The American Council on Education (ACE) began offering support to veterans and servicemembers on college campuses long before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The organization was founded in 1918 to help address the higher-education needs of returning American servicemembers in the wake of World War I. After World War II and the passage of the nation’s first G.I. Bill, the council intensified its work. Over the years, ACE has expanded beyond these military-related programs into topics like lifelong learning, college affordability, diversi-
ty, effective administration, and the internationalization of education. Today, its membership includes approximately 1,600 colleges and universities, and 200 college associations.

One of the early achievements of ACE was helping servicemembers receive certain forms of academic credit for their military learning. Rather than apply a single set of standards, ACE developed two programs that have since become standards in higher education: the General Education Development (GED) testing program, which certifies that individuals have all of the requisite skills taught in a traditional high school curriculum, and the Military Guide, which provides institutions of higher learning with recommendations for awarding course credit for particular forms of military training.

In recent years, with the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, the most generous educational benefit for veterans since World War II, ACE members noticed an influx of veterans into their classrooms. Colleges and universities turned to ACE for help identifying promising practices that could support these new students in their studies. Although ACE’s Military Guide remained a useful tool for converting military experience to course credit, “higher education knows that the education experience is about more than just sitting down in a classroom,” says Meg Mitcham, the current director of veterans programs at ACE.

And so, in 2008, ACE began a new initiative to “provide programs and services to institutions of higher education to help them ensure that today’s veterans are college and career ready,” in Mitcham’s words. Rather than developing this from scratch, ACE borrowed from its existing programs on educating older students, and leaned on the in-house team that had long been working with the various service branches on the Military Guide for training-to-coursework conversion. Two specific programs were created: the Success for Veterans Award Grants, and the Veterans Success Jam.

Funded by the Walmart Foundation, the Success for Veterans Award Grants provided $100,000 to each of 20 colleges around the country (selected from 248 applicants) to serve as laboratories for veteran support in higher education. The program aims to “explore existing programs and initiatives supporting student veterans, promote awareness of innovative ideas and lessons learned, and disseminate insights and ideas to institutions of higher learning.”

These grants began in June 2009 and ended with a final report in July 2011. Mitcham explains, “We funded those grants with the hope of really understanding the process these institutions went through, what challenges they hit, and how they addressed them.” To what extent these programs would succeed in those early days was uncertain.
When Mitcham set out on site visits to each of the grantees, however, what she discovered surprised her. “I wasn’t sure what these programs would look like, or how much they would differ. But at 20 institutions I found 20 drastically different programs, all of which were highly successful. It became clear very quickly that there was no single definition of what ‘veteran-friendly’ meant.” Fresno City College, for instance, built a job-training pipeline into major regional employer Pacific Gas & Electric, while the CUNY Silberman School of Social Work hired and trained student interns to support veterans.

To make sure they stayed closely in touch with what different sorts of campuses were learning and needing, ACE organized a Veterans Success Jam with support from the Kresge Foundation. “We wanted to be sure we heard the viewpoints of all of our member institutions—two-year and four-year institutions, public and private institutions, rural and urban ones, institutions located in close proximity to military bases and ones that weren’t,” says Mitcham. Gathering feedback from 1,600 institutions plus other stakeholders was a big undertaking, but ACE managed by hosting the Veteran Success Jam as a “three-day online brainstorming event.” Organized around seven major discussion topics and several training webcasts, the event attracted 2,877 registrants.

Throughout the Jam, participants returned again and again to the phrase “veteran and military friendly.” Yet nobody really knew what that meant. Colleges were hungry to know what they should do to make themselves open and useful to veterans. Answering that became the next phase of ACE’s work.

Turning Research into Action
ACE made it their goal to “take everything we learned over the past few years and help the rest of the institutions out there, whether they are our members or not.” In addition to the vast amount of information and experience collected from the Jam and grant awards, colleges continually approached ACE to share their new and evolving programs. Realizing that what worked for one institution may not work at the next, Mitcham and colleagues decided to offer options:

We needed to help institutions see that there are multiple ways of addressing any of these issues, and we needed to provide them with
examples of those. We’ll give them the program and the guide, but there are many different ways they could turn and still successfully serve their military and veteran students.

With this in mind, ACE built the Toolkit for Veteran-Friendly Institutions. It is more a collection of case studies and samples than a set of prescriptions for colleges and universities to follow. In more than a dozen categories, the Toolkit diagnoses the challenges student veterans face, then provides documents and resources used by various universities to solve those problems. It provides, for just a few examples, a copy of Wayne State University’s veterans housing policy, an agenda from the University of Illinois’ veterans orientation program, and an overview of Central Michigan University’s training given to professors working with veterans. As of early 2013, 529 institutions of higher learning have registered for the Toolkit.

All of this information exchanging seems to be improving campus offerings. According to ACE’s Soldier to Student surveys—one conducted in 2009 and the other in 2012, bracketing ACE’s Jam and the Veteran Success Award Grants—the percentage of schools providing special programming for veterans increased from 57 percent to 62 percent nationwide, and the number of institutions saying such programming is a priority increased from 57 percent to 71 percent.

As with others in this relatively new field, ACE began its work by conducting research and running pilot programs. Once it began to understand the full spectrum of issues facing veterans on campus, and the institutions wanting to cater to them, the group began to put that research to work. While acknowledging that there is no single solution, ACE’s Toolkit offers well-organized lessons and examples that can be used by motivated institutions of higher education to welcome and better serve the influx of veterans they can expect over the next several years.