Science Societies

# Military veterans in agricultural studies

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*Student veterans should determine if they qualify for an Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship (https://bit.ly/3nAEQbS). Edith Nourse Rogers (shown here) served in the House of Representatives for 35 years and sponsored important legislation for veterans, including the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the G.I. Bill). Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

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In the U.S., military veterans comprise approximately 6% of college graduates—equating to nearly 3.6 million veterans and 58 million non-veteran students that have graduated from post-secondary education institutions as of 2017 (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, National Science Foundation). Although the absolute number of veteran and non-veteran students differs greatly, the proportion of veterans seeking degrees is similar to their non-veteran counterparts. Approximately 60% of veterans and 64% of non-veterans earn bachelor's degrees, 31% of veterans and 27% of non-veterans earn master's degrees, and 2% of veterans and 4% of non-veterans earn doctorate degrees.

What is curious is that of all the undergraduate and graduate degree programs to choose from, only 3% of veterans, compared with 5% of non-veterans, obtain degrees in biological, agricultural, and environmental life sciences. These statistics are surprising given the history of veterans in agriculture in our country.

## Veterans in Agricultural Studies

### Post-WWII

After World War II, 1.5 million military veterans returned home. Due to labor shortages, they were encouraged to work on, or start, farms upon their re-entry into the American

workforce. Many of these young men and women had originally either grown up on farms or were farm laborers before embarking on their military service, which left substantial gaps in our agricultural workforce. It was clear that these young veterans would need assistance in pursuing agricultural ventures, which led to President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. The 1944 G.I. Bill offered low-interest mortgages for homes and farmland and education assistance benefits. Veterans in particular were encouraged to pursue education in agriculture, especially through land grant institutions.

The push toward higher education in agriculture was further incentivized with free tuition and living stipends for veterans—spiking college admission rates and leading to an 18-fold increase in students enrolled in agricultural courses from the 1930s to the 1940s. The surge of veterans enrolling in agriculture programs throughout the U.S. has fizzled since then, which begs the question, why are fewer of today's veterans pursing agricultural-related degrees compared with the post-WWII era?

**Post-9/11**

These days, the U.S. government still encourages veterans to pursue agriculture after serving their country. Veterans in agriculture is still a current initiative and focus of USDA, which offers substantial support programs that help veterans gain employment, get an education, and start businesses. Even with these resources and incentives, non-veteran students are pursuing education in agriculture at nearly double the rate of veterans. Although it's likely very complicated, some reasons for this could include a combination of increased farming technology and crop yield, fewer family owned farms, and the reduction of labor shortages. Present-day military service members are highly diverse, coming from a wide range of backgrounds and regions that are not necessarily connected to agriculture.

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, originally signed in 2008, has since been expanded upon to the current Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, known as the Forever G.I. Bill (**https://bit.ly/34BcC86**), signed by President Trump in 2017. The new G.I. Bill offers education benefits in nearly all fields of study, degrees, and certification or training programs. The numerous education possibilities covered by the G.I. Bill means veterans and their families can pursue degrees of their choosing—likely contributing to more than 50% of veterans choosing to obtain degrees in non-science-and-engineering-relatedfields, such as business and management. With this in mind, the Forever G.I. Bill has purposefully incentivized veterans to pursue plant, soil, and crop sciences through the expansion of benefits for veteran students in STEM fields by offering an additional year of financial support and scholarships ( **https://bit.ly/2SHlFic**). It is too early to determine if these new incentives will reverse the decline of veterans obtaining agricultural degrees on a national scale, but it is clear that there are abundant opportunities and appeals for veterans to pursue agricultural education.

**Benefits, Ways to Offer Support**



*Source: Adobe Stock/Straight8Stock.*

The discussion surrounding the benefits of outdoor physical activity on veteran mental health is expansive, suggesting there are obvious benefits for veterans who study or conduct research in agriculture. Enhanced well-being of veterans in agriculture likely stems from a tangible sense of accomplishment and positive impact on one's environment. However, another less obvious benefit for veterans entering agricultural academic programs may be that these programs often have higher percentages of non-traditional and first-generation students. There are clear overlaps between non-traditional and veteran students' experiences on college campuses, such as a reduced sense of belonging. Bringing these groups of students together may alleviate the stressors encountered by both groups and improve their academic experiences, and agricultural colleges are uniquely poised to do so.

Beyond unifying groups of students to help student veterans transition to academic life, universities should recognize that veteran students often need further support to navigate their institution. University support systems ideally include a veteran-specific resource office that employs properly trained staff and administrative personnel who are familiar with the challenges faced by veteran students. Furthermore, supporting veteran student family members, such as spouses and children, is essential but commonly overlooked at academic institutions.

With or without these resources on campus, student veterans and their dependents should know where to tap into support systems to ease their transition from military to academic life. I have compiled a list of suggestions for veteran students based on my own experience as a Marine Corps veteran in both undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the field of soil science.

**Tapping into Support Resources**

- First, and most importantly, find the Veteran's Affairs (VA) ( **https://benefits.va.gov/gibill**) liaison, and ask them every question you can think of regarding financial aid and G.I. Bill assistance. Their assistance is invaluable.
- Determine if you qualify for an Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship ( **https://bit.ly/3nAEQbS**). Contact your VA representative for application assistance.
- Find out if your campus has a student veteran resource office that can assist veterans in navigating enrollment and registration processes, locating available housing, identifying scholarships, and connecting with the on-campus veteran community. These offices may also have veteran lounges and veteran-specific study areas for you to use.
- Consider joining the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Military Veterans of Agriculture Specialty Group (**www.soils.org/membership/specialty-groups**) and become involved in the group's Discussion Board (**https://bit.ly/36Nv5AZ**) to get to know a broader network of veterans within your scientific Society.
- If you are a graduate student veteran, you may have to be more pro-active in locating student veteran groups. Often, email listserves may only include undergraduate student veterans, unintentionally leaving out veteran graduate students of event notifications or important G.I. Bill financial assistance

announcements.

- Find out if your campus has a networking group of faculty and staff who are also military veterans or dependents. These groups often won't turn away student veterans and may be especially good groups for graduate student veterans to get involved in.
- Consider getting connected with the ROTC organization on your campus. It's usually staffed by active-duty service members who can also be a good source of campus information and connection. If you're lucky, some ROTC programs will let veterans use their fitness centers, which are usually reserved for ROTC students.
- Participate in Team Red White and Blue (RWB) events (**www.teamrwb.org**). Team RWB is a member/volunteer-driven organization that promotes wellness through group fitness (virtual and in person). While team RWB is not explicitly associated with academic institutions, finding your local chapter and getting involved with this veteran community in your area will ensure you're staying healthy (both physically and mentally) throughout your time in school.
- Identify if your campus has a Student Veteran's of America ( **https://studentveterans.org/**) chapter to get plugged into peer-to-peer veteran networks and advocacy for veteran education benefits at your institution.

In summary, I want to end with an appeal for veterans to consider pursuing both undergraduate and graduate degrees in agriculture. A recent survey asked ASA, CSSA, and SSSA military veteran members what steered them to agricultural sciences. One veteran noted being intrigued with the "mystery of soils" and another mentioned enjoying the "problem-solving aspect" required for farming—both of these perspectives ring true for me as well. So, if you love being outdoors, solving problems, and enjoy being mystified, consider pursuing agricultural science!

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