

GI Bill to ease financial burden of veterans

Aid in sight for soldiers registering for college

by Holly Pablo, news editor **Published:** Tuesday, March 17, 2009 ACCENT ADVOCATE

Following President Barack Obama's military plan to end combat operations in the Middle Eastern countries by August 2010, institutions of higher education may experience increases in veteran students taking advantage of a new GI Bill.

Admissions and Records Director Michael Aldaco said the Post-9/11 GI Bill is a federally funded education benefit package for veterans who served in the military on or after Sept. 11, 2001. With approximately 175,000 California residents currently active on duty, these veterans, after returning home, are likely to pursue an education in order to start the next chapter in their lives, he said.

"The GI Bill (after World War II) changed the face of college," Aldaco said.

The bill, passed into law in 2008 as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, takes effect on Aug. 1, Aldaco said. Given the veteran is enrolled as a full-time student taking 12 units, the main offerings of the bill include assistance in college tuition and fees, a book stipend and monthly housing allowance.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill covers up to the maximum cost of in-state public tuition and fees at the highest level of higher education, Aldaco said, which is \$7,703 in California.

In addition, there is the Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program, a program that allows veterans, who served for three years and are now in college to attend a private or graduate institution. Because the tuition is much higher, the school and the Veterans Affairs Office will split the balance after deducting the in-state public tuition and fees cost, he said.

The book stipend provides \$1,000 a year for books and supplies. The monthly housing allowance, adjusted for living arrangements for housing as the school's zip code, is not to exceed \$2,760 a month in California.

Aldaco said the amount of benefits received depends on the amount of time served in the military. The minimum time, 90 days, guarantees 40 percent of entitlement. To qualify for full benefits, the veteran must have served at least 36 months.

Veteran student Jose Urquilla said that in addition, in order to receive the aid, the veteran must be in good standing with the military, such as being released on honorable discharge, retired discharge or disabled discharge. Getting kicked out, such as in an administrative separation, the benefits are lost, he said.

The bill offers these benefits for 36 months of enrollment, Aldaco said, to be used anytime within 15 years of being discharged, and considering that the standard school year consists of nine months, it is enough time to complete an undergraduate degree.

"The level of support is quite significant," he said. "These benefits also trickle down to dependents, which are children and spouses."

Norman Lopez, veteran affairs coordinator, said there are currently 50 veterans enrolled at Contra Costa College, including beneficiaries.

While there has not yet been an increase in the number of veteran students or beneficiaries, because California has the largest amount of residents serving in the military, there will definitely be impact, Lopez said.

Urquilla said that the GI Bill should not be considered as monetary aid, but a solid investment, because participants have already paid into it.

"You have to sign up for it in boot camp. They only offer it once, during the first week," Urquilla said.

By signing up, \$50 a month is deducted from the person's pay for one year, for a grand total of \$1,200. But the benefit packages offer much more back, even in a month, he said.

"It's a sweet deal. You can't go wrong," Urquilla said.

He said if everybody knew about the GI Bill, they would be running to join the military.

Contact Holly Pablo at hpablo@accentadvocate.com.