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TCC SECOND IN NATION FOR STUDENTS USING GI BILL

Tidewater Community College

1,414

Number of students enrolled last fall at TCC's campuses under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

By Denise Watson Batts | *The Virginian-Pilot*

The new GI bill has helped spur an enrollment boom at Tidewater Community College, which has the nation's second-highest number of students receiving benefits.

TCC, the only community college in the top five, had 1,414 students enrolled last fall at its four campuses under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

That figure, tallied by school officials, would place TCC behind only the University of Phoenix and its Axia College, which had 2,054 students using the program aimed to help veterans.

The Arizona-based school topped a recent ranking by Inside Higher Education, an online source of college information.

On that list, TCC's Virginia Beach campus placed fourth with 879 students. TCC officials

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GI BILL | *2 other local schools make list of Top 25*

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took issue with the number, saying it overlooked students on the GI Bill at its other campuses.

Many of the top 25 schools are primarily online programs, such as Capella University, or schools in areas with a concentrated military population, such as San Diego Mesa College and Florida State College in Jacksonville.

Two other local schools ranked in the top 25: Old Dominion University, eighth, with 725 students, and ECPI College of Technology, which has two campuses in Hampton Roads, 18th, with 536 students. The chart and TCC used enrollment data as of Dec. 9.

The new GI Bill, championed by Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., covers all tuition and fees for some recent veterans at public and some private schools. Often, benefits can be transferred to a spouse or child and can be

used for books and housing. The program went into effect last year.

TCC President Deborah DiCroce said she would have been disappointed had her school not made the list.

"A distinctive piece of Hampton Roads is the military presence, thus a distinctive piece of the community college for Hampton Roads should be military," DiCroce said, "and we've embraced that for years."

One appeal, she said, is that TCC offers programs that are familiar to those in the service. Compared with other TCC students, those on the GI Bill are taking more career and technical programs such as in information systems technology. A higher percentage are on the transfer track, meaning they will move on to a four-year college.

TCC's lower costs are attractive to all students, DiCroce said.

DiCroce said the school has striven to create a rep-

utation of being military-friendly. Through partnerships with ODU and Norfolk State University, it offers Army and Navy ROTC programs, and its campuses often have served as a training center for the Navy.

Emanuel Chestnut, interim dean of student services at TCC, said it's helpful that each campus has counselors who are veterans and they often attend community functions to recruit.

"I think it's vital to have a fellow vet there in that role," said Chestnut, who served 23 years in the Navy. "You can relate to them; you can share information in regards to your life experiences."

Kasey Hamilton, who served four years in the Navy, said the Virginia Beach campus felt like a maze. Trying to decipher the GI benefits only complicated the feeling.

But Chestnut helped Hamilton complete the paperwork and plot his course work. Hamilton, 24, plans to

transfer to Virginia Commonwealth University after graduating this spring.

"I just wish I could take him with me," Hamilton said.

Julia Blakeburn, 22, is using GI Bill benefits transferred from her mom, who soon will retire from the Navy.

Blakeburn picked TCC because she didn't want the huge lecture halls of a bigger college, she said. The school also offers a physical therapy assistant program that will allow her to graduate in two years and walk into a stable job with a good salary. Counselors have made the benefits process easy, she said.

"They answered all of my questions; they looked at all of my paperwork to make sure I was correct before I submitted it," she said. "They've been great."

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TCC comes second in nation for most students using GI bill



Emanuel Chestnut, left, talks with TCC school administration regarding graduation eligibility of Kasey Hamilton, right, a Navy veteran, at his office at the Virginia Beach campus. Chestnut is a Navy vet who works as an adviser to help veterans feel welcome and navigate through the maze of paperwork. (Hyunsoo Leo Kim | The Virginian-Pilot)

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