

## **GI Bill Students and Their Equal Opportunity to Fail**

by Robert Oliphant

Let me begin by announcing that I'm a GI Bill of Rights alumnus. So were at least half of my colleagues at California State University, Northridge, in 1959. Since CSUN is now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, here's a take on how important the GI Bill was as an equal opportunity measure to both CSUN and to our nation as a whole.

As a mass education experiment with 16 million potential students, the GI Bill frightened many American educators, including Robert Maynard Hutchins and James Bryant Conant. It was Hutchins who predicted that the GI Bill would turn nearly all of our colleges and universities into "hobo jungles."

Nor was Hutchins far off the mark, judging from the physical and mental condition of my fellow veterans at Washington and Jefferson College in the summer of 1946. Some were certainly much older than conventional college students, including my friend Edward Edwards, an air corps lieutenant colonel, who was over 35 when he matriculated as a freshman at W&J.

Many of them had serious physical problems, including life long malaria for my study partner, Gordon Jerrold (an air corps captain), and a large steel plate in the head for my trumpet-playing friend, Marshal Swenson, who had served in the Pacific theater as a marine. Judging from late-at-night dormitory screaming, many of our GI Bill students also had serious psychological problems.

Even more were heavy drinkers. Hence the decision by Dean Edward Davison, who had been commandant of a prisoner of war camp, to establish student rapport by prowling the bars of Washington, Pennsylvania and chatting with his fellow GI tipplers—informally and incognito.

In 1946, it should be noted, American educators, including those at West Point and army tech schools, still graded on the curve, which meant 30% of the letter grades came out as Ds and Fs. For GI Bill students this policy meant that the struggle for academic survival grew more and more competitive each year, especially for those who were able to make it into doctoral programs or professional schools.

The ones who had made it through this all-American academic gauntlet and landed among the CSUN faculty by 1959 were in many respects the best of the best. Mitchell Marcus, one of my department chairs, had been a major in the marines. James Woodress, CSUN's first dean, had been a forward artillery observer with the rank of captain. Ralph Prator, CSUN's first president, had risen in the navy to the rank of captain.

With this kind of academic and military background, it's not surprising that President Prator in one of our first faculty meetings insisted on an "equal opportunity to fail" grading policy, announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, we want to build a truly respectable college in the San Fernando Valley, so if you have a choice between giving students a B or a C, by all means give them the C."

But by 1959, the GI Bill itself had fallen upon hard times. Korean War veterans, for instance, had already been denied full tuition benefits, thereby excluding them from our high-priced Harvards and Princetons. Even worse, some years later the stipend for Vietnam veterans was cut back to way under subsistence level (all of my Vietnam-veteran students worked at jobs outside the university).

By 1990 what was then called our "leisure class revolution" had driven tuition levels, paralleling the rise of political dynasties, up to six figures for an upscale BA, and grade-point averages had begun their dizzying inflationary jump to the A minus averages that now characterize Harvard and other high-end investments for the rich, the well-born, and the greedy.

To reiterate, though: my primary purpose here is to honor the GI Bill and CSUN's GI Bill alumni. Overall they put their duty first. Even more impressively, judging from the obituaries for Americans born before 1920, their subsequent contributions to our economy far outweigh what this egalitarian "hobo jungle" experiment cost the American taxpayer.

Should we replay the GI Bill experiment? Can't hurt, might help, some might say. If Americans as a whole want their educational system to offer an equal opportunity to succeed or fail to ALL of our students, just as Douglas Wilder (our first black governor of Virginia) once called for, that's what we'll demand in time, and that's what we'll get. Productively so, I hope.

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Robert Oliphant's best known book is *A Piano for Mrs. Cimino*, [the film version of which](#) won a Golden Nymph Award at Monte Carlo for Bette Davis. He is a WWII air corps veteran, and his eBooks are available from the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#).