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Military Veterans to Collegiate Aviation and Beyond: Lessons Learned Supporting Collegiate Aviation Student Veterans

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Military veterans bring leadership, discipline, and experience to collegiate aviation. Yet, their transition from military service to academic and professional flight careers often presents distinct challenges, even when compared to other non-traditional students. This article presents three effective strategies for supporting and enabling student veteran success in aviation programs. The first example highlights the Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center. This on-campus, public-private partnership provides mentorship, community reintegration, and transition services for veterans and their families. The next initiative, Vets2Wings, is an FAA-funded initiative that offers targeted funding to assist current student veterans in achieving their professional pilot career goals. Finally, the last section addresses the unique challenges and complications that veterans may face when seeking FAA medical certification, along with recommendations on methods to ease the process. Collectively, these examples highlight strategies that can strengthen institutional support systems and promote smoother transitions for student veterans from military service to successful aviation professionals.

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Introduction and Background

Military veterans bring leadership, discipline, and valuable experience to college aviation, but they often encounter complex transitions as they shift from military life into an academic and professional environment. As non-traditional students, they must navigate a form of social reintegration while dealing with unique financial and medical certification challenges when compared to their more traditional counterparts. This article examines three key areas to demonstrate how these challenges can be addressed, enabling veteran students to succeed in collegiate aviation programs. The first section discusses the Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center, an on-campus public-private resource to help veterans transition into civilian life. Next, the Vets2Wings initiative highlights the value of targeted funding, career mentorship, and industry engagement to help veterans transition into an aviation career by offering flight training assistance. Finally, the last section examines the unique challenges that prior-service military members may face when applying for their FAA Medical certification and offers suggestions to ease the process. Together, these three examples provide integrated approaches to help veterans successfully transition from military service to collegiate aviation programs and onto successful aviation careers.

The Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center

MTSU Veterans Programs

A non-traditional student is referred to as someone who does not follow the typical academic path by attending college directly after high school. The difference between military veterans and other non-traditional students lies in the environment they are coming from. Veterans are accustomed to the rigors of military structure. Many veteran students have active combat experiences that are vastly different from those of everyday citizens, let alone younger traditional college students. These differences can lead to a form of culture shock that presents challenges to the transition from active-duty military service to veteran student status. Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) has developed a comprehensive program to help veteran students navigate the path into the college environment. In addition, an internal support structure has been developed specifically for Aerospace veterans, which emphasizes outreach designed to encourage social interaction. The Aerospace program expands the university's goal to maintain active involvement opportunities for veterans, along with direct mentoring as needed for individuals who so desire.

Mission

Musician Charlie Daniels had strong ties to Tennessee and held his very first Volunteer Jam concerts at MTSU during the 1970s, establishing a close relationship with the university. Mr. Daniels has been quoted as saying, "I learned at an early age that only two things protect America, the grace of Almighty God and the United States military." Charlie Daniels saw an opportunity to give back to veterans and worked with MTSU to open The Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center, where he remained actively involved until his death in 2020. The center was established in April of 2015, and a 3,200-square-foot facility was completed and staffed by November of that year. The Daniels Center's mission is to provide

transition services to veterans and their families as they return to civilian life after military service. To accomplish this mission, the center has developed the “E” mission, which consists of five tenets: *Enroll* military-connected students; *Encourage* those students while they attend MTSU; assist with *Employment* opportunities; *Educate* the MTSU community at large about military-connected student involvement; and *Expand* the veteran-educated knowledge base. As of Fall 2025, 1,252 veterans and their dependents are served at MTSU, accounting for 6% of the university's student base.

Goals of the “E” mission are accomplished through the dedicated work of twelve full-time employees funded by the university, the state of Tennessee, and the federal government. Additional full-time employee funding comes from the Daniels Center’s self-directed fundraising efforts. The senior advisor for the program is a retired 3-star Army general with 38 years of active-duty experience, including 14 years as a general officer and 5 1/2 years of combat experience. A full-time director and assistant director lead the day-to-day operations of the center. The staff consists of a full-time veterans’ health advocate who provides mental health counseling and a veterans’ benefits advocate for vocational rehab counseling. The center is fortunate to have two on-site, full-time veteran service officers to help veterans process their Veterans Administration (VA) claims. Additionally, the Daniels Center employs a veteran job placement specialist, a university school certifying official, and a VA school certifying official.

Veteran Personal Outreach

The Daniels Center offers numerous and varied services to veterans. What makes them truly unique is that they offer these services to any veteran, from anywhere, not just the MTSU community. Aside from providing ample office and lounge areas dedicated to veteran usage, Daniels Center personnel will also travel to a veteran if needed. They have helped veterans and their families financially through rent and mortgage payments and raised over \$150,000 to assist veterans in financial need during the COVID pandemic. They have participated in off-campus community and business outreach programs through benefits fairs with major companies such as Alabama Power and Nissan. The Daniels Center strives not only to help develop a veteran’s educational path but also to provide veterans and their families with professional development opportunities. Through specific training sessions, the center helps develop resumes, obtain job interviews, and develop entrepreneurial knowledge.

In addition to assisting with personal, governmental, and VA issues, the Daniels Center works tirelessly to welcome and accept military veterans and their families into the MTSU community. Organized newcomer in-briefings and social mixers are a large part of the introductory process. Overall information about the center, including program updates, individual veteran successes, and coverage of their program, is provided in an outreach publication. Journey magazine, available both online and in print, helps veterans keep up with all the center does. It is a way to get information out to anyone, including the public, in a widely accessible manner. Although recognized by the university president en masse at each main university graduation ceremony, the Daniels Center also holds separate veteran graduation stole ceremonies for prior service members and their families in a more private and personal setting. These ceremonies emphasize the sacrifices veteran families have made prior to attending college, in addition to celebrating the great successes of each veteran who has achieved

graduation. These ceremonies elicit high emotions, great pride, and have proven to be a key recognition focal point.

Veteran Social Interaction

The Daniels Center places equal emphasis on the social aspect of the university community, offering veterans many opportunities to enjoy the Nashville area and its entertainment venues. The university, through the Daniels Center, has established relationships with numerous organizations that offer veterans and their families complimentary admission to various events. They have partnered with the Nashville Predators hockey team, Nashville Sounds baseball, and the Nashville Soccer Club, not only for game tickets, but also for special military and MTSU-centered events that recognize veterans directly. There have also been tickets provided for the Nashville Symphony, Grand Ole Opry, and the Nashville Ballet. NASCAR and Formula 1 races have been attended by MTSU veterans free of charge. The social and entertainment opportunities are truly amazing, and all made possible through the hard work of Daniels Center employees. The Daniels Center is the main reason that MTSU remains one of the nation's most military-focused universities.

Aerospace Veterans Group

Aerospace faculty members, many of whom are veterans themselves, noticed that student veterans were searching for assistance with their transition into the department, in addition to the university. An initial interest meeting for veterans was organized, consisting of 10 veteran students and two faculty members. The discussion primarily focused on what the veterans needed and what they were experiencing in their college classes, as compared to what they had expected. Feedback indicated that veterans were accustomed to receiving straightforward answers and wanted people they could trust to provide them with information that would help navigate department-specific details. Course selection, the flight lab process, VA funding for flight training, VA issues with FAA physicals, and the general process needed for success in the Aerospace department were discussed. What the veterans divulged during this meeting was that they wanted a point of contact who was trustworthy and understood where they were coming from as active-duty military personnel. Although they wanted no special treatment, they did feel different from the traditional student base. "These kids don't get it," was a common sentiment initially as the veterans, understandably, differentiated themselves from the average college student. Another key point emphasized was that they wanted social interaction with other veterans within the department. Although the Daniels Center does an excellent job connecting veterans to the university community, Aerospace veterans wanted a similar situation on a more personal level with their Aerospace peers.

The MTSU Aerospace Veterans Group was established during the spring semester of 2022. As of 2025, the number of veterans in the department stands at 212, which equates to 15.5% of the Aerospace student population. Eight faculty and staff personnel are also former military. Three professors in the professional pilot concentration, the largest concentration in the department, are former military pilots. The two UAV faculty and staff members are veterans, along with senior faculty in the maintenance management concentration. Additionally, the flight operations program manager and one of the three flight training managers are also former

military. As the advisory function of the Group is well covered, in addition to the support received from each other, veteran Aerospace students start out with a full grasp of who to see and what to do from day one. To date, this network has greatly eased the transition into the department.

An equally important function of the Aerospace Veterans Group is the social aspect within the department. One might say that this aspect is most important, since a great deal of advice occurs during social functions. Gatherings are held at least monthly. Restaurants, sports bars, pool and dart halls, and firearms ranges have all been frequented by the MTSU Aerospace Veterans Group. Gathering numbers average between 25 and 50, with as many as 60 veterans attending some activities.

The combination of services offered by the Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Family Center and the Aerospace Veterans Group continues to provide MTSU Aerospace veterans with the camaraderie and mentorship that they are used to from their military time. The programs provide valuable insight and opportunities within the university environment to veteran students and have been instrumental in aiding veteran student success.

Vets2Wings

Background

The Veterans Pilot Training Pilot Program, branded Vets2Wings (V2W), at the University of North Dakota (UND) is a new initiative designed to help U.S. military veterans transition into aviation careers by offering funding for flight training. The program, officially launched on 4 October 2022, is funded through a \$2.5 million cooperative agreement with the FAA and is designed to assist veterans who already hold a private pilot's license in completing FAA instrument, commercial multi-engine, and certified flight instructor certifications and ratings. The program recruited current veteran students at all levels of the Commercial Aviation degree program to participate through four separate application sessions. The V2W program is also part of a broader effort to address the national pilot shortage, which has significantly impacted regional airlines and airports across the U.S.

Students are selected to participate in the program through an online application that gathers their demographic and eligibility status. Additionally, it elicits short essay responses concerning the students' willingness to participate in the program and measures their career aspirations to become commercial aviation pilots.

Veteran Student Benefits

Each veteran student who joined the program is unique in their program status, and the amount of Veterans Affairs (VA) or National Guard benefits they receive. The administrative team's finance and accounting professionals analyze each student's needs and update them on a monthly basis to ensure funds are expended in a timely manner. On average, each of the current participants will receive approximately \$24,500 of flight training benefits, with the range extending from \$17,500 to \$71,500.

In addition to the flight course cost benefits, veterans also participate in mentorship and career advice sessions led by industry professionals. These sessions increase their opportunity to successfully transition to Restricted ATP hours, building and commercial airline positions post-graduation. Some of the mentorship involves information and application advice for major airline pathways programs. Currently, 75% of V2W students either belong to a pathway program or plan to apply to one within the next year.

Since many veteran participants are non-traditional students who bring prior life and professional experience to college, this program also provides excellent mentorship and camaraderie opportunities for the students.

Industry Interaction

The Vets2Wings (V2W) program hosted several key industry engagement events throughout the 2022-2025 academic years, providing valuable insights and career guidance to veteran students pursuing aviation careers. The industry events ranged from focused small group discussions and presentations to roundtable networking sessions. To date, the program has hosted ten events where students interacted with representatives from more than twenty different airlines and aviation companies. These events fostered an environment of mentorship, career development, and industry connections, ensuring V2W students are well-prepared for their future careers.

Measures of Success

From November 2022 to October 2025, the following metrics illustrate participants' dedication to the program as well as their overall success.

- 30 veteran students have graduated and begun building hours towards their R-ATP
- Overall average GPA for V2W members stands at 3.5, with numerous students making the Dean's List each semester (perfect 4.0 average)
- 100% of V2W students have passed the FAA-required written examination for each certificate on the first attempt (program goal is 90%)
- 170 FAA certificates and ratings have been earned by V2W students

Post Graduation

Through the Summer Semester of 2025, the V2W program has produced 30 graduates. Upon graduation, participants will seek employment to begin building flight hours towards their Restricted Airline Transport Pilot (R-ATP) FAA certification. One of the benefits of graduating from the University of North Dakota's aviation program is that students will only require 1,000 hours of flight time to qualify for this certificate. This allows them to reach airline pilot positions much sooner.

Each semester, a V2W representative from UND flight operations shares valuable insights into the hiring process for students interested in flight instructor positions, with advice that can be applied to any aviation career. To date, 53% of our V2W graduates have been hired

as flight instructors at UND, which exceeds the 20% average hiring rate for all graduates and is yet another testament to their aptitude, maturity, and success within the program.

Student Feedback

The administrative team continually seeks student feedback within the program to improve and tailor it to student needs. Additionally, the students share their opinions on the overarching benefits of the program. The top five themes are presented below:

1. Allows students to focus on studies and flying without stressing about paying the bills
2. Enables more camaraderie amongst participants; they learn from and mentor each other
3. Gives students a support group; provides a common bond
4. Students can see how the dream of flying professionally can become a reality
5. Industry visits have connected students to industry partners, resulting in enhanced mentorship and pathway opportunities to the major airlines

Lessons Learned

Based on three years of implementation, several key lessons have emerged regarding program impact and best practices. This program has been highly successful in providing veteran aviation students with additional funds to cover the flight course costs not already covered by other veterans' assistance sources. More importantly, this program demonstrated that our veteran students are very professional and dedicated to achieving their goals of becoming commercial airline pilots, helping to alleviate the current and projected shortage of commercial pilots in the United States.

The additional benefits provided to veterans in this program increase their chances of success in the program and post-graduation. The peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities that arise during the program are invaluable, and many veterans seek the same type of camaraderie they enjoyed during their military service. Potential employers also recognize the benefits of prioritizing veteran hiring and have been eager to engage with the V2W students in small group settings, which also increases our veterans' chances of success.

Future of Funding Veteran Flight Training

It is hoped that additional funding will be available in the future to expand this pilot program to other institutions, so that many other veterans can achieve their dream careers in commercial aviation. UND Aerospace is eager and ready to share the lessons learned from this program with other aviation universities that desire to establish a similar program.

Overcoming Veteran Medical Certification Challenges

As previously mentioned, veterans can make exceptional students. Beyond the typical non-traditional student, they tend to be more purpose-driven and have experience being responsible for themselves and others, resulting in an increased level of maturity. This can not only provide for their own success, but it can also serve as an example for other students. Yet,

this advanced maturity often stems from unique experiences gained as a result of their military service, and these experiences can make FAA medical certification more complicated than that of more traditional collegiate aviation students. This includes more extensive and documented medical histories, possible Veterans Administration (VA) disability ratings, and distrust of governmental medical systems that is equal to or greater than that found in civilian aviation (Hoffman et al., 2023).

This section outlines some of the unique FAA medical complications that veterans can experience, their impacts, and some methods that may be used by both veterans and collegiate aviation programs to ease the process of receiving their FAA medical certificate.

Common Veteran FAA Medical Complications

Given the combat and combat-like experiences encountered by many veterans, it is not uncommon for them to leave the military service with medical diagnoses and VA disability ratings that can complicate receiving a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Medical Certificate. A few of the common issues veterans can face when applying for their medical include mental health, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) diagnoses or ratings. Additionally, there are a few lesser-known and often unexpected issues that can cause delays and difficulties for aviation personnel with prior military experience. This includes prior military medical waivers that may not directly transfer to the FAA system, non-compensatory (0%) and ‘surprise’ disability ratings, off-label prescriptions, and other non-medical issues, such as military non-judicial punishment.

When evaluating individuals with mental health, TBI, and OSA ratings or diagnoses, the Aviation Medical Examiner (AME) and FAA must consider several factors for each case, including the severity of symptoms, types of treatment, and the recency of symptoms, treatments, and any changes in treatment (U.S. Federal Aviation Administration [FAA], 2025a). Even with these factors, an AME is often able to issue a medical certificate upon completion of the examination. The FAA provides mental health, head and brain injury, and OSA decision tools to help AMEs determine what they can approve at their level and what conditions may require deferral for further evaluation (FAA, 2025b).

Lesser-Known Complications

Besides these more common conditions, several lesser-known issues can complicate the FAA medical process for veterans. One often surprising item is that prior military aviation medical waivers are not automatically approved by the FAA. In fact, if the waiver does not match one of the Conditions AMEs Can Issue (CACI) or meet the criteria listed in other decision worksheets, a special issuance will likely be necessary (FAA, 2024). Additionally, the military grants aviation waivers for certain conditions and medications that currently do not have an approved pathway from the FAA.

Other factors that can cause confusion include 0% and ‘surprise’ ratings. A non-compensatory (0%) disability rating occurs when the VA recognizes a service-connected condition but determines it is not severe enough to warrant compensation (U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs [VA], 2023). Even though service members do not receive compensation for these conditions, the FAA still recognizes them as disabilities, and, as such, they must be disclosed when applying for an aviation medical. ‘Surprise ratings’ are not an official rating category, but refer to situations where a veteran’s assigned rating has a different title than the one they requested. For example, a service member might request ratings for adjustment disorder, but the VA may assign a rating for PTSD, anxiety, or depression instead. If the veteran does not carefully review their decision letter, they might miss these different conditions. This could affect their ability to obtain an FAA medical, and in certain scenarios, may also lead to the suspension or revocation of their certificate if they fail to include these conditions in their application. (FAA, 2023b, 2025c)

Off-label medication use may pose another challenge for FAA medical applicants. Many drugs on the FAA’s Do Not Fly medication list may be prescribed off-label for conditions that typically do not lead to grounding (FAA, 2023a). As an example, some well-known telehealth services currently prescribe SSRIs that are not approved by the FAA as a treatment for sexual health concerns. It is essential for veterans, like all aviation professionals, to understand the impact of any medication they may be taking, regardless of the reason it was prescribed.

Finally, certain military non-judicial punishment actions, commonly known as Article 15s or Captain’s Masts, may affect the FAA medical process. MedXPress questions 18W and V ask about arrests, convictions, and administrative actions, including non-traffic-related convictions (FAA, 2025a). Since non-judicial punishments can be used as an administrative action in lieu of a Court Martial, some believe they meet the criteria of administrative actions and should be included when completing an FAA Medical.

Recommendations for Applicants

To help overcome many of these challenges, we recommend encouraging veterans to prepare for their medical just as they would for a final exam, checkride, or promotion board: *Select, Study, Prepare, Complete Your Homework, and Plan Ahead*. The first step is to *select* the right AME. It is important to find an AME who is both up-to-date with the FAA’s latest standards and has experience working with aviators who have VA disability ratings. Additionally, if the service member has mental health or addiction concerns, it is essential that they find a well-qualified Human Intervention Motivation Study (HIMS) AME. Reaching out to other veterans for recommendations can be helpful in identifying AMEs with the appropriate veteran experience.

The next step is to *study* the FAA Guide for Aviation Medical Examiners. The guide offers detailed instructions on all aspects of the application process, including the criteria AMEs use to evaluate each item. After studying, it’s time to *prepare* by gathering their VA Decision Letter, relevant military medical records, and completing the online MedXPress questionnaire. If the veteran has questions about their specific situation, they should request a separate consultation from an AME or an external medical consultation service (e.g., AOPA PPS, Wingman Med, Aviation Medical Advisory Service). *Completing Homework* is always important, and in this case, that includes reviewing and filling out any CACIs or decision worksheets for their specific medical conditions. Having these completed can not only speed up

the medical examination by ensuring the proper paperwork is available, but it can also help prompt an AME who is unfamiliar with the latest guidance for a particular issue.

Finally, it is important for the student veteran to *Plan Ahead*. In addition to allocating enough time to schedule their FAA Medical, it is also important to be prepared for a possible deferral. Waiting until days or weeks before the semester or flight training begins does not allow enough time to address any missteps or unplanned complications.

College Support

At the college level, three main areas can help support veteran students: a detailed aviation medical provider list, encouraging a ‘veteran aviators organization’, and advising service members impacted by a Deferred Medical. Providing a detailed list of aviation medical providers goes beyond simply providing the contact information for local AMEs. Veterans can be best served by AMEs with experience evaluating VA disability ratings and with an understanding of military medical records. For schools with in-house AMEs, consider allowing prospective or accepted student aviators to use the organization’s medical examiner, as they are likely to be one of the most experienced and up-to-date in the area. Outside of standard AMEs, a list of FAA and military-familiar HIMS and mental health providers can assist veterans with questions and aviation-appropriate treatment for any mental health concerns.

If the institution is uncomfortable developing and providing a detailed list themselves, one alternative is to encourage the formation of a veteran aviators student organization to curate and distribute the aviation medical provider list. Similar to Middle Tennessee State University’s Aerospace Veterans Group, this type of organization could go well beyond helping construct a provider information sheet by supporting veteran students with professional development opportunities, networking, and offering mentorship for fellow veterans enrolled in aviation degree programs.

Finally, providing specially trained academic advisors for veteran students with deferred medicals can help them complete their degree programs and ratings while maximizing the efficient use of their veterans' benefits. Unlike other scholarships that offer a specific dollar amount, most VA-related education benefits cover a set number of months (VA, 2025). Because of this, a student veteran who is unable to complete flight training for multiple semesters due to a deferred medical might miss out on the funds needed to complete their training. Advisors who understand the specific limitations of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and the Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve will be best equipped to give accurate and timely advice to veterans, helping them decide how to best use their benefits to achieve their goals while waiting for medical clearance. Such actions can help improve retention of prior service members, while supporting recruitment by fostering a veteran-friendly environment.

Benefits of Proactive Preparation and Institutional Support

While veterans bring experience, discipline, and leadership skills to collegiate aviation programs, their transition into the civilian aviation community can be affected by FAA medical certification challenges that are unique to their military backgrounds. Complex medical histories,

VA disability ratings, and differences between military and FAA medical waiver systems can cause uncertainty and delays. However, by encouraging student veterans to prepare proactively and offering institutional support, these challenges can be alleviated. Creating a veteran-friendly environment and providing tailored guidance can help student veterans successfully navigate the FAA medical process and achieve their goal of becoming aviation professionals.

Conclusion

Supporting veterans in collegiate aviation programs requires coordinated strategies that address social, financial, and medical certification challenges. The Daniels Center offers a method for helping service members transition back into civilian life, and Vets2Wings provides financial assistance for veterans interested in a career in aviation, while informed guidance, proactive preparations, and support can help former military members obtain their aviation medical certifications. Together, these efforts show that aligning emotional, academic, and administrative support helps universities and aviation professionals turn barriers into opportunities, ensuring veterans continue to strengthen the aviation industry.

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