

## JOBS &amp; EDUCATION

# Education in Reach

## Online and on campus, universities target veteran success

By Robin Roenker

**O**RLANDO DUARTE, A FORMER Air Force aerospace propulsion mechanic, always dreamed of becoming a pilot. Thanks to the GI Bill — which is funding his pursuit of a dual bachelor's-master's degree in aeronautics through Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) — he's now closer to achieving his career goal. He's on track to graduate in May and eventually plans to apply for a full-time

commissioned pilot position in the U.S. Air Force.

Capitalizing on the flexibility of ERAU's online class offerings, Duarte, 30, was able to begin his studies in 2017 at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio while still on full-time active duty. When he accepted a position in the Hawaii Air National Guard in fall 2021, his online classwork seamlessly traveled with him — as did the option of taking occasional in-person classes at ERAU's Hickam Air Force Base campus in Honolulu.

"Taking classes online made pursuing

a degree very convenient and military-friendly for me," says Duarte. "It was perfect, because I could take classes from anywhere, no matter where I was. And now that I'm out of the military, the GI Bill benefit helps me tremendously to cover the cost of tuition, as well as housing expenses for my family."

### REMOVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Since the original GI Bill's passage in 1944, the Department of Veterans Affairs has paid out more than \$400 billion in educational benefits, says James

Ruhlman, deputy director for program management for the VA's education service division.

The current Post-9/11 GI Bill covers 36 months of full in-state, public university tuition and fees — plus funds for books and housing — for veterans who qualify for maximum benefits, typically those who have served at least 36 months of active-duty military service since Sept. 10, 2001.

The Yellow Ribbon Program, a provi-

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Students at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.

BRENDAN J. SULLIVAN/BELLARMINE UNIVERSITY

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Veterans at Embry-Riddle's  
Daytona Beach, Fla., campus

DAVID MASSEY/EMBRY-RIDDLE AERONAUTICAL UNIVERSITY

**“I was super anxious about getting out of the military. Having a community on campus of fellow veterans to serve as a support system has really helped ease that transition.”**

– ETHAN KENT, University of Central Florida

sion in the Post-9/11 GI Bill, can help qualifying veterans meet the additional tuition expenses of attending an out-of-state or private university, as well as professional programs like medical or law school.

At Bellarmine University, a private Catholic university in Louisville, Ky., where undergraduate tuition is currently around \$45,000 per year, fully eligible Yellow Ribbon Program students pay nothing out of pocket to attend, says Lindsay Gargotto, director of the school's

Office of Military and Veteran Services.

William Lawrence, 23, a former U.S. Army combat medic from Boone, N.C., who is in his second year of full-time studies as a respiratory therapy major at Bellarmine, says receiving tuition assistance from the GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon Program gave him the flexibility to select a “smaller, private school that could offer more individualized help” — a decision he credits for helping to ease his transition from four years of active-duty U.S. Army service to civilian student life.

“Because I hadn't been in school for so long, I knew I was going to need small classes with more one-on-one time with my professors,” he explains, noting most of his courses at Bellarmine have fewer than 20 students. “I felt this was my best chance to get the best education while using my GI Bill benefits.”

#### FLEXIBLE ONLINE OPTIONS

Many of the fully online degree programs offered by Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's (ERAU) worldwide campus were created specifically with veteran and current military students in mind. Thanks to this targeted focus, roughly 52 percent of ERAU's 20,000 global online student enrollment is military-affiliated, says Kenneth Witcher,

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#### EXPLORING BENEFIT OPTIONS

To learn more about Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and eligibility criteria, go to [VA.gov/education](http://VA.gov/education).

The site's GI Bill comparison tool offers an easy way to explore the cost of attending various universities, colleges and professional training programs while using GI Bill benefits.

Locate participating Yellow Ribbon Program schools through the search tool available at [va.gov/education/yellow-ribbon-participating-schools](http://va.gov/education/yellow-ribbon-participating-schools).

## JOBS &amp; EDUCATION

Embry-Riddle  
veteran students

DAVID MASSEY/EMBRY-RIDDLE AERONAUTICAL UNIVERSITY

## BY THE NUMBERS

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs:

- ▶ Since the launch of the **Post-9/11 GI Bill** in 2009, VA has awarded \$127 billion in education benefits to more than 2.5 million students and trainees.
- ▶ In FY2021, VA dispersed \$10.5 billion in **GI Bill benefits** to 841,000 veterans, service members and their dependents.
- ▶ Between 2009 and 2020, **GI Bill education benefits** have helped more than 545,000 students graduate from a two- or four-year degree program, with 73,000 additional students earning a non-degree vocational or trade certification.
- ▶ Between 2009 and 2015, 69,000 **GI Bill beneficiaries** completed a master's degree program, and more than 5,000 completed a doctoral or post-doctoral program.

— Robin Roenker

dean of ERAU worldwide's College of Aviation.

At ERAU, veterans can use their GI Bill benefits to complete fully online degree paths such as aeronautics, business analytics, aviation maintenance, engineering, homeland security, or logistics and supply chain management — all of which let veterans draw upon military experience while leading to in-demand fields.

“Our students are savvy customers. They realize if they’re going to invest their time in earning a degree, they want one with a good ROI,” Witcher says. “Our degrees are industry-connected, industry-reviewed, and lead to careers that very much value veteran employees.”

## CATERING TO MILITARY NEEDS

Across the country, colleges and universities are expanding initiatives to create environments and class offerings that appeal to military and veteran students. For their efforts, many are seeing significant gains in their military-affiliated student bodies.

Since launching its Office of Military and Veteran Services six years ago, for

Veterans Day,  
University of Central Florida

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

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## JOBS &amp; EDUCATION



Bellarmine University

BRENDAN J. SULLIVAN/BELLARMINE UNIVERSITY

example, Bellarmine has seen its veteran and military student enrollment increase by 85 percent, according to Gargotto, who is a U.S. Air Force veteran. The office aims to be a one-stop shop for former and active-duty military students, she says, from offering assistance navigating GI Bill benefits to creating a new on-campus learning community dedicated to helping veteran students bring their military experiences into the education environment.

Similarly, at the University of Central Florida (UCF) in Orlando, veteran enrollment is booming: Nearly 1,700 students utilized GI Bill educational benefits at the university in fall 2022. “We have a very large, growing veteran population here, thanks largely to our president setting a

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— WILLIAM LAWRENCE, Bellarmine University

mandate that we will be a military- and veteran-inclusive campus community,” says Michael Kepner, a U.S. Army veteran who now serves as director of UCF’s Military and Veteran Student Success.

“When veterans come here, we have academic advisers and career services advisers sit down with them and say, ‘What’s your career plan? What is your goal with this degree?’” Kepner says. “Our students know we are here to help

facilitate their next pathway.”

While the majority of military-affiliated students at UCF are enrolled in in-person classes or hybrid in-person and online coursework, the university also offers more than 100 fully online degree programs for students who prefer the flexibility of remote learning.

Political science major Ethan Kent — a former decadelong U.S. Air Force intelligence analyst who will graduate

in May with plans to attend law school — completed three years of undergraduate study fully online at UCF while still in active-duty service. By using military tuition assistance for those courses, Kent still has GI Bill benefits available to help pay for law school.

Even though he enjoyed the convenience and flexibility of online learning, Kent says dedicated, face-to-face veteran services, such as those provided by the UCF Military and Veteran Success Center, have also enhanced his academic experience.

“I was super anxious about getting out of the military,” he says. “Having a community on campus of fellow veterans to serve as a support system has really helped ease that transition.”