . Eligible veterans are entitled to as much as \$17,500 for tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, and a stipend for books and supplies (up to \$1,000 per year) (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

Literature Review

The literature on this topic provides arguments and data to support two distinctly different sides. It shows that African American veterans benefitted from the GI Bill after World War II and it also shows that their efforts to achieve college degrees were suppressed as the result of institutionalized racism. This review of the literature will cover the benefits of the G.I. Bill program; the different forms of discrimination and exploitation that veterans endured as they tried to use their tuition benefits; and the differences in the educational outcomes of veterans in the South and the rest of the country.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

While segregation in America was prevalent after World War II, there were some ways the G.I. Bill had a positive impact on the college enrollment and graduation of African Americans. The G.I. Bill offered generous opportunities to African Americans and other low income individuals. In 1945 there were 1.6 million students enrolled in higher education and 88,000 were veterans (Altbach, Gumport & Bergdahl, 2011). Two years later, college

enrollment was 2.3 million students, of which over 1 million were veterans (Altbach, et al., 2011). A Veterans Administration survey from 1950 found that more of the 1.3 million black veterans participated in at least one aspect of the G.I. Bill's provisions when compared to white veterans (Humes, 2006). According to the study, 49% of black veterans used the benefits for education while 43% of whites used the benefits for education (Humes, 2006). It should be noted that African American veterans often used the educational benefits for vocational training rather than bachelor's degrees (Turner & Bound, 2003). Twelve percent of black veterans went to college on the G. I. Bill compared to 28% of whites. Many black veterans demanded and received their benefits. These individuals and their families were the a part of an emerging black middle class and politically active members of society who went on to be the push for freedom during the Civil Rights Movement (Humes, 2006). Veterans who used the G.I. Bill also had a lasting impact on colleges and universities. Enrollment at HBCUs increased by 100% (Herbold, 1994). Before the education benefits were announced, 7% of soldiers stated that they wanted to pursue higher education upon their return to civilian life, but after the news spread of these benefits the number soared to 43% (Turner & Bound, 2003). The influx of students necessitated a change and forced campuses to improve their facilities, admissions procedures, curricula and pedagogies (Altbach, 2011). There is also evidence that opportunities for African Americans to enroll in state colleges and universities increased in the north (Turner & Bound, 2003). There were some opportunities in southern states but not in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina.

While there were considerable benefits that African Americans derived from the G.I. Bill, racism in America—particularly in the South—kept many veterans from reaping the full benefit of the bill. In his book *When Affirmative Action Was White*, Ira Katznelson, argues that “there was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America

than the G.I. Bill” (2005). While the G. I. Bill was a race neutral initiative, John E. Rankin, the Mississippi congressman and other likeminded legislators made sure that each individual state would be able to control how this federal bill was administered. He worked diligently against more federal control of the bill (Humes, 2003; Herbold, 1994).

Another major problem noted in the literature is the educational levels of African Americans in the 1940s (Turner & Bound, 2003). Many potential veterans were denied admission to the army based upon their literacy levels. Those who made it into the military and later sought to take advantage of their education benefits were often discouraged by VA employment and education counseling services from pursuing college degrees. They were pushed to vocational training (Humes, 2003). The lack of African American counselors in the South limited the opportunities of African American veterans. There were twelve in Georgia and Alabama and zero in Mississippi (Turner and Bound, 2003).

The schools where African American veterans were most welcome, were HBCUs. There were about 100 at that time and many of them were filled to capacity after World War II. Researchers estimate that between 20,000 and 50,000 were turned away due to housing and infrastructure limitations (Herbold, 1994). Widespread segregation, particularly in southern colleges in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina, severely limited the options for these veterans (Turner & Bound, 2003).

For-Profit Colleges and Veterans

For profit institutions are known for their heavy recruitment of African American veterans. This is not a new phenomenon. After World War II, there was a major increase of vocational schools that were established to meet the needs of the returning veterans of all races. The institutions were also intent on getting as much money GI Bill money as they possibly could. Before the war there were about 100 of these private vocational schools. After the war

the number grew to more than 10,000 by 1950 (Humes, 2003). These schools offered training for careers from cooking to aviation. While some of these schools were legitimate, others were not. They simply took the veterans' hard earned benefits and offered them little education in return. African American veterans were often targeted. The lack of federal oversight allowed this to take place. Ultimately many of these schools were shut down after a congressional investigation discovered the corruption (Humes, 2003).

Predatory institutions are still a problem today. Low income, first generation students from underrepresented racial backgrounds are often drawn to for-profit institutions because they desire a convenient, quality education in a short amount of time. Two of the strengths of the for-profit colleges are their successful marketing and recruitment strategies. They spend a lot of money to recruit veterans and other adult students and their strategies are working to get the students to enroll. The fifteen largest for-profit universities typically spend 23% of their total budget on sales and marketing, while non-profit institutions spend about 0.5% (less than 1%) (Sander, 2012). The University of Phoenix spent over \$1 billion dollars in the 2011 fiscal year. This includes billboards, television commercials and glossy magazines like *Phoenix Patriot* to attract students (Sander, 2012). They focus on their target market which consists of veterans and low income, first generation students and they are able to successfully recruit these students into their programs. Since these institutions do not have endowments, they must have income to stay in business. The income comes from loans, grants and federal aid obtained by their students.

Veterans are drawn to for-profit colleges because of the convenient class schedules and online course offerings. Many for-profit colleges offer evening and weekend classes to accommodate students who work full time jobs on weekdays. This can work well for students who desire regular face to face contact with their instructors. The online classes are good for

students who cannot or choose not to sit in a traditional class for their education. Many schools offer complete degree programs totally online. This allows students to complete their course requirements when it is convenient for them and frees them from traveling to and from class.

The number of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) offering associates and bachelor's degrees in the United States in 1976 was 55. By 2006, the number of (FPCUs) in the United States grew to 986 (Altbach, Gumport & Berdahl, 2011). While smaller colleges have closed down unexpectedly, some of the larger colleges are actually thriving financially with their current business model. In spite of the financial success of some of these colleges, they have many weaknesses that show that they do a disservice to many of their students. The recruitment and marketing strategies are effective, but those institutions are not right for many of the students that they recruit. FPCUs focus their recruitment efforts on people who are less represented at traditional college and universities (TCUs). Many of these students are low income, first generation. In 2005-2006, 37% of students enrolled in FPCUs were from underrepresented groups compared to 20% in private, non-profit TCUs (Hentschke, Lechuga & Tierney, 2010). Data from 2008 shows that underrepresented students at FPCUs made up as much as 43% of the total student population (Hentschke, et al., 2010). These numbers show that many students who were not served well when they were in high school and graduated underprepared for higher education. This is one of the reasons so many nontraditional aged students start school many years after high school. However, many of these students do not do well in an accelerated or online program as the result of underpreparation. They need more interaction with instructors.

In For-Profit Colleges and Universities: Their Markets, Regulation, Performance, and Place in Higher Education, Hentschke, Lechuga and Tierney (2010) attempt to present an

unbiased picture of FPCUs, and it is clear that they recognize the growth and influence of the institutions. The authors' attempt at impartiality prevents them from really exposing some of the more egregiously negative practices of FPCUs. It was recently reported in the *Los Angeles Times* (2015) that the Pentagon had temporarily barred the University of Phoenix from recruiting students at United States military bases and halted tuition assistance for new active duty troops as the result of inquiries from the United States Federal Trade Commission and the California Attorney General Kamala Harris. This did not affect the G.I. Bill, but between 2009 and 2014, FPCUs received 40% of the 8.2 billion G.I. Bill dollars going to higher education institutions (Puzzanghera, Kirkman, & Zaremba, 2015). In 2014 alone, the industry took in 46% of the 538 million in tuition assistance dollars. This book paints a very non-controversial picture of a very volatile issue in higher education. Low income, first generation and people of color are being targeted, and many of the schools are not delivering on the promises made during recruitment.

Due to the recruiters' unfulfilled promises of good jobs with high salaries, FPCU students endure high loan debt and high loan default rates. The average debt of graduating seniors in 2008 was \$23,200 (\$20,200 at public universities and \$27,650 at private universities), while the average debt of students graduating from for profit colleges was \$33,050 (Altbach, et al., 2011). This means low income and other students from underrepresented groups are leaving college, often without a college degree, with over \$10,000 more in debt. With limited job prospects these students have limited opportunities to pay back these loans. Consequently, these students have the highest federal loan default rates. The 2009 default rate of all students who began repaying loans in 2007 was 12%. FPCU students made up 44% of all borrowers who defaulted in that period of time while they were only 7% of the overall general student population (Altbach, et al., 2011). While FPCUs work for some students, many students end up

worse off financially and are unable to attain the social mobility that they desired. They are merely saddled with debt because they paid too much for an education that was ultimately not as beneficial as they had hoped.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that aids in the analysis of African American veterans and their pursuit of higher education is critical race theory. This theory was derived from critical legal studies and is found in the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman. Critical legal studies favored a form of law that addressed the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts over traditional legal scholarship that emphasizes doctrinal and policy analysis (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Gloria Ladson Billings compiles the work of other scholars to summarize the four tenets of critical race theory:

- Racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” and a permanent fixture in American society (Delgado, 1995)
- Critical race theory uses storytelling to “analyze myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and render blacks and other minorities one-down.” (Delgado, 1995)
- Critical race theory requires the critique of liberalism, because liberalism does not have the mechanism to institute the major changes that racism requires (Crenshaw, 1988).
- Civil rights legislation primarily benefitted white Americans, particularly white women (Guy-Sheftall, 1993).

Critical race theory can be used to the expose and explain the racism that African American veterans have experienced as they attempted and still attempt to matriculate at different types of educational institutions since the conclusion of World War II. The racism that veterans experienced when they returned in the 1940s kept them from receiving the full benefit

of the bill. Politicians like John E. Rankin of Mississippi made it difficult by allowing states to determine how the benefits were delivered. While the G.I. Bill was supposed to be a race neutral policy, research shows that historically it has benefitted whites greater than other racial groups (Humes, 2003; Herbold, 1994).

Discussion

African American veterans faced class and race discrimination before, during and after their military service. The experiences of veterans seeking higher education greatly paralleled their experiences as military service persons while enlisted. They had to endure the same institutionalized race and class based discrimination they faced in a segregated military once they re-entered civilian society. These veterans had access to military benefits but they were often prevented from using them because of their race. Access to education has a tremendous effect on social class and the advisors and government workers who blocked veterans from receiving an education were well aware of this. They were a part of an interlocking system of oppression that was manifested in a policy that was supposed to be race neutral.

During their pursuit of higher education, they resisted racism by attending historically black colleges and universities. There were so many veterans on HBCU campuses that many of the campuses were enrolled to capacity.

HBCU Enrollment after World War II

Year	Number of veterans	Total Students	Percentage of all students
1946	18,216	58,842	31
1947	26,306	74,173	35
1948	22,526	70,644	32
1949	19,320	69,651	27

Note: Adapted from *Understanding Minority Serving Institutions*, 2008.

While it was difficult for African American veterans to attend any college in the country, these veterans did the best they could to improve their social status by pursuing a college education at

an HBCU. They also helped these institutions expand and strengthen their infrastructure at a crucial time. The persistence of those who desired access to higher education made it easier for those who came after them. The for-profit colleges that sprang up to exploit the veterans for their GI Bill money is just an example of race and class exploitation. While overall college access is greater veterans must be careful because every school is not a good fit.

Recommendations

This paper demonstrates the persistence of challenges facing African American veterans in pursuit of higher education. From the conclusion of World War II to the present, they have shown a great deal of resourcefulness and resilience. Their determination should be applauded. However, there is still much that can be done to improve their educational outcomes.

The primary stakeholders are the veterans themselves, historically black colleges and universities, The United States Government and the American taxpayers. If improvements are made to help more veterans use their tuition assistance wisely and graduate from college, many people would benefit. Here are some suggestions:

- The military exit process needs to become a lot more informative for veterans so they can use their benefits on the path to a better life. Sometimes superior officers are so disappointed when a good soldier leaves, they don't want to provide him or her with useful information about higher education.
- Since more low income and first generation veterans are likely to enlist, many of them need a lot of help navigating the college application and matriculation process. Lutz (2008) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) to reveal relevant characteristics of soldiers and factors that motivated them to enlist. She found that individuals from lower socioeconomic groups were more likely to enlist.

- HBCUs and other private and public universities should make more of an effort to recruit and retain student veterans. Some would prefer the family atmosphere at a small historically black college and others would appreciate a larger public institution. Many of these other colleges could learn from the recruiting and marketing practices of for-profit colleges. They focus on their target market which consists of veterans and low income, first generation students and they are able to successfully recruit these students into their programs.
- Public and private universities must help with readjustment by providing programs to address the psychological, academic, and physical needs of this population to help ensure their success.

References

- Altbach, P, Gumport, P. & Berdahl, R. (2011). *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD.
- American Council on Education. (2008). *Serving those who serve: Higher education and America's veterans*: November issue brief. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved from http://www.ace.net.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/Programs/Services/MilitaryPrograms/serving/Veterans_Issue_Brief_1108.pdf
- Education and Training. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2016, from <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/history.asp>
- Gasman, M., Baez, B., Sotello, C., & Turner, V. (2008). *Understanding minority-serving institutions*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hentschke, G., Lechuga, V. and Tierney W. (2010). *For-profit colleges and universities: Their markets, regulation, performance, and place in higher education*. Stylus Publishing: Sterling, VA.
- Herbold, H. (1995). Never a level playing field: Blacks and the GI Bill. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. 104-108.
- Humes, E. (2006). How the G.I. Bill shunted blacks into vocational training. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*.
- Katznelson, I. (2005). *When affirmative action was white: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998) Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11:1, 7-24, DOI: 10.1080/095183998236863 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863>
- Lutz, A. (2008). Who joins the military?: A look at race, class, and immigration status. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*. 36:2 (Winter) 167-188. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
- Sander, L. (April 27, 2012). "With G.I. Bill's billions at stake, colleges compete to lure veterans," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Smith, Tenikka. (November 4, 2013). "JCSU President: Federal loan program changes hurt historically black institutions." WSOC Television News Website. Retrieved from <http://www.wsoc.tv/news/news/local/jcsu-president-federal-loan-program-changes-hurt-h/nbhG4/>

Turner, S. & Bound, J. (2003). Closing the gap or widening the divide: The Effects of the G. I. Bill and World War II on the educational outcomes of black Americans. *Journal of Economic History*, 63 (1).

United States Department of Veterans Affairs. (2013). *Federal benefits for veterans, dependents and survivors*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Veterans Affairs.