



# THE CALL TO SERVE



Providing data-driven recommendations and peer analysis for Fayetteville State University becoming the leading HBCU to attract, support, and graduate military-connected students

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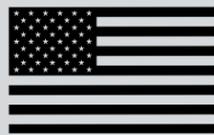


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Report photography by Cindy Burnham and Ezekiel Best



## ABOUT FSU

Fayetteville State University (FSU) is a public, comprehensive, Historically Black University that offers robust and innovative degree programs rooted in the liberal arts tradition. The university advances knowledge through the integration of teaching, learning, research, and public service. FSU strives to meet the educational, career, and personal aspirations of its students from rural, **military**, and other diverse backgrounds so that they are equipped with academic and practical knowledge to serve local, state, national, and global communities as enlightened citizens, globally astute leaders, and engaged solution creators.

## SERVING MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS

FSU has a rich history of supporting military-connected students. As of Spring 2021, approximately 1,700 military-connected students were enrolled either full-time or part-time in undergraduate and graduate degree-seeking programs—nearly 30 percent of the entire student body. FSU also boasts a Student Veterans’ Center, an active student veterans’ organization, a Veterans Business Outreach Center, and both U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps detachments.

Cadet Andrez Anderson



## CHANCELLOR'S LETTER

Dear Fayetteville State University and HBCU Stakeholders:

We are pleased to share the findings of this new and innovative market analysis with you. It provides exciting news about how well Fayetteville State University (FSU) serves military-connected students. Among four-year HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) nationwide, FSU earns the number one rank for educating the most military-connected students! In addition, FSU is the highest-ranked four-year HBCU in *Military Times'* 2021 ranking of Best for Vets Colleges.

Conducted by a veteran-owned marketing and consulting firm, the analysis in this report was comprehensive, including 85 four-year HBCUs nationwide. In addition to the findings above, the analysis reveals other key measures of success: FSU produces strong academic outcomes, offers extensive student supports, and delivers a rapid return on students' investment.

We are proud to have earned such powerful affirmation from an independent, third-party entity. It

builds on FSU's rich legacy of service to military-connected students and our commitment to the service members, veterans, and military families in our midst. In addition, it encourages us in our ongoing efforts to broaden access for military-connected students.

The report underscores yet another reality: There is room for us to improve. At FSU, we do many things well—but we do not do all things well. This report illumines the path forward, showing us how to shore up our weaknesses and build on our strengths. It offers clear insights and targeted recommendations, highlighting areas where we can work strategically to improve how we serve military-connected students. In fact, work is already underway to implement some of the recommendations in this report.

This report is not for FSU alone, however. It has far-reaching implications for other HBCUs across the country. Report recommendations, while written with FSU's programs in mind, still offer a useful template for

any HBCU seeking to strengthen its service to military-connected students. Crafted by a team at a veteran-owned firm, recommendations are thus imbued with authority: They reflect the authors' distinct voices and their concrete, contextual knowledge of the military-connected community in the U.S. We would do well to heed their input.

Finally, this report should serve as a clear call to action for all of our nation's HBCUs. A national conversation about how best to serve military-connected students, within the context of HBCUs and their legacy of developing military leaders of color, is long overdue. My hope for this report is that it will serve as a catalyst for such a conversation, and then, for concerted action from HBCUs all across our nation.

I invite you to read this report, consider its findings, and then collaborate with us—as we seek to serve the heroes among us who have, *already*, heeded the call to serve.

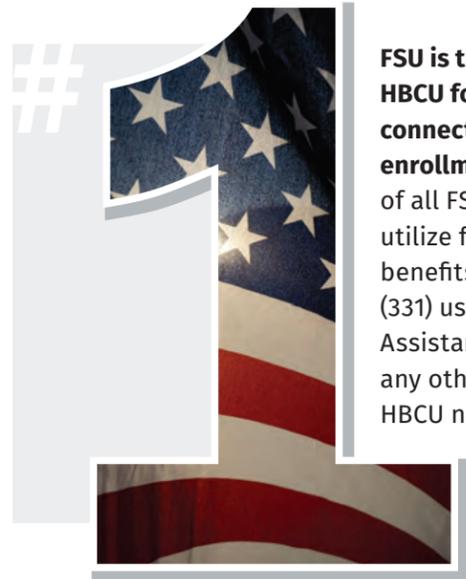
Sincerely,

Darrell T. Allison, J.D.  
Chancellor, Fayetteville State University

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

FSU Is a National Leader in Service to Military-Connected Students

## FSU: Topline Findings



**FSU is the number one HBCU for military-connected student enrollment.** Nearly 18% of all FSU students (1,172) utilize federal GI Bill benefits and over 5% (331) use Tuition Assistance—more than any other four-year HBCU nationwide.

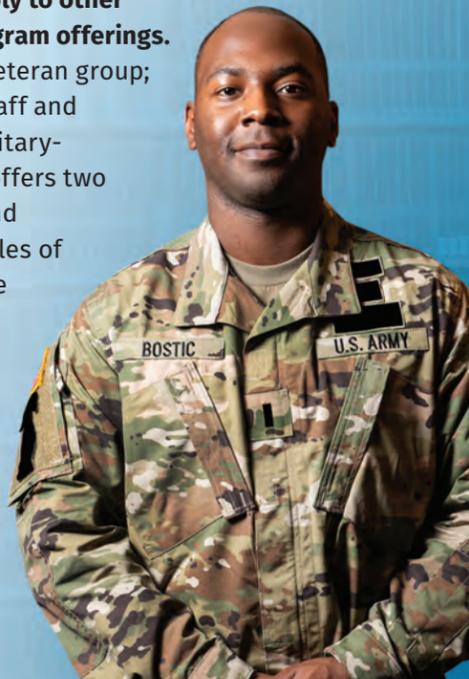
**FSU earns the highest rank among HBCUs as a 2021 Best for Vets College.**

Rankings from *Military Times* position FSU above all other four-year HBCUs.



**FSU excels in academic outcomes linked to student success.** Compared to other four-year HBCUs, FSU exceeds the average undergraduate admissions rate, yield rate, and enrollment count as well as overall retention rate and graduation rate.

**FSU compares favorably to other HBCUs in military program offerings.** FSU hosts a student veteran group; provides dedicated staff and program space for military-connected students; offers two ROTC detachments; and participates in Principles of Excellence through the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA).



2LT Dwayne Bostic

**FSU ranks in the top 3% of HBCUs in graduates' return on investment (ROI).** FSU graduates recoup the return on their educational investment in 2.6 years, on average—over four times faster than the average ROI at other four-year HBCUs.

**TOP 3% 2.6 year ROI 4x FASTER than other HBCUs**

## The Nation's HBCUs: Topline Findings

**2X MORE GI BILL STUDENTS**

**North Carolina HBCUs enroll twice as many GI Bill students, on average, as other HBCUs in the U.S.** HBCUs in N.C. enroll an average of 300 GI Bill students at all degree levels compared to 144 GI Bill students at four-year HBCUs nationwide.

**HBCUs are garnering national recognition from military influencers.** In addition to FSU, four other four-year HBCUs are ranked by *Military Times* as 2021 Best for Vets Colleges: Morgan State University, Albany State University, Elizabeth City State University, and Xavier University. Twelve four-year HBCUs are identified as Military Friendly, according to Viqtory Media.



**14: 100+**

**Fourteen HBCUs in the U.S. enroll more than 100 undergraduate GI Bill students; four enroll over 200 GI Bill students.** Four-year institutions leading undergraduate GI Bill student enrollment nationwide are FSU, North Carolina A&T University, Norfolk State University, and North Carolina Central University.

**4: 200+**

**HBCUs demonstrate a strong commitment to military-connected student support through federal programs—but there is room to improve.**

*Among four-year HBCUs:*

**86%** participate in Tuition Assistance.

**64%** participate in the VA's Principles of Excellence.

**32%** participate in the VA's Yellow Ribbon Program, which increases educational affordability and access.

**HBCUs generally provide outreach to, and support for, military-connected students—but most do not offer a student veteran group.**

*Among four-year HBCUs:*

**69%** feature a veteran-specific website or landing page.

**52%** provide a dedicated office to support their military-connected students.

**LESS THAN 23%** host a student veteran group on campus.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have enjoyed a rich history of supporting military-connected students for nearly 150 years. The time is ripe for an HBCU to seek ways to leverage a positive national discourse around its mission and the significant benefits military-connected students bring to campus, to become America's leading HBCU for military-connected students.

To achieve this and better understand its institutional profile among its peers, Fayetteville State University (FSU) partnered with a veteran-owned marketing and consulting firm to conduct a constructive peer analysis that explored how it compared to its peers at attracting

and serving military-connected students. The secondary purpose was to provide recommendations for better positioning FSU to meet its mission and vision for serving military-connected students through 2025.

This market intelligence supports data-driven decision-making, provides actionable insights that FSU can implement immediately, and empowers FSU to represent the HBCU community in a call to action, to include its historic mission and contributions to America's military-connected community.

Based on an analysis using 26 variables, including academic outcomes, a survey of college ranking systems, and programmatic offerings, FSU

compared favorably, even exceptionally, to its four-year peer HBCUs.

FSU exceeds the average undergraduate admissions rate, undergraduate yield rate, undergraduate enrollment count, overall retention rate, the average number of GI Bill students, graduation rate, and return on investment (ROI) compared to its peers. FSU placed in the top three percent of its peers for ROI, has the largest number of GI Bill students among HBCUs, and was the highest-ranked HBCU in *Military Times*' Best for Vets ranking.

FSU participated in or hosted most of the services and programs captured, including participating in the U.S. Department of Defense's Military Tuition Assistance program, the

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Principles of Excellence, and two Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs associated with the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force. In addition, FSU has a student veteran group on campus, a veteran-specific office, a marketed programming space for military-connected students, and a veteran-specific website.

A slight positive correlation was detected between the number of undergraduate GI Bill students and ranks as a Best for Vets campus by *Military Times*. Finally, a higher number of undergraduate GI Bill students at an HBCU correlated to a higher overall graduation rate for undergraduate students.

These findings were incorporated to propose the following recommendations to FSU decision-makers as the institution seeks to become the destination for military-connected students:

- » *Design and employ a military-connected Student Outcomes Assessment Framework at FSU to empower decision-making and resource allocation.*
- » *Establish new domestic and international academic partnerships to increase brand recognition and serve military-connected students.*
- » *Participate in VA's Yellow Ribbon Program in the interest of student equity and increased enrollment.*

» *Become the first HBCU to partner with Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) to help military-connected students thrive on campus.*

» *Centralize and expand the military and veteran education website to streamline information and share FSU's proud history.*

» *Lead the national conversation in higher education as a voice for underserved communities of color and military-connected students.*

Once these recommendations are implemented, FSU will be well-positioned to become America's best HBCU for military-connected students and to meet its institutional mission.



Cadet Lynette Medina

## INTRODUCTION

Under the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, universities that received grants of land required their male students to participate in military training (Hutcheson, 2020). This requirement includes Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which have a rich history of educating Black service members for the U.S. Armed Forces, dating back

to the establishment of Alcorn State University in 1871. The establishment of the “separate but equal” doctrine by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 set the stage for HBCUs to train educated Black men drafted into the U.S. Armed Forces (Hampton II, 2013). With the establishment of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) in 1916,

HBCUs have produced more than 75 percent of Black officers for the U.S. Armed Forces.

Higher education has played a significant role in preparing students for a career in the military, but it was not until after September 11, 2001 that higher education widened its focus to better support military-connected

students serving or transitioning from a career in the military, due to an expansion of federal education benefits.

Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill<sup>1</sup> went into effect in 2009,<sup>1</sup> providing more generous federal financial benefits, there has been a tremendous growth among higher education institutions’ efforts to identify military-connected students as a part of campus communities and the barriers and benefits they face on campus. There is corresponding growth in military-connected students enrolling in higher education using federal education benefit programs such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment programs. As recently as June 2021, the VA reported serving nearly 900,000 students annually (VA Annual Benefits Report, 2021). This growth has also coincided with an increase in ranking and branding services to identify best-performing institutions that serve military-connected students.

Higher education marketing publications targeted at prospective military-connected students established specific attributes to categorize colleges and universities as “military- or veteran-friendly” that go beyond statutory and regulatory requirements to foster welcoming academic environments. For example, in one major ranking publication, Viqtory Media’s 2021-2022 Military Friendly<sup>®</sup> Schools<sup>2</sup> rankings across institutional types, 12 HBCUs are listed as Military Friendly (Military Friendly Schools, 2019). The current national political climate and policy formation are also favorable to HBCUs.

The Biden Administration’s budget request to the U.S. Senate for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 includes increased funding for “minority-serving” institutions, significant increases in Pell Grant funding, and greater financial support for attracting underserved and underrepresented students into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degree programs (Burke, 2021).

Furthermore, President Biden has committed his administration to advancing more financial equity to HBCUs, stating, “Just imagine how much more creative and innovative we’d be if this nation held the historically Black colleges and universities to the same...funding and resources of public universities to compete for jobs and industries of the future” (Biden, 2021). This reinvigorated support leads to two fundamental questions: How can Fayetteville State University attract more military-connected students, and how can the institution better support its military-connected students?

Fayetteville State University (hereafter, FSU), a public, comprehensive HBCU, has a generational opportunity to position itself as the number one HBCU for military-connected students. In alignment with the University of North Carolina (UNC) System’s strategic goals for supporting military-connected students, FSU established an Office for External Affairs and Military Relations to bring together a team of university administrators to increase military student enrollment, retention, graduation rates, and post-graduation success (Norris, 2021).

In May 2021, FSU completed an internal *Campus Military Landscape Analysis* to understand the context of the military-connected population and recommend uniquely tailored services. The analysis found eight factors that could make FSU a nationally recognized destination for military-connected students, with an emphasis on students of color. Those factors include:

1. *Geographic proximity to Fort Bragg*
2. *Access to Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) which serves as a “feeder” for military transfer students who want to pursue a four-year degree (27 percent of military-connected students at FSU transfer from FTCC)*
3. *A large veteran population remaining in Fayetteville, NC, after leaving active-duty service*
4. *Specific degree programs that are in high demand for active-duty personnel, veterans, and military spouses*
5. *Low tuition rates*
6. *An admissions office located at Fort Bragg’s Continuing Education Center*
7. *Two major ROTC detachments that produce U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army officers*
8. *The only North Carolina HBCU Center for Defense and Homeland Security*

<sup>1</sup> GI Bill<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by the VA is available at the official U.S. government website at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.

<sup>2</sup> Military Friendly<sup>®</sup> is owned and operated by VIQTORY, a service-disabled, veteran-owned small business.

*The primary purpose of this paper is to provide a constructive analysis that explores how FSU compares to its peers at attracting and serving military-connected students. The secondary purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations to FSU senior leadership for ways the institution can better position itself to meet its mission and vision for serving military-connected students through 2025.*

The analysis showed that as of May 2021, FSU had approximately 1,700 military-connected students enrolled in full- or part-time undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Finally, the analysis sought to connect the recommendations to the broader mission and vision for FSU.

The *2020-2025 Strategic Plan: New Challenges, Bold Promises* outlined how FSU will “be bold in providing a transformative experience to students from rural, underserved, and economically challenged environments” as the second-oldest public university in North Carolina. As part of this strategic plan, the institution’s vision is to “be the regional university of choice for students [from] rural, **military** [emphasis added], and other diverse backgrounds, who are poised to become visionary leaders who transform communities, states, and nations” (2020-2025 Strategic Plan: New Challenges, Bold Promises). FSU will achieve this vision by focusing on specialized offerings and services to meet the needs of military-connected students.

The competitive advantages that FSU enjoys complement its 2020-2025

Strategic Plan and coincide with the hiring of an Associate Vice Chancellor for Military Affairs—a new leader tasked with implementing a broad agenda to improve FSU programs and services to current and prospective military-connected students.

To support its effort, FSU contracted with Evocati LLC, a service-connected veteran-owned marketing and consulting firm that supports clients who want to make a positive impact in the military-connected community. FSU tasked Evocati with conducting thorough research and data analysis on military-connected student enrollment, retention, graduation, and post-graduation success rates among all HBCUs within the United States. Evocati was also tasked, based on its analysis and expertise, with providing recommendations for how FSU can increase its productivity and footprint in service to active-duty members of the military, military-connected students, and veterans.

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connected students. The secondary purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations to FSU senior leadership for ways the institution can better position itself to meet its mission and vision for serving military-connected students through 2025.

The implications for the analysis and recommendations below are far-reaching. First, FSU senior leadership will have access to market intelligence for where the university is institutionally positioned compared to its peers—intelligence to make data-driven decisions to support its mission and vision through 2025. Second, the recommendations outlined below will provide actionable insights that can be implemented immediately, thus placing FSU ahead of its peers to become America’s most attractive HBCU for degree-seeking, military-connected students, and students from underrepresented communities. Finally, and most importantly, this research can empower FSU to represent the HBCU community in a call to action to include its historic mission and contributions among stakeholders in the military-connected higher education space.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE & PROGRAMS

Scholarly research on military-connected students’ needs, performance, and demographics is an emerging field of study. To acknowledge the research and literature around military-connected students, some readers may need to understand terms and definitions used throughout the current body of scholarship and this paper to make more meaningful connections and conclusions.

### TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

The term “*veteran*” has historically been used to describe anyone who has served in the U.S. Armed Forces. The U.S. Armed Forces include the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Space Force; each service branch may have respective National Guard and Reserve components with specialized missions to meet America’s national defense needs. U.S. National Guard and Reserve members are often described as “*citizen soldiers*” who generally maintain roles in the civilian sector while also fulfilling the requirement to serve at least once a month in their respective component. National Guard members may be activated and deployed by a state’s respective governor for the purposes of responding to an emergency. Finally, while the U.S. Coast Guard operates under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, it is considered a member of the U.S. Armed Forces and may operate in the U.S. and international waters in support of America’s national defense.

A veteran is defined in Title 38 U.S.C.

§ 101 for the purposes of determining eligibility to federal benefits and services administered by the VA. The term is defined as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released there from under conditions other than dishonorable” (P.L. 85-857, 1958). While a veteran may leave the U.S. Armed Forces and enroll in an ROTC program on a college campus, most ROTC cadets are civilians pursuing a degree that includes an obligated period of service with a service branch upon graduating (Wikimedia Foundation, 2021).

The term “*service member*” is often used to describe someone who is a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, i.e., this person is a member of an active, reserve, or National Guard component of the U.S. Armed Forces (Wikimedia Foundation, 2020). Once discharged (sometimes referred to as separated) from the service, this person is considered a veteran.

The term “*family member*” is often used interchangeably with

“*dependent*,” especially for the purposes of determining eligibility to federal benefit programs and services offered by the VA. A family member can be the spouse, child, adopted child, stepchild, or survivor(s) of a veteran or service member.

For the purposes of this paper, a veteran includes anyone who served in the U.S. Armed Forces, regardless of discharge status (The College Board & Ithaca S+R, 2020). “*Student veteran*” includes anyone who served, regardless of discharge status, and may be a current or prospective postsecondary student.

Finally, the terms “*military-connected*” and “*military-affiliated*” are used interchangeably within higher education, based on preferences or formal policy. This report uses “*military-connected*” to capture all the terms described above, to include service members, veterans, ROTC cadets, and family members, unless otherwise specified.

## MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Military-connected students have pursued postsecondary higher education throughout American history; however, the 20th century saw a substantial increase when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill of Rights) into law, igniting an era of educational expansion. Thanks to the World War II era GI Bill, "more than 10.3 million veterans attended colleges and universities; what is more, the percentage of U.S. citizens with undergraduate or advanced degrees rose from 4.6 percent in 1945 to more than 33 percent by 2016" (Bogue & Morse, 2020). However, this promise was not delivered equitably to all veterans consistent with the values of American society, including a commitment to greater diversity and equity on college campuses.

Black veterans were disproportionately denied GI Bill benefits or pushed to underperforming higher education institutions—95 percent of Black veterans attended segregated colleges, including HBCUs, that were already chronically underfunded and underserved (Bogue, Restoring Equity to Black World War II Veterans, 2021). Now, more than 75 years later, the national discourse and policy discussions are finally confronting the reality of this injustice. FSU and all of America's system of postsecondary higher education have an opportunity to confront this injustice, because military-connected students are some of the best-performing students in higher education.

Student veterans using the GI Bill have an average GPA of 3.4, compared to 2.94 for nontraditional adult learners. They achieve this GPA despite the obstacles they encounter. They are more likely to be married, have a full- or part-time job, have a child(ren), be living or diagnosed with a disability, and be a first-generation college student (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017). Student veterans using the GI Bill are more likely to complete a degree compared to their peers. They prefer to pursue degrees in business, STEM, and healthcare-related fields. Women veterans using the GI Bill are overrepresented in higher education, with 23 percent earning degrees compared to making up only 16 percent of the population serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. Finally, 56 percent of student veterans using the GI Bill attend public institutions of higher education (Cate et al., 2017). Despite the positive implications in these trends, the postsecondary utilization and outcomes of military-connected students of color remain largely unexplored by scholars and, from what has been discovered, suggest a greater level of effort is necessary to support their matriculation into postsecondary education.

One peer-reviewed study conducted in 2014 found that "despite the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 expanding educational benefits for military veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, African-American veterans are utilizing GI benefits less than other ethnic groups. Few longitudinal studies have

addressed this phenomenon." Barriers (access to postsecondary education) and obstacles (readiness to enter postsecondary education) included access to healthcare, employment opportunities, funding, and remedial training. The author recommended that higher education and community leaders address the barriers and obstacles to higher education for African-American student veterans and all underserved communities to better realize their potential and contribution to society (Ottley, 2014).

Another study released in 2021 by a veteran-serving nonprofit found that undergraduate student veterans of color have disparate outcomes. Using data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), the study found that undergraduate veterans of color were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree compared to their white peers; they were slightly more likely to earn an associate degree. However, they were more likely to withdraw without earning a degree compared to their white peers, citing the increase in risk factors associated with non-completion (Ochinko & Payea, 2021).

Undergraduate veterans of color constituted 41 percent of undergraduate veterans in the academic year 2015 to 2016; however, students of color were more likely to enroll in proprietary institutions (Ochinko & Payea, Annual and Cumulative Student Loan Debt Among Veterans Using and Not Using GI Bill Benefits, 2019). Finally, the study validated benefit usage measured in 2014, determining that the "use of

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GI Bill benefits by undergraduate veterans of color was lower than that of their white peers across all institutional sectors and for each year of enrollment." A separate study by the same nonprofit found that "57 percent of veteran beneficiaries who graduated from a for-profit school had an average of \$25,150 in student loan debt compared to 79 percent of their non-beneficiary counterparts who had an average of \$37,620 in student loans when they graduated." Current trends that witness more veterans of color enrolling in proprietary institutions and leaving with higher levels of student loan debt compared to their peers are worrisome.

A working paper by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, measuring two decades of financial literature and outcomes at proprietary institutions, found that a "vast majority of studies on employment and earnings gains for students in for-profits find worse outcomes for for-profit students relative to similar students in other sectors." The author does credit proprietary institutions with their ability to pivot more effectively to meet

market demands compared to other types of institutions (Riegg Cellini, For-Profit Colleges in the United States: Insights from Two Decades of Research, 2021). This observation is further supported by a RAND Corporation testimony in 2012 which utilized focus groups of veterans using the GI Bill to learn about their experiences attending proprietary institutions.

RAND determined that the assumption that veterans choose proprietary institutions based on aggressive marketing tactics may require a more nuanced lens from policymakers. RAND observed that veterans choose these institutions based on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, tuition costs that the GI Bill covered, access to more adult-oriented programs with flexible course times, more accommodative credit transfer policies, and the ability to attend the same institution regardless of where they lived (RAND Corporation, 2012). These are entirely rational reasons for choosing to enroll in proprietary institutions—they also offer an opening for HBCUs to examine how their policies and

programmatic offerings can better align to improve their attractiveness to military-connected students. This could coincide with the call to action by Ithaka S+R to enroll more veterans at high graduation rate colleges and universities (Bond Hill, Kurzweil, Pisacreta, & Schwartz, 2019).

In 2019, Ithaka S+R noted that only one in ten veterans using the GI Bill enrolls in institutions with a graduation rate of 70 percent or higher; one in three veterans attends proprietary institutions. The paper sought to counter persistent myths about veterans in higher education to gain national attention for reducing income inequality and improving attainment for underrepresented minorities in higher education (Hill et al., 2019).

While the current literature surrounding military-connected students is steadily emerging, the growth in programs and services for military-connected students has quietly matured into a burgeoning industry, but only in key institutional sectors.



Military Science Classroom

## GROWTH OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS

The implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009 established marketing terms such as “Best for Veterans” and “Military-Friendly” campuses to attract and recruit military personnel and families to enroll at these institutions. This trend coincided with a variety of ranking systems for schools that support military-connected students. Defined characteristics of what deems an institution as “military-connected inclusive” vary and often rely on opt-in survey responses that may include survey bias (Altman, 2019,

Military Friendly, n.d., & Brooks & Morse, 2020). Research indicates that military-connected students believe that being “military-friendly” should include more than offering financial support to foster a campus community to allow for positive student outcomes (American Council on Education, 2009).

In 2010, the Department of Education established the Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success program for postsecondary institutions to apply for funding to coordinate services to

address veteran students’ academic, financial, physical, and social needs (2016). As of 2020, the Department of Education has awarded more than \$17 million to two-year and four-year institutions for programming models meeting the following requirements:

1. *Establishing a Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success on the campus of the institution to provide a single point of contact to coordinate comprehensive support services for veteran students*

2. *Establishing a veteran student support team, including representatives from the offices of the institution responsible for admissions, registration, financial aid, veterans’ benefits, academic advising, student health, personal or mental health counseling, career advising, disabilities services, and any other office of the institution that provides support to veteran students on campus*
3. *Providing a coordinator whose primary responsibility is to coordinate the model program*
4. *Monitoring the rates of veteran student enrollment, persistence, and completion*
5. *Developing a plan to sustain the Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success after the grant period*

Establishing a Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success may not align with an institution’s military-connected student population demographics or needs. The spirit of the program addresses how institutional resources need to be aligned to foster an inclusive campus culture for military-connected students to promote high student outcomes.

Characteristics of military-connected comprehensive services factor in the entire student enrollment cycle, including pre-enrollment advising to alumni engagement. Prospective military-connected students have unique experiences when navigating the admissions process to include military and academic transfer of credits, cost of attendance with the use of military education benefits, and accessing high school and

standardized testing records (Bond Hill, Kurzweil, Pisacreta, & Schwartz, 2019). Military-connected students benefit from engaging with faculty and staff familiar with the military-connected student experience to efficiently connect students to campus resources (Lopez, Schwartz, & Pisacreta, 2020). While enrolled in an academic program, engagement opportunities such as a Student Veterans of America chapter serve to build community and peer networks of support and mentorship (Student Veterans of America, n.d.).

On June 3, 2021, U.S. Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Jacky Rosen (D-NV) introduced legislation to improve on-campus programs and services for student veterans; the Veteran Education and Empowerment Act of 2021 already enjoys bipartisan and bicameral support. Citing findings by the Department of Education that “federally funded Student Veteran Centers and staff have generated improved recruitment, retention, and graduation rates, have helped student veterans feel better connected across campus and have directly contributed to the successful academic outcomes of student veterans,” the legislation seeks to reestablish a federal grant program for an on-campus student veteran success center that was previously funded in 2015 and 2020 (Rubio, Rosen & Frankel, 2021). While the legislation has yet to make its way through Congress, the tone and tenor are clear: National lawmakers from across the aisle are interested in improving comprehensive services for military-connected students to improve their outcomes (Veteran Education Empowerment Act, 2021).

Several military-connected inclusive institutions offer a range of resources that cater specifically to their student

population and institutional assets. Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) provides robust services to enrolled military-connected students and produces state-of-the-art community programming designed for entrepreneurs and women veterans while generating scholarly research to learn more about the military-connected community (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, n.d.). Columbia University’s Center for Veteran Transition and Integration (CVTI) also provides robust services to a large population of military-connected students while producing innovative transition programming for any service member or veteran (Center for Veteran Transition and Integration, n.d.). Stanford University offers a four-week intensive accelerator program for post-9/11 veteran entrepreneurs (Stanford Graduate School of Business, n.d.). Arizona State University is home to the Pat Tillman Veterans Center, designed to support on-campus and online military-connected students as they navigate resources and services (Arizona State University, n.d.). The University of Maryland Global Campus has a legacy of serving the military-connected community dating back to 1947 by offering degree courses to active-duty service members in the U.S. and deployed overseas (University of Maryland Global Campus, n.d.). This is a unique example of an institution that went out into the military-connected community instead of waiting for the community to come to campus to build an engaged academic partnership. The institutions highlighted are not exhaustive but are intended to highlight different ways schools tailor comprehensive services specific to the community and institutional assets.

# METHODOLOGY

FSU's *Campus Military Landscape Analysis* provided the context of FSU military-connected student outcomes and initiatives (Norris, 2021). In a strategic approach to meet FSU's goal to position itself as the number one HBCU for military-connected students, Evocati conducted a secondary quantitative data analysis to compare FSU's student outcomes and initiatives with other HBCUs in the U.S. Through purposive sampling, schools included in the HBCU sample met the criteria of being four-year public or private accredited institutions that the Department of Education recognizes as HBCUs (n=85; 40 public

and 45 private) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This analysis includes 26 variables that were measured to compare undergraduate student outcomes (e.g., admissions, enrollment, retention, and graduation rates), marketing outcomes (e.g., rankings, recruiting, and websites), campus resources (e.g., dedicated staff, space, student organization, and ROTC unit), and cost of attendance financial support (e.g., Yellow Ribbon Program, Rogers STEM, and scholarships). Student outcomes data were retrieved from the Department of Education's

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d. & U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Marketing outcomes data were retrieved from private publications and institutional websites. Campus resources were retrieved from the VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool, institutional websites, and DoD branch of service ROTC school locators. To provide context for military-connected student outcomes, five variables of overall undergraduate student outcomes at four-year HBCUs were measured.

**Table 1.1 A** Detailed List of the Variables, Source, and Description

Variable	Source	Description
HBCU Overall Undergrad Admissions Rate	U.S. Department of Education Data File	Number of total undergraduate applicants, percentage accepted, percentage enrolled (yield)
HBCU Overall Undergrad Enrollment	U.S. Department of Education Data File	Number of full-time undergraduate enrollment for a specific academic year (an academic year: August 1-July 31)
HBCU Overall Top Degree Programs	U.S. Department of Education Data File	Overall undergraduate degrees conferred in the 2019-2020 academic year
HBCU Overall Grad Rate	U.S. Department of Education Data File	The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program
HBCU Veteran Grad Rate	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate mil-con students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program. If possible, mil-con should include breakdown of service members (active and reservist), veterans, spouses, children, and ROTC.
HBCU Overall Retention	U.S. Department of Education Data File	The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year
HBCU Veteran Retention	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The percentage of first-time, first-year mil-con undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year. If possible, mil-con should include breakdown of service members (active and reservist), veterans, spouses, children, and ROTC.
Military Times "Best for Vets" Ranking	"Best for Vets" Website	Rank Listing
Viqtory Media "Military Friendly" Ranking	"Military Friendly" Website	Rank Listing
US News & World Report Best College for Veterans Ranking	US News & World Report	Rank Listing
CVTI Interactive Map	Columbia University Center for Veteran Transition & Integration Attaining Higher Education Map	On the Map or Not

**CONTINUED Table 1.1 A** Detailed List of the Variables, Source, and Description

Variable	Source	Description
Yellow Ribbon Participant	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	2021-2022 dollar contribution and number of slots. Yellow Ribbon is administered by VA and offers to pay for the higher cost of tuition at a private school or for attendance as a nonresident student at a public school. If a beneficiary qualifies, a school will contribute a certain amount toward their extra tuition and fees through a grant, scholarship, or similar program while the VA matches the contribution.
DoD Military Tuition Assistance	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	This program provides financial assistance to service members for voluntary off-duty education programs supporting professional and personal self-development goals. TA is available for courses that are part of an approved academic degree or certificate program; they must be offered by schools recognized by the U.S. Department of Education that are signatories to the current DoD Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding.
Yellow Ribbon Equity	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	Yellow Ribbon Equity is defined based on the extent to which an institution participates in the VA's Yellow Ribbon Program. Institutions may not participate, may offer a capped amount of financial support to students or a capped number of students; or may have no cap (unlimited) on the financial amount and number of students who can receive Yellow Ribbon funds.
VA Principles of Excellence	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The Principles of Excellence are administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and require schools that receive federal funding through programs such as the GI Bill to follow certain guidelines.
Rogers STEM Scholarship Participant	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The Edith Nourse Rogers Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) Scholarship allows some eligible veterans and dependents in high-demand fields to extend their Post-9/11 GI Bill or Fry Scholarship benefits. The institution offers the Rogers STEM Scholarship as indicated on the GI Bill Comparison Tool.
Student Veteran Group	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The institution has a student-led veteran group on campus and is indicated on the GI Bill Comparison Tool.
Veteran Specific Scholarships Funded by Institution	Institution's Financial Aid Site	The institution offers scholarships for veterans and military-connected students.
Veteran Specific Website	Institution's Site Search	The institution has a dedicated website for military-connected students.
Veteran Specific Office	Institution's Site Search	The institution has a dedicated office for supporting military-connected students.
Veteran Specific Programming Space	Institution's Site Search	The institution has a dedicated physical space on campus for military-connected students.
ROI	Interactive Map of the Price-to-Earnings Premium for All Students - Third Way	The Price to Earnings Premium is the net price the average student pays out-of-pocket to obtain an academic credential relative to the additional amount they earn by attending that institution in the first place. The formula is as follows: Total Average Net Price / (Post-Enrollment Earnings - Typical Salary of High School Graduate) = Number of Years to Recoup Net Cost
ROTC Unit	Institution Site Search	Yes/No
Institution's Student Population	U.S. Department of Education Data File	Enrollment of all degree levels
Institution's Count of GI Bill Recipients	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs GI Bill Comparison Tool Data File	The number of veterans, service members, and family members using their GI Bill benefits attending this school in the last calendar year. This includes all chapters of the GI Bill program (e.g., Post-9/11, Montgomery GI Bill, Reserve Education Assistance Program, and Veteran Readiness and Employment).
Institution's Count of Military TA Recipients	U.S. Department of Defense Data File	The number of service members using DoD Military Tuition Assistance benefits attending school.



(left) Janet Polk, Interim Director for Military Student Success and Jamie Davis, FSU Student Veteran

## KEY FINDINGS

Overall, FSU compares favorably, even exceptionally, to its four-year peer HBCUs. FSU exceeds the average undergraduate admissions rate, undergraduate yield rate, undergraduate enrollment count, overall retention rate, the average number of GI Bill students, graduation rate, and return on investment (ROI) compared to its peers. FSU placed in the top three percent of its peers for ROI, has the largest number of GI Bill students among HBCUs, and was the highest-ranked HBCU in *Military Times*' Best for Vets ranking.

Five four-year HBCUs, including FSU, were ranked as Best for Vets institutions by *Military Times*—FSU was ranked the

highest out of all HBCUs at 65th (out of 297 schools) in the four-year school category. Twelve HBCUs were designated as Military Friendly institutions by Viqtory Media; however, FSU was not designated as Military Friendly. Only one HBCU, Howard University, was ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as a best college for veterans.

FSU compared favorably to its peer HBCUs for participating in or hosting most of the services and programs captured, including participating in DoD's Military TA program and the VA's Principles of Excellence; having a student veteran group on campus, a veteran-specific office, a marketed programming space for military-

connected students, and a veteran-specific website; and offering two ROTC programs associated with the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force.

Using the Pearson correlation coefficient, a slight positive correlation was detected between the number of undergraduate GI Bill students and rank as a Best for Vets institution by *Military Times*;  $r(84) = .316, p = .003$ . HBCUs with a high number of GI Bill students were more likely to be ranked. There is a correlation between an institution's graduation rate and GI Bill students—the more undergraduate GI Bill students at an HBCU, the higher the overall graduation rate for undergraduate students.

## PERFORMANCE & RETURN ON INVESTMENT AT FOUR-YEAR HBCUS

The average undergraduate admissions rate for four-year institutions was 69%, while FSU's rate was 79%; this placed FSU in the 71st percentile among its peers. The average undergraduate yield rate for four-year institutions was 18%, while FSU enjoyed a 20% yield rate. This placed FSU in the 72nd percentile among its peers. The average overall retention rate for full-time students at four-year institutions was 64.3%, while FSU's retention rate was 74%. The average overall retention rate for

part-time students at HBCUs was 41.6%, while FSU's retention rate was significantly lower at 14%. See Table 1.2 for a comparison.

The average overall graduation rate for four-year institutions was 33.9%, while FSU's graduation rate was 36%, placing it in the 60th percentile of its peers. Spelman College had the highest graduation rate at 75%, while Southwestern Christian College had the lowest graduation rate at 6%.

Table 1.2 Averages for Students at HBCUs

Measurement (Four-Year HBCU)	Average	FSU	Rating
Undergraduate Admission Rate	69%	79%	71%
Undergraduate Yield Rate	18%	20%	72%
Retention Rate (Full-Time Students)	64.3%	74%	85%
Retention Rate (Part-Time Students)	41.6%	14%	18%
Graduation Rate	33.9%	36%	60%
Return on Investment	11.8 Years	2.6 Years	3%

Deonna Aponte, FSU Student Veteran



The first, second, and third most preferred undergraduate degree programs at four-year HBCUs were: (1) business, (2) biomedical and health professions, and (3) criminal justice. At FSU, the first, second, and third preferred degree programs mirrored those at all four-year HBCUs.

Four-year institutions enrolled an average of 2,576 undergraduate students compared to FSU, which enrolled 5,644 undergraduate students. VA data demonstrated that, on average, HBCUs have 53 Post-9/11 GI Bill undergraduate students; FSU had the most with 473 Post-9/11 GI Bill undergraduates and 1,172 among all degree levels and benefit types. Fourteen HBCUs had more than 100 Post-9/11 GI Bill undergraduate students (see Table 1.4). When comparing the number

of GI Bill students among all degree levels and benefit types, the average number among all U.S. four-year schools was 165.27; the average among all U.S. two-year schools was 146.83 students. Four-year HBCU institutions averaged 144.02 GI Bill students among all degree levels; the average among all two-year HBCUs was 255.36 GI Bill students.

Four-year institutions in North Carolina averaged 158 GI Bill students at all degree levels; two-year institutions in North Carolina averaged 199.84 students. When narrowing down solely to North Carolina's HBCUs, the average number of GI Bill students among all degree levels was 300.2 students. FSU had the highest percentage of students using the GI Bill and DoD's Military TA among all four-year HBCUs (see Table

1.3) at 17.89% and 5.05%, respectively.

To compare by scale, the top three institutions with the most GI Bill students are the American Public University System (17,648), the University of Maryland Global Campus (13,366), and the University of Phoenix (13,284). While FSU's results are encouraging, they should serve as a warning: FSU operates in a fertile recruiting area that provides inherent advantages. Unless the recommendations below and those provided in the internal *Campus Military Landscape Analysis* are implemented, FSU risks losing students to a primarily online four-year institution that deliberately targets prospective military-connected students in Fayetteville and surrounding military bases like Fort Bragg.

**Table 1.3** Percentage of GI Bill & DoD's Military TA Users at all 4-year HBCUs

Institution	Student Population	GI Bill Students	TA Students	GI Bill %	Military TA %
<b>Fayetteville State University</b>	<b>6,551</b>	<b>1,172</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>17.89%</b>	<b>5.05%</b>
North Carolina A&T State University	12,556	765	28	6.09%	0.22%
Texas Southern University	9,034	521	7	5.77%	0.08%
Norfolk State University	5,601	506	56	9.03%	1.00%
Prairie View A&M University	8,940	489	10	5.47%	0.11%
North Carolina Central University	8,011	431	17	5.38%	0.21%
Alabama A&M University	6,172	408	5	6.61%	0.08%
Florida A&M University	9,626	395	7	4.10%	0.07%
Virginia State University	4,365	370	10	8.48%	0.23%
Alabama State University	4,190	342	6	8.16%	0.14%
Bowie State University	6,171	300	23	4.86%	0.37%
Howard University	9,399	285	0	3.03%	0.00%
Albany State University	6,122	284	12	4.64%	0.20%
Southern University and A&M College	7,140	284	5	3.98%	0.07%
Winston-Salem State University	5,121	274	1	5.35%	0.02%
Savannah State University	3,668	264	19	7.20%	0.52%
Hampton University	4,293	263	17	6.13%	0.40%
Jackson State University	7,020	263	16	3.75%	0.23%
Tennessee State University	8,081	263	7	3.25%	0.09%

**CONTINUED Table 1.3** Percentage of GI Bill & DoD's Military TA Users at all 4-year HBCUs

Institution	Student Population	GI Bill Students	TA Students	GI Bill %	Military TA %
South Carolina State University	2,479	235	9	9.48%	0.36%
Clark Atlanta University	3,920	224	4	5.71%	0.10%
Morgan State University	7,763	215	11	2.77%	0.14%
Grambling State University	5,232	181	1	3.46%	0.02%
Delaware State University	4,768	169	15	3.54%	0.31%
Fort Valley State University	2,624	159	3	6.06%	0.11%
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	2,498	150	6	6.00%	0.24%
Tuskegee University	2,876	130	4	4.52%	0.14%
Clafin University	2,070	126	15	6.09%	0.72%
Spelman College	2,120	123	0	5.80%	0.00%
University of the District of Columbia	4,199	123	1	2.93%	0.02%
Bethune Cookman University	2,901	121	12	4.17%	0.41%
Alcorn State University	3,523	118	10	3.35%	0.28%
Southern University New Orleans	2,309	116	0	5.02%	0.00%
Elizabeth City State University	1,769	109	1	6.16%	0.06%
Lincoln University	2,436	104	30	4.27%	1.23%
Morehouse College	2,238	97	2	4.33%	0.09%
Xavier University	3,325	97	2	2.92%	0.06%
Johnson C. Smith University	1,494	85	0	5.69%	0.00%
Benedict College	2,040	82	1	4.02%	0.05%
University of Maryland-Eastern Shore	2,886	82	3	2.84%	0.10%
West Virginia State University	4,120	80	1	1.94%	0.02%
Mississippi Valley State University	2,147	77	5	3.59%	0.23%
Bluefield State College	1,241	72	2	5.80%	0.16%
Huston-Tillotson University	1,121	72	N/A	6.42%	N/A
Shaw University	1,291	70	1	5.42%	0.08%
Coppin State University	2,724	58	7	2.13%	0.26%
The Lincoln University	2,241	58	5	2.59%	0.22%
Langston University	2,190	54	N/A	2.47%	N/A
Miles College	1,456	53	2	3.64%	0.14%
Livingstone College	1,122	47	0	4.19%	0.00%

Institution	Student Population	GI Bill Students	TA Students	GI Bill %	Military TA %
Dillard University	1,225	45	0	3.67%	0.00%
Kentucky State University	2,171	43	2	1.98%	0.09%
Morris College	600	43	1	7.17%	0.17%
Philander Smith College	996	42	N/A	4.22%	N/A
Stillman College	861	41	0	4.76%	0.00%
Oakwood University	1,526	39	2	2.56%	0.13%
Virginia Union University	1,451	38	0	2.62%	0.00%
St. Augustine's University	899	37	0	4.12%	0.00%
Florida Memorial University	1,097	34	N/A	3.10%	N/A
Allen University	817	33	0	4.04%	0.00%
University of the Virgin Islands	2,084	33	13	1.58%	0.62%
Edward Waters College	3,085	30	N/A	0.97%	N/A
Harris-Stowe State University	1,630	30	3	1.84%	0.18%
Paine College	448	29	0	6.47%	0.00%
Tougaloo College	716	29	N/A	4.05%	N/A
Talladega College	1,239	28	N/A	2.26%	N/A
Voorhees College	510	28	0	5.49%	0.00%
Wiley College	712	27	N/A	3.79%	N/A
LeMoyne Owen College	835	26	0	3.11%	0.00%
Central State University	2,033	25	N/A	1.23%	N/A
Lane College	1,267	25	0	1.97%	0.00%
Jarvis Christian College	867	22	N/A	2.54%	N/A
Paul Quinn College	554	22	N/A	3.97%	N/A
Fisk University	874	21	0	2.40%	0.00%
Arkansas Baptist College	531	16	N/A	3.01%	N/A
Rust College	738	16	N/A	2.17%	N/A
Texas College	940	16	N/A	1.70%	N/A
Bennett College	311	12	0	3.86%	0.00%
Cheyney University	616	9	N/A	1.46%	N/A
Virginia University of Lynchburg	270	9	N/A	3.33%	N/A
American Baptist College	99	8	0	8.08%	0.00%
Clinton College	190	8	N/A	4.21%	N/A
Simmons College of Kentucky	209	6	N/A	2.87%	N/A
Wilberforce University	566	4	N/A	0.71%	N/A
Southwestern Christian College	106	2	N/A	1.89%	N/A

**Table 1.4** Fourteen HBCUs with 100+ Post-9/11 GI Bill Undergraduate Students

Institution	Post-9/11 GI Bill Undergraduate Students
<b>Fayetteville State University</b>	<b>473</b>
North Carolina A&T State University	438
Norfolk State University	247
North Carolina Central University	219
Morgan State University	165
Prairie View A&M University	159
Texas Southern University	136
Bowie State University	121
Hampton University	114
Alabama State University	113
Florida A&M University	113
Virginia State University	113
Howard University	111
Tennessee State University	105

On average, students at four-year HBCUs took 11.8 years to realize a return on their investment (ROI). That means it took an average of nearly 12 years to recoup the amount spent to earn an academic credential relative to the additional amount in earnings gained upon graduating and entering the workforce. FSU enjoys an ROI of 2.6 years, an encouraging signal that earning a degree at FSU pays off in a short amount of time—this ROI placed FSU within the top three percent of all four-year HBCUs. In comparison, Elizabeth City State University has the shortest ROI of 1.5 years and Livingstone College has the longest ROI of 51 years.

## MILITARY-CONNECTED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AT FOUR-YEAR HBCUS

As demonstrated above, institutions have increased their support and programs for military-connected students commensurate with the growth in beneficiaries using federal education benefit programs. These include participating in the VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program to offset the unmet cost of earning a degree; participating in the VA’s Principles of Excellence to adhere to certain best practices supporting military-connected students; participating in the VA’s Rogers STEM Scholarship program to extend federal education benefits to eligible veterans and dependents in high-demand fields; participating in the DoD’s Military Tuition Assistance (TA) program; hosting organized student veteran groups on campus; and offering veteran-specific scholarships, office, website, and marketed programming space on campus. Finally, HBCUs have a proud history of hosting ROTC programs for students who wish to join the U.S. Armed Forces.

FSU compared favorably to other HBCUs, participating in or hosting most of the services and programs captured—including participating in the DoD’s Military TA program and the VA’s Principles of Excellence; having a student veteran group on campus, a veteran-specific office, a marketed programming space on campus, a veteran-specific website; and offering two ROTC programs associated with the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force. FSU does not participate in VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program or provide veteran-specific scholarships.

Seventy-three (73) HBCUs (86%) participated in the DoD’s Military

TA program, indicating a strong commitment across the sector to supporting service members in the U.S. Armed Forces who are seeking an academic credential.

Only 27 HBCUs (32%) participated in the VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program, thus indicating a strong opportunity for FSU to better support military-connected students financially. Yellow Ribbon amounts may be capped, i.e., an institution may limit the number of students or the amount offered. An institution may choose to be unlimited, i.e., there is no cap to the number of students eligible for any amount. This was captured as Yellow Ribbon Equity: Four HBCUs (Bluefield State College, North Carolina Central University, University of the District of Columbia, and Xavier University) offered unlimited Yellow Ribbon, 23 HBCUs capped their Yellow Ribbon benefits, and 58 four-year HBCUs did not participate.

Fifty-four (54) HBCUs participated in the VA’s Principles of Excellence, which are guidelines institutions agree to follow to better serve military-connected students, including providing prospective students with a summary of their total cost to attend, ensuring institutional refund policies follow Title IV rules, and providing a point of contact for academic and financial advice. A majority (64%) of four-year HBCUs participated.

A majority of four-year HBCUs (69%) have a veteran-specific website or landing page; however, many sites had a sparse amount of information and/or were simply posting existing

information about VA federal education benefit programs. FSU’s page stood out for offering helpful information, including strong branding; it was the only HBCU to feature military-connected students prominently on its homepage. A majority of four-year HBCUs (52%) had a dedicated office for supporting military-connected students.

Less than three percent of four-year HBCUs participate in VA’s Rogers STEM Scholarship, less than 10% offer veteran-specific scholarships, and less than 23% have a student veteran group on campus (see Table 1.5).

**Table 1.5**

Institutions with a Student Veteran Group
Bowie State University
Delaware State University
<b>Fayetteville State University</b>
Florida Memorial University
Jackson State University
Livingstone College
Miles College
Morgan State University
North Carolina Central University
Paul Quinn College
Prairie View A&M University
Savannah State University
Shaw University
Stillman College
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff
Voorhees College
West Virginia State University
Xavier University

## RANKING AND BRANDING SERVICES FEATURING FOUR-YEAR HBCUS

Publications, periodicals, institutions of higher education, and websites all seek to rank or capture institutions’ support for military-connected students, similar to the way in which *U.S. News & World Report* conducts ranking services for colleges, cars, hospitals, etc. This paper does not address the efficacy or value of such services in academia and to military-connected students, but instead, provides insight into how HBCUs compare to each other and to FSU.

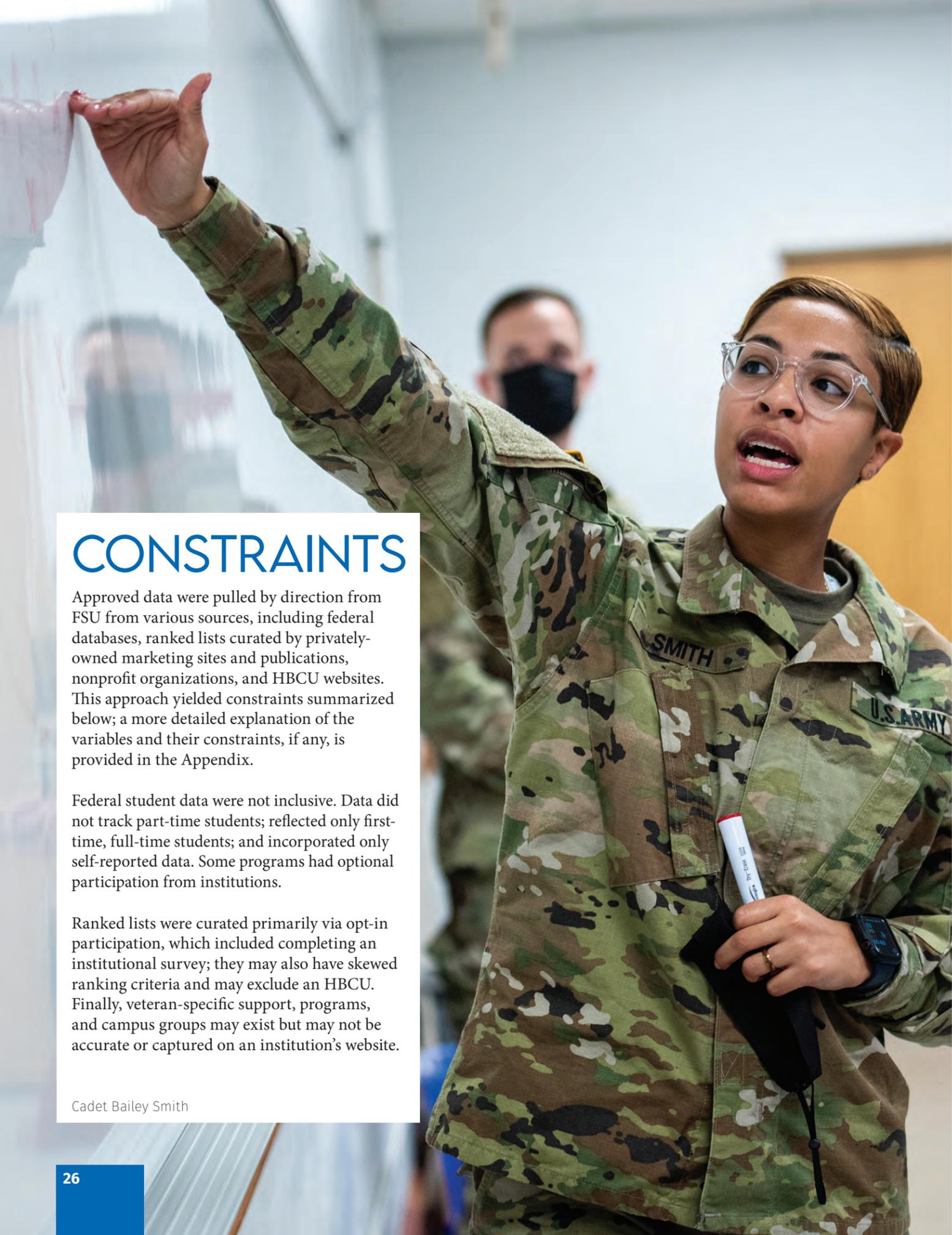
Five four-year HBCUs were ranked in *Military Times* Best for Vets in 2021, including FSU, which is ranked 65th—the highest of any four-year HBCU. Other HBCUs included Morgan State University (128); Albany State University (171); Elizabeth City State University (184); and Xavier University (237).

Twelve four-year HBCUs were designated Military Friendly by Viqtory Media; FSU was not. Some HBCUs were ranked in the top ten of Military Friendly institutions, receiving a “Gold” designation; otherwise, they received the Military Friendly designation only. The 12 HBCUs are listed in Table 1.6.

Only one HBCU, Howard University, was ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as a Best College for Veterans. Howard University was ranked 50th out of 142 institutions as best for veterans and was tied with Gonzaga. No HBCUs were captured in Columbia University’s Attaining Higher Education Interactive College Map.

**Table 1.6** Twelve HBCUs with Military Friendly Designations

School Name	Military Friendly Designation	Rank
Bowie State University	Military Friendly	N/R
Jackson State University	Military Friendly	N/R
University of Arkansas Pine Bluff	Military Friendly	N/R
Virginia State University	Military Friendly	N/R
Xavier University	Military Friendly	N/R
Stillman College	Gold - Military Friendly	3
Bethune-Cookman University	Gold - Military Friendly	4
Elizabeth City State University	Gold - Military Friendly	5
University of Maryland Eastern Shore	Gold - Military Friendly	5
Morgan State University	Gold - Military Friendly	9
Winston-Salem University	Gold - Military Friendly	10
Norfolk State University	Gold - Military Friendly	6



## CONSTRAINTS

Approved data were pulled by direction from FSU from various sources, including federal databases, ranked lists curated by privately-owned marketing sites and publications, nonprofit organizations, and HBCU websites. This approach yielded constraints summarized below; a more detailed explanation of the variables and their constraints, if any, is provided in the Appendix.

Federal student data were not inclusive. Data did not track part-time students; reflected only first-time, full-time students; and incorporated only self-reported data. Some programs had optional participation from institutions.

Ranked lists were curated primarily via opt-in participation, which included completing an institutional survey; they may also have skewed ranking criteria and may exclude an HBCU. Finally, veteran-specific support, programs, and campus groups may exist but may not be accurate or captured on an institution's website.

Cadet Bailey Smith

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the internal and peer institutional analysis, Evocati identified six recommendations for FSU to bolster its performance outcomes, programming, and marketing strategies serving military-connected students.

As FSU seeks to become the leading HBCU for military-connected students by 2025, these specific recommendations are designed to be measurable, actionable, realistic, and

timebound. These goals are designed to factor in environmental contingencies as higher education evolves and recognize that FSU's stakeholders will learn about the resources in the context of supporting military-connected students as the administration assesses its goals (Reeves & Fuller, 2018).

Strengthening FSU's programs for military-connected students provides an opportunity to break barriers in the nonprofit higher education

conversation, which has focused historically on predominantly white institutions (PWIs). These recommendations are research-based to empower senior leaders to make strategic decisions within FSU's situational context and within the HBCU community. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that they are framed through an asset-based lens, intended to strengthen the resources for a student population that will enrich FSU.

### PERFORMANCE OUTCOME RECOMMENDATIONS

#### RECOMMENDATION 1

*Design and employ a military-connected Student Outcomes Assessment Framework at FSU to empower decision-making and resource allocation.*

This analysis determined that many institutions are not tracking military-connected student outcomes, let alone providing robust resources (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). There were no veteran-specific graduation data at HBCUs reported to the VA. The VA did not require schools to report graduation information for students using GI Bill benefits until the "Forever GI Bill" was signed into law (Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, 2017). Therefore, government agencies, decision-makers, and academia lack institutional data regarding military-connected student performance and outcomes. This hinders any stakeholder's ability to conduct meaningful peer analysis.

While the higher education landscape slowly recognizes the need to measure and assess military-connected student outcomes, FSU is positioned to lead all HBCUs by building a data system to collect, measure, analyze, and report student outcomes among military-connected students. Evocati recommends that FSU build on the current military-connected student data collection to track admissions and yield rates, graduation rates, and retention rates.

A data collection infrastructure specific to military-connected students will require integrated project management and coordination among admissions, the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness, and Military Affairs. Effective data collection involves identifying military-connected students in the admissions process where applicants are tagged with a designation that can be cross-walked into the Enterprise Resource Planning System (ERP) Banner, and

where enrolled students are assigned an attribute to enable administrators to access performance reports throughout the student life cycle.

Once FSU has determined military-connected student outcomes, administrators can segment populations (e.g., reservists compared to veterans) and degree programs (e.g., STEM fields compared to business). More importantly, administrators will have the ability to compare student outcomes of the overall FSU student population and the military-connected student population. Owning such knowledge will enable administrators to identify areas to allocate resources efficiently in order to support military-connected students as well as fundraising efforts to sustain or build out resources. In addition, student outcomes assessment allows FSU to highlight the unique strengths and institutional deliverables that separate it from other HBCUs supporting military-connected students.



2021 Military Welcome Event

## RECOMMENDATION 2

*Establish new domestic and international academic partnerships to increase brand recognition and serve military-connected students.*

Identifying the top degree programs at FSU provides an opportunity for the institution to innovate with curricula and distinguish itself. FSU’s top three degree programs mirror the overall HBCU top three programs of business, biomedical and health professions, and criminal justice. Furthermore, FSU’s top three programs reflect Student Veterans of America’s findings in the NVEST report, which found that business, health professions, liberal arts and sciences, and law enforcement were the top four degree programs among veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Student Veterans of America, n.d.).

Since the data indicate consistent interest in specific degree programs, FSU can present unique and impactful programming for military-connected students. In addition, higher education as an industry is responding to the

residual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by aligning academic programs to meet financial sustainability and career outcome demands.

Evocati recommends that FSU explore additional domestic and international academic partnership opportunities that leverage its enrollment strengths to create cutting-edge student experiences in which military-connected students can benefit and distinguish FSU graduates from peer institutions.

The Veterans in the Community (VACOM) partnership between FSU’s School of Nursing, veterans in the community, and stakeholders, is a great example of how FSU nursing students can gain unique educational experiences (Fayetteville, n.d.). Georgetown University and Howard University recently announced the Howard Scholar at McCourt, which allows a full-tuition scholarship for a Howard University student or alumnus to enroll at one of Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy graduate programs (Howard University, 2021). The University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business (UVA) has academic

partnerships with international business schools worldwide to offer study abroad and intercultural exchange programs around the world (University of Virginia Darden School of Business, n.d.). The diverse range of countries UVA partners with offers compatible international opportunities for Post-9/11 military-connected students. The emphasis on academic partnerships among degree programs where military-connected students are likely to enroll enables FSU to highlight the added value military-connected students bring to the classroom while also providing a top-of-the-line education program for all students to benefit.

FSU should conduct a peer review of top degree programs at HBCUs to evaluate curriculum offerings and identify collaborative stakeholders for lucrative partnership opportunities. Evocati recommends that FSU establish a student exchange program with an international institution that enrolls a post-9/11 veteran population, supports research into its respective national defense posture, and is committed to supporting social justice actions.



Cadet Aaron Light

## RECOMMENDATION 3

*Participate in the VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program in the interest of student equity and increasing enrollment.*

While FSU is a public institution—and in-state students eligible for 100% of the Post-9/11 GI Bill would receive complete tuition and fees coverage—the Yellow Ribbon Program (YRP) can still serve as a commitment and marketing enhancement to prospective military-connected students.

YRP is a supplemental matching program using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to reduce the out-of-pocket tuition and required fees that remain after the maximum out-of-state tuition cap has been met for the academic year. For every dollar an institution contributes to YRP, the VA provides a matching contribution. The VA determines that YRP beneficiaries must be:

- » 100% eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.
- » Not on active duty or receiving transferred benefits from a spouse on active duty\* (children receiving transfer benefits from a parent on active duty are eligible to participate). \*Effective 2022, eligible active-duty service members and spouses will be eligible for the program.
- » Enrolled in a degree-seeking program.
- » Enrolled at an institution in which tuition and required fees exceed the Post-9/11 out-of-state tuition base benefit for the academic year.

Institutions can publicly market the dollar amount for each academic school at each degree level (e.g., bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral) to specify the school’s financial contribution and the number of available slots for eligible participants.

Due to the Choice Act of 2017, which expanded affordability for beneficiaries to earn a degree, public institutions were provided an incentive to enroll more in-state or out-of-state service members using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, 2014). YRP is designed to support students who do not qualify for in-state tuition, primarily children, spouses, and out-of-state veterans who have separated three or more years before enrolling.

Due to the talent and transferable skills military-connected students bring to campus, these students often qualify for merit-based scholarships. Under a shared financial structure of the program, the VA pays the Post-9/11 tuition benefit first and splits the YRP designated amount with the institution. This shared financial agreement incentivizes institutions to assess their scholarship expenditures that would have otherwise been spent on high-performing students. Instead, the VA partially met these expenditures, allowing the institution to reprogram scholarships to other deserving students. In addition, many military-connected marketing outlets, and the VA’s GI Bill Comparison Tool, highlight whether institutions participate in YRP as a measure of military-connected inclusiveness.

Evocati recommends that FSU conduct a financial analysis of the number of students receiving Post-9/11 benefits and identify the number of institutional scholarships awarded to Post-9/11 students. If the analysis determines that FSU is not enrolling out-of-state Post-9/11 GI Bill eligible students, FSU has an opportunity to recruit strategically, enroll, and support out-of-state students to join its military-connected population—a potential financial windfall and increase in talented students.

## RECOMMENDATION 4

*Become the first HBCU to partner with Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) to help military-connected students thrive on campus.*

Military-connected student organizations are often established to foster an environment for non-traditional student backgrounds while also finding opportunities to serve the community at large. FSU's significant undergraduate military-connected student population and active Student Veterans of America chapter create a campus climate to weave together student leadership, community engagement, and academic success. FSU empowers military-connected

students in peer-led initiatives that stem from an asset-based model instead of a challenge-response model by having an engaged military-connected student population.

Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) offers a unique opportunity to train and facilitate military-connected students to serve as advisors who mentor their peer military-connected students (Peer Advisors for Veterans Education, n.d.). The program offers benefits to newly admitted military-connected students, and it serves as a connector between the students and institutional resources. PAVE's partners create a peer education network where students can leverage accountability for positive academic success while also

utilizing established services to connect students effectively to resources.

Evocati recommends that FSU explore becoming a PAVE partner campus in consultation with FSU's SVA chapter. Currently, PAVE does not have any partnerships with HBCUs; therefore, FSU has an opportunity to become the first HBCU partner and set a national example. An institution could always create its own mentorship program. However, PAVE is already a nationally recognized program that provides an opportunity for students and the administration to commit together to support those transitioning from the military to academia so that they can thrive in their communities.

## MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

### RECOMMENDATION 5

*Improve the user experience on FSU's military and veteran education websites to streamline information and share the institution's proud history.*

The HBCU peer analysis discovered that most institutions have a dedicated website for military-connected students. FSU's military education website stood out with its emphasis on FSU's history of serving military-connected students, the Student Veterans' Center, and the overview of services to include education benefits and access to campus resources (Fayetteville State University, n.d.). In addition, FSU's homepage highlights diverse profiles of military-connected students with the "Heroes Welcome!" homepage banner and landing page (Fayetteville State University, n.d.).

Market research indicates that users prefer a streamlined web design with

clear headings, which reduces the number of clicks to access information, as well as a logical flow of content. Since prospective military-connected students navigate multiple websites with complex information that often intersects with multiple units within the university, designing a streamlined website is essential (Nielsen Norman Group, 1994). Prospective military-connected students, many of whom are first-generation students, should not be expected to conduct a digital scavenger hunt to learn more about an institution, how it supports them, and how to apply. The website should emphasize the inclusive culture to recruit future students while also fully outlining accessible resources specific to the military-connected student population. The website can also serve as a resource to faculty and administrators supporting military-connected students outside of the Student Veterans' Center to connect military-connected students to campus resources effectively.

To strengthen the FSU military and veteran education websites, Evocati recommends updating the websites to connect student information through the lens of the student life cycle by streamlining information and resources with direct links. The life cycle includes resources for prospective students, current students, and graduating students. Prospective student information can connect to admissions offices, academic programs, and funding options. Current student information can connect to academic programs and resources, ROTC and the Student Veterans' Center, the FSU Student Veterans of America chapter, and career services. Graduating student resources can also include career service connections but also profile upcoming graduating students and alumni. An example of a well-organized military-connected website can be found at North Carolina Central University (North Carolina Central University, n.d.).

## RECOMMENDATION 6

*Lead the national conversation in higher education as a voice for underserved communities of color and military-connected students.*

Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009, and as described in the review of literature, higher education communities and stakeholders have narrowed the national conversation to focus on enrolling GI Bill students among nonprofit institutions compared to proprietary institutions and enrollment among selective institutions (Ochinko & Payea, 2018).

At the conclusion of the HBCU peer institutional review of military-

connected student marketing, it is evident that HBCUs are less likely to be considered as a part of the national conversation of institutions serving military-connected students.

Out of 297 four-year institutions listed on *Military Times'* Best for Vets ranking, only five HBCUs were listed, including FSU. More than 1,200 two-year and four-year institutions participated in Victory Media's Military Friendly survey, and only 14 HBCUs (12 four-year and two two-year institutions) received the designation ("Military Friendly," n.d. & *Military Times*, n.d.). When moving beyond opt-in marketing surveys and marketing opportunities such as the Warrior-Scholar Project and Service to School, there are currently no HBCU partnerships with these veteran service

organizations that often contribute to the national discourse around military-connected students (Warrior-Scholar Project, n.d. & Service to School, n.d.).

Due to the absence of HBCU representation in the national dialogue around military-connected student enrollment, Evocati recommends that FSU engage urgently in the higher education military-connected student national conversation. FSU can highlight its institutional strengths outlined in this report, data collected (if Recommendation 1 is implemented), and proclaim publicly the steps it will commit to in order to become the preferred HBCU in America for military-connected students.

*Despite the potential work ahead, one thing is clear: FSU is the best-positioned HBCU in America to accomplish all of the above and more.*

## CONCLUSION

This peer analysis is the first step towards strengthening FSU's programs and service to America's underserved military-connected communities and certainly should not be the last.

More research is needed to better capture military-connected student outcomes at FSU; more exploration

is required to identify partners who will support FSU's students and raise its national profile; and more can be done to improve FSU's value proposition to prospective military-connected students. Despite the potential work ahead, one thing is clear: FSU is the best-positioned HBCU in America to accomplish all of the above and more.

# APPENDIX

## Variables - Descriptions and Constraints

**HBCU Overall Undergrad Admissions Rate** - Number of total undergraduate applicants, percentage accepted, and percentage enrolled (yield).

**HBCU Overall Undergrad Enrollment** - Number of full-time undergraduate enrollment for a specific academic year (an academic year is August 1-July 31). *Constraint: Inability to include part-time enrolled students.*

**HBCU Overall Top Degree Programs** - Overall undergraduate degrees conferred in the 2019- 2020 academic year. *Constraint: Inability to include part-time enrolled students.*

**HBCU Overall Graduation Rate** - The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program. *Constraint: Graduation rate definition is a full-time, first-time degree-seeking student; many military-connected students do not meet the criteria as transfer students to four-year institutions.*

**HBCU Veteran Graduation Rate** - The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate military-connected students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program. If possible, military-connected should include breakdown of service members (active and reservist), veterans, spouses, children, and ROTC. *Constraint: The GI Bill Comparison Tool only captures student veterans who graduate while using GI Bill benefits and does not include other military-connected populations and if the student graduates while not using benefits. It also lumps together full-time and part-time graduation rates, making it difficult to compare rates with ED rates. Some institutions do not have a graduation rate listed because institutional requirements to report program completion did not go into effect until 2018.*

**HBCU Overall Retention** - The percentage of first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year. *Constraint: Self-reported.*

**HBCU Veteran Retention** - The percentage of first-time, first-year military-connected undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year. If possible, military-connected should include breakdown of service members (active and reservist), veterans, spouses, children, and ROTC. *Constraint: Self-reported.*

**Military Times “Best for Vets” Ranking** - Rank Listing. *Constraint: Opt-in survey.*

**Victory Media “Military Friendly” Ranking** - Rank Listing. *Constraint: Opt-in survey.*

**US News & World Report Best College for Veterans Ranking** - Rank Listing. *Constraint: Skewed ranking criteria.*

**Columbia University’s Center for Veteran Transition & Integration Attaining Higher Education Map** - Displayed data on map. *Constraint: Opt-in only.*

**VA Yellow Ribbon Participant** - 2021-2022 dollar contribution and number of slots. Yellow Ribbon is administered by the VA and offers to pay for the higher cost of tuition at a private school or for attendance as a nonresident student at a public school. If a beneficiary qualifies, a school will contribute a certain amount toward extra tuition and fees through a grant, scholarship, or similar program while the VA matches the contribution.

**VA Yellow Ribbon Equity** - Yellow Ribbon Equity is defined based on the extent to which an institution participates in the VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program. Institutions may not participate, may offer a capped amount of financial support/or a capped number of students; or may have no cap (unlimited) on the financial amount and number of students who can receive Yellow Ribbon funds.

**VA Principles of Excellence** - The Principles of Excellence are administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and require schools that receive federal funding through programs such as the GI Bill to follow certain guidelines including, but not limited to:

- » Providing a written personal summary of the total cost of an educational program.
- » Providing an educational plan with a timeline showing how and when a student can fulfill everything required to graduate.
- » Assigning a point of contact who will provide ongoing academic and financial advice (including access to disability counseling).

*Constraint: Opt-in, although recent legislative changes have codified the Principles of Excellence into law, whereas before they were enacted by Executive Order 13607.*

**Rogers STEM Scholarship Participant** - The Edith Nourse Rogers Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) Scholarship allows some eligible veterans and dependents in high-demand fields to extend their Post-9/11 GI Bill or Fry Scholarship benefits. The institution offers the Rogers STEM Scholarship as indicated on the GI Bill Comparison Tool. *Constraint: Opt-in and limited in scope and application. Applicable to undergraduate students only. The extension must be approved by the VA; veterans and Fry Scholarship recipients who “are eligible for the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit (100% level) and require the most credit hours compared to other applicants are given priority preference.”*

**Department of Defense Military Tuition Assistance** - This program provides financial assistance to service members for voluntary off-duty education programs supporting professional and personal self-development goals. TA is available for courses that are part of an approved academic degree or certificate program; they must be offered by schools recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and are signatories to the current DoD Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding.

**Student Veteran Group** - The institution has a student-led veteran group on campus and is indicated on the GI Bill Comparison Tool. *Constraint: The student veteran group may not be listed on the GI Bill Comparison Tool. A group may be listed but may not be active.*

**Veteran Specific Website** - The institution has a dedicated website for military-connected students. *Constraint: Researchers may not be able to identify a website. A site may be published between the time data were collected and the report is published.*

**Veteran-Specific Scholarships Funded by Institution** - The institution offers scholarships for veterans and military-connected students. *Constraint: The researchers determined if scholarships were available based on a search query of the institution’s website. Not all scholarships available to military-connected students may be reflected online.*

**Veteran-Specific Office** - The institution has a dedicated office for supporting military-connected students. *Constraint: Researchers may not be able to ID a veteran office. An office may be established between the time data were collected and the report is published.*

**Veteran-Specific Programming Space** - The institution has a dedicated physical space on campus for military-connected students. *Constraint: Researchers may not be able to ID a programming space. A space may be established between the time data were collected and the report is published.*

**Return on Investment** - The Price-to-Earnings Premium is the net price the average student pays out-of-pocket to obtain an academic credential relative to the additional amount that student earns by attending that institution in the first place. The formula is as follows: Total Average Net Price / (Post-Enrollment Earnings - Typical Salary of High School Graduate) = Number of Years to Recoup Net Cost.

**ROTC Unit** - A college program offered at an institution that will cover the cost of students’ degree programs in exchange for an obligated period of service in the U.S. Armed Forces.

**Institution’s Student Population** - Student enrollment at all degree levels.

**Institution’s Count of GI Bill Recipients** - The number of veterans, service members, and family members using their GI Bill benefits attending this school in the last calendar year. This includes all chapters of the GI Bill program (e.g., Post-9/11, Montgomery GI Bill, Reserve Education Assistance Program, and Veteran Readiness and Employment). *Constraint: A significant number of institutions listed showed no GI Bill students in the data. The reason why is unclear; data were blank because they had 0 GI Bill recipients or because the data did not accurately crosswalk from the raw dataset to the public-facing website. Average number of GI Bill recipients at U.S. 4-year (3,663 IHLs with data and 2,721 removed due to blanks), 2-year (1,604 IHLs with data and 859 removed due to blanks), North Carolina 4-year (112 IHLs with data and 46 removed due to blanks), and North Carolina 2-year (70 IHLs with data and 10 removed due to blanks) excluded institutions with a blank field to remove any error of indicating an institution with 0 recipients when that institution has enrolled recipients.*

**Institution’s Count of Military TA Recipients** - The number of service members using the DoD’s Military Tuition Assistance benefits. *Constraint: Twenty (20) of the 85 schools do not have a MOU with the DoD. TA Decide does not include students participating in civilian schools’ programs (e.g., GRaDSO, STA21, Green to Gold, etc.); therefore, these students are not included in the data. Institutions with tuition rates higher than \$250 per credit hour and up to \$4,500 per budget year will likely have lower TA enrollment due to other federal or state programs offering more advantageous assistance.*

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