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Elites neglect veterans

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At a special presidential forum Wednesday night, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were scheduled to appear back-to-back, take questions from military veterans and talk about how our country treats them.

Wick Sloane's complaint probably won't come up, but I wish it would.

Sloane teaches at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, and eight years ago, after discovering veterans among his students, he reached out to officials at his own alma maters, Williams College and Yale University, for any guidance they might have about working with this particular group.

"They were bewildered," he told me, because they'd had so little contact with veterans.

He began collecting data, and for several years now, on Veterans Day, he has published an accounting of how many veterans, among a population of more than 2 million eligible for federal higher-education benefits, wind up at America's most elite colleges. It appears on the website Insider Higher Ed, and this is from the first paragraph of his November 2015 tally: "Yale, four; Harvard, unknown; Princeton, one; Williams, one." Harvard didn't grant his request for information, he said.

The tally noted just two veterans among undergraduates at Duke, one at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one at Pomona and zero at Carleton.

"These schools all wring their hands and say, 'We'd love to have more, but they just don't apply,'" Sloane said. "That's what offends me. These schools have incredibly sophisticated recruitment teams. They recruit quarterbacks. They fill the physics lab. They visit high schools. How many visits did they make for veterans?"

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The schools in question educate only a small percentage of this country's college students, and their behavior isn't the most pressing concern for college-minded veterans, who have graduation rates slightly below other students' and who don't get adequate guidance about how best to use their government benefits, too much of which go to for-profit institutions with poor records.

But it's symbolic. It sends a message: about how much we prize veterans; about the potential we see in them.

And not-for-profit private colleges like the ones I mentioned should feel a powerful obligation. They're exempt from all sorts of taxes. Donations to them are tax-deductible. So they're getting enormous help from the country.

Do they, in turn, go out of their way to embrace the young men and women — veterans — who have helped the country the most?

Some, yes. Vassar, Wesleyan and Dartmouth are all part of the Posse Veterans Program, which commits them, each year, to admitting 10 veterans who have been identified by the Posse Foundation as people of exemplary character and sufficient academic promise. Vassar was the first on board, four years ago, while Dartmouth just joined.

Deborah Bial, the founder and president of Posse, told me that the program is already developed enough to provide 10 qualified veterans annually to another three colleges, and that elite institutions know about it.

So why haven't more signed up?

"That's a great question," she said.

Some schools have turned to other organizations that, like Posse, try to point veterans to elite colleges. Yale recently entered into such a partnership with the group Service to School; a Yale official told me that the count of veterans among undergraduates has risen to 11 as of this new academic year. He said that it was six last year, out of nearly 5,500 undergraduates, and that Yale had given Sloane the wrong number.

There is also positive change — if not nearly enough — elsewhere. Williams and Pomona each added two veterans this year, bringing their totals to three. MIT is up to four.

"It's moving in the right direction," said Beth Morgan, the executive director of Service to School.

And there are elite schools that have been laudably ahead of the curve, including Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Brown, Stanford and USC.

But there are huge discrepancies: The three veterans at

Williams — out of about 2,000 students — compares with 33 at Vassar, out of about 2,400.

And there’s evasiveness. A Harvard official said that she’d prefer to give me a combined count of veterans at Harvard College and the Harvard Extension School, a much different entity. I asked for separate numbers, which she then said she couldn’t provide by my deadline.

These institutions pride themselves on trying to reflect America’s diversity, broadening students’ horizons, filling in their blind spots and preparing tomorrow’s leaders, whose decisions could well include matters of war.

For those reasons and more, the schools should be integrating veterans to an extent that some have only just begun to and many still don’t.

Sloane, whose community college has more than 400 veterans out of some 14,000 students, suggested that elite schools commit to at least “as many veterans as freshman football players.” Great idea. I invite Clinton and Trump to echo his call.

Nicholas Kristof is a columnist for The New York Times.

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