



Veterans deserve universities' loyalty

Top schools should help pay our nation's debt to those who protected the United States since 9/11.

By C. L. Max Nikias and David Petraeus

Millions of Americans have served in the U.S. military and returned to civilian life since our nation was attacked on 9/11. Many more will join them in the years ahead. By 2019, America's post-9/11 veterans population will exceed three million people.

Our nation owes an enormous debt to these new veterans. Indeed, they have earned recognition as America's "New Greatest Generation." And our universities need to support them to the fullest extent possible, including through the Yellow Ribbon Program, which removes financial barriers that often stand in the way.

The challenges our newest veterans face as they transition to civilian life are not unprecedented. Over 70 years ago, an earlier generation of military veterans came home from war and underwent a similar transition. Indeed, that generation's veterans helped our nation develop the world's leading economy — and earned recognition as America's "Greatest Generation."

A key element of that generation's successful transition to civilian pursuits was the opportunity to attend college with tuition funded by the 1944 G.I. Bill. That legislation made higher education possible for millions of Americans who had served in World War II.

The new G.I. Bill now provides the same opportunity for our newest veterans, though where tuition exceeds the national maximum



U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan in 2014.
Photo by Brendan Smialowski, AFP/Getty Images

amount provided by the G.I. Bill, as is the case with most private universities, additional funding, both from the government and through financial aid from universities is needed — and that is exactly what the Yellow Ribbon Program helps to facilitate.

The Yellow Ribbon Program was established by the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 to allow private universities in the United States to partner with the Veterans Administration (VA) in funding tuition and other expenses not covered by the new G.I. Bill for qualified veterans. Funding comes from both the participating university and the VA, which matches what the university provides.

The Yellow Ribbon Program ensures that student veterans with the right qualifications can afford to attend even the most select private universities in America. And given that 23 of our nation's top 25 research universities are private, this is a very important program.

Unfortunately, however, only a handful of the 23 top private universities are taking full advantage of the program and ensuring that the total cost of undergraduate tuition is covered. The others either limit their funding or put a cap on the number of available slots for veteran undergraduates.

The University of Southern California (USC) is now one of nine of the top private research universities that will ensure full undergraduate tuition funding and offer unlimited slots for academically qualified veterans. Through May 15, all U.S. universities have the opportunity to likewise revise their Yellow Ribbon commitments with the VA for the 2016–2017 school year. We encourage the remaining 15 institutions, as well as other private universities and colleges, to join us. We all need to ensure that those who volunteered to serve our nation in a time of war have the necessary academic qualifications and a pathway to an education from the best schools America has to offer.

USC is proud to have one of the largest student veteran populations of any private research university in America. Today, USC enrolls nearly 900 veterans or active duty service members and military dependents. Nearly 300 of them are Yellow Ribbon Program recipients. And 57 came to USC as community college transfers, taking advantage of a critical pathway for high-achieving veterans who benefit from the opportunity to demonstrate their academic excellence at a community college after

a period of absence from an academic environment.

The difference the Yellow Ribbon Program makes in the lives of USC’s veterans is significant. Jeremy Fricke, who transferred to USC from a community college after serving in the Marine Corps for eight years, is one example. While on active duty, Fricke taught his fellow Marines how to protect themselves from chemical and biological weapons. Now, he is studying biological sciences and plans to go on to

medical school so that he can continue to help people — as a doctor. And because of the Yellow Ribbon Program, students like Fricke will graduate from one of our nation’s finest research universities without any student debt.

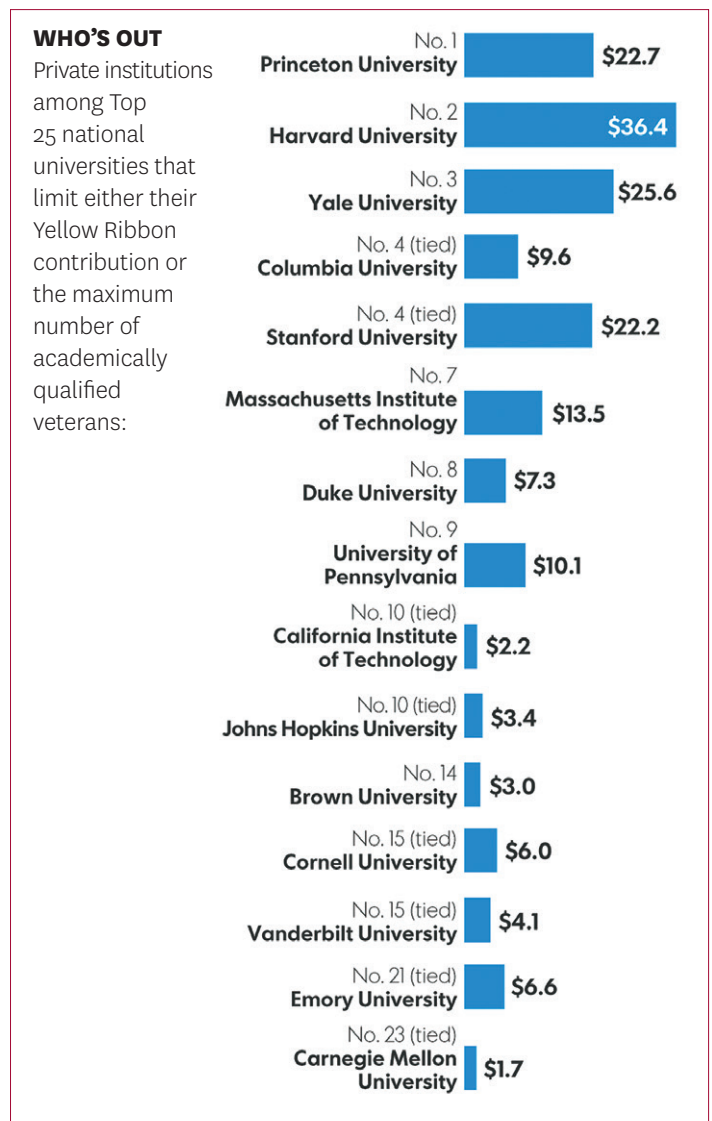
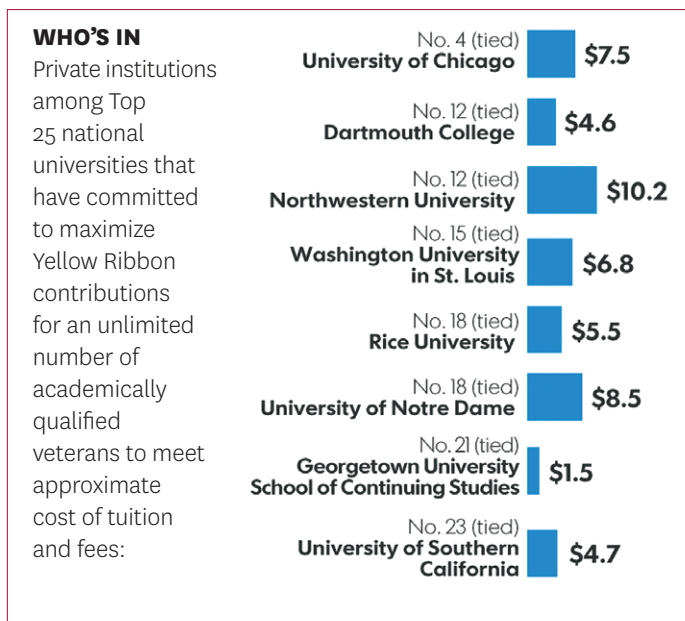
As they are at every university where they study, the student veterans at USC are a rich source of diversity and experience. They contribute to our intellectual community in innumerable ways. And they will contribute enormously, as well, when they return to their

civilian communities after they graduate. The Yellow Ribbon Program makes this possible — and the opportunity is there for America’s other leading universities to do likewise. The members of America’s New Greatest Generation deserve nothing less.

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RICHEST UNIVERSITIES CHINCY WITH VETERANS

See which top private universities have committed to help meet the full cost of undergraduate education for U.S. veterans through the Yellow Ribbon program and which are lagging behind. Below, fiscal year 2015 endowment, in billions, by U.S. News and World Report National Universities ranking:



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. News & World Report rankings, National Association of College and University Business Officers Alex Gonzalez, USA TODAY