**Veterans, Farmers, Rurality, and Critical Examination of**

**Online Educational Programs**

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**Abstract**

Many veterans return home with disabilities, including physical and cognitive impairments.  Among those that return, many similarly not only reside in rural communities, but also own, manage, cooperatively plant, or consult on corporate, cooperative, or family-owned farms.  While many veterans desire to complete unskilled positions, many also desire to perform semi-skilled and skilled position, most often requiring completion of collegiate-based courses.  However, due to rurality, closely available community colleges or 4-years colleges may not be available, necessitating the use of online programs.  Unfortunately, online programs vary greatly regarding their purpose and quality.  This presentation will not only offer essential information about veteran educational benefits, but also nationally accepted matrices to evaluate online program application and also benefit.  Following this presentation, participants will be able to identify educational benefits available to veterans, discern if further educational courses may benefit vocational progression, and critically examine the worthiness of any potential online courses.

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Recently, a national study, completed by the RAND Corporation, revealed that 20 percent of individuals returning from deployment, specifically Iraq and Afghanistan have the signs and symptoms of depression, or subsequent signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Moreover, about the same number of veteran’s have the same probability of incurring a combat-related Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Unfortunately, on 53 percent that have these mental health related overlay issues actually seek treatment. Nonetheless, unfortunately, suicide rates among returning veterans is three-times the average annual rate for comparable sex and age groups. Unfortunately, the range of disabilities is not limited to mental health issues, but also encompasses physical disabilities. Today, there are approximately 2.9 million veterans with disabilities, representing a 25 percent increase since 2001. Among these veterans, among those returning, many not only want to continue to reside in their hometown of residence, but furthermore, remain in farming. Lastly, they want to participate in post-secondary educational programs, in which many of these programs are online, warranting a need to evaluate the quality of these programs—offering the primary purpose of the current presentation.

**Choosing a School**

 The VA offers an excellent document, called simply *Factors to Consider When Choosing a School: A Guide before Using the GI Bill*, which is worth reviewing.

From this document, several main points must be considered when choosing a school, including the following:

1. Identifying your interests, and how you want to make a living.
2. Designating the type of degree that you want.
3. Understanding the difference between the various types of schools.
4. Recognizing the value and difference with feeder schools.
5. Identifying the benefits and similarly costs of obtaining a college education, including time away from family, needed time to study, personal stress, etc.
6. Determining whether or not the intended professional field will accept a degree from the university that one expects to attend and ultimately graduate.
7. Understanding the difference between job placement promises versus reality.
8. Identifying whether or not the intended school supports veterans and has a dedicated program for veterans.
9. Realistic costs and financing for a college degree

Each of these points will be discussed in the pending presentation.

**Understanding the Structure and Function of Online Educational Programs and Classes**

 Most individuals will assume that the only difference between online and traditional courses is whether you are home or in the classroom. While this does represent one feature, this is a relatively minor differentiation between the course formats. There are several features deserving of contemplation:

1. Brick and mortar versus online-only university
2. Flexibility of time
3. Variable forms of feedback from instructors
4. Resources available to students, including library and other student support services
5. Interaction expectation from instructors and other college personnel

These features will be discussed, leading into nationally recognized methods to evaluate not only institutional reputation, but also individual course evaluation.

**Accreditation of Colleges within the United States**

 Ultimately, any college that someone attends should be accredited. Attending a non-accredited university wastes money, time, and fails to offer any true benefits upon graduation. Up front, the U.S. Government does not accredit schools. Rather, private accrediting bodies or organizations perform this task. The main organization required for this activity is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Each state-level government will approve which colleges and technical school can operate within its borders, however, approval to operate within a state does not indicate that it is accredited. The U.S. Department of Education offers a database, designating which programs are and are not accredited.

**Evaluating Online Course Quality**

 The ongoing standard for evaluating course quality is Quality Matters, which represent not only an organization, but also a rubric and standard within itself. The following elements should always be a part of the review process for a course:

1. Online course or blended course to be reviewed.
2. Rubric used to evaluate the course.
3. Review system.
4. Reviewers and their comments.
5. Final report evaluating the course.

This presentation will offer a “live” course and outline how each of the Quality Maters standards are met in the demonstrated course.

**Conclusions**

Veterans have many needs following deployment and as a feature of readjustment.

Education represents not only a benefit, but also a necessary process towards adjustment.

Online educational programs present an avenue towards obtaining post-secondary education.

Special considerations must be taken regarding both school eminence and course value.