

CASE STUDY

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Recruit, Retain, and Educate: Bill Ahmanson encourages colleges to remember vets

In Southern California, you can't throw a stone among the core cultural and educational institutions without hitting something the Ahmanson Foundation has supported. It was an early funder of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Ahmanson Theater, the California Museum of Science and Industry, the Ahmanson Center for Biological Research, Ahmanson Technology Center, Ahmanson-Getty Fellowship, and the Ahmanson Foundation Humanities Endowment

Fund, among others, which dot the landscape of higher education in the region. In addition, it has given substantially to medicine and health services, preservation of the environment, ending homelessness, and supporting low-income populations. Broadly, its mission is to “increase the quality of life in Southern California and to enhance its cultural legacy.” To say that the foundation of the late financier Howard Ahmanson and his nephews Robert and William is a bedrock Los Angeles institution is an understatement.

Around 2010, foundation president Bill Ahmanson, Robert’s son, noticed an uptick in the number of young veterans returning to the L.A. area from Iraq and Afghanistan. He decided the foundation should help make sure those transitions were smooth. He received plenty of proposals mentioning veterans, but few were targeted tightly on vets—“they were just tossing in the name ‘veterans’ to get people like us to loosen up the purse strings.”

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Veterans had become the cause of the day, a fundraising tool of choice, but despite the public discussion not much was happening in programming. At the V.A. there were lots of ideas “but nothing was gelling,” according to Ahmanson, and “I got tired of all the handwringing and people wondering ‘What are we going to do?’ So we did something on our own.”

Foundation leaders asked themselves, “what can we do specifically for veterans in a space where we’re already comfortable? We did some research and learned about the Yellow Ribbon program at the Philanthropy Roundtable meeting in October 2012.” By then the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill was up and running and had nearly 650,000 users. So was Yellow Ribbon, a V.A. program that matches dollar for dollar any funding universities put up to cover attendance costs that exceed what the G.I. Bill provides. It is mostly used by expensive private schools.

Building on familiar ground

Higher education was something the Ahmanson Foundation knew well, and where it was confident it could find opportunities to make

a difference. Bill sensed that “80 to 90 percent of today’s new veterans are basically squared away and just need some direction and education.” Some veterans, though, were struggling to complete their degrees. Some weren’t going to the right schools for their needs. Some of those attending private colleges (where fees sometimes exceed even the generous payments of the new G.I. Bill) were graduating with lots of debt. There were issues of adjustment and culture and support that could make the college experiences of vets especially successful if they were addressed.

So the program that emerged—the Ahmanson Veteran Scholarship Initiative—isn’t directed at tuition or student living costs. Instead, the AVSI makes annual \$50,000 grants to colleges to help them “recruit, retain, and educate veterans.” Before making this commitment Bill called two college presidents to test the idea. Then he took it to his board for a vote. The effort was conceived and approved in record time.

Ahmanson then made a series of calls to heads of colleges and universities that went something like this: “I want to see if you would accept a grant to create new procedures on your campus to recruit, educate, and retain veterans all the way to graduation. My board has already approved it.’ This would usually be followed by dead silence on the other end of the phone. Then I got everything from a chilly ‘let me check with admissions to see if we need it’ to ‘we were just talking about this the other day—are you involved in some corporate espionage?’”

After four years, the basic structure of AVSI remains roughly the same as when it launched. About two dozen colleges are participating. All of them are private, four-year undergraduate schools in California, but that’s about all they have in common. They include some science and engineering schools, business schools, women’s colleges, three art schools, and a myriad of liberal-arts colleges—places like the University of Southern California, Art Center College of Design, and Pomona College.

Bill explains that these schools are good partners for the Ahmanson Foundation. The foundation has worked with most of them for decades, and knows their leadership, the quality of their education, and the ways they operate. Because they’re all private institutions where tuition is usually higher than what the G.I. Bill will pay, they are likely to have students facing the kinds of challenges the foundation wants to tackle. And making these high-level private schools better fits for veterans is a valuable public service—because “just like for anybody else, large public

institutions are not always the best fit for a veteran,” and Bill wanted to increase individual educational choices for former servicemembers.

Programming evolves as colleges learn

One major goal for the Ahmanson Foundation was to increase the total number of veterans at each participating college. A few of them had substantial veteran populations before AVSI began, but most did not. That’s an imbalance many other elite private universities share—Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Duke, and many other top institutions all have fewer than five veterans on their campuses as undergraduates.

It isn’t that vets don’t qualify to get into these schools; there are significant numbers of students just out of the military doing superbly at top schools like Columbia, Georgetown, University of Southern California, and Syracuse. But many elite colleges have no idea how to advertise to veterans, inform them of their opportunities, or make the small adjustments in application processes or enrollment processes needed by students who don’t follow the conventional “right out of high school” path to campus.

Bill Ahmanson started small by challenging the colleges participating in his initiative to take the One More Vet Pledge—promising to enroll at least one more veteran every year than they had the year prior. AVSI also helped schools invest in college fairs for veterans, marketing to veterans, and tasking college counselors to do outreach and help veterans through the application process. A couple of institutions set up partnerships with American Honors, a program that identifies talented veterans enrolled in community colleges across the country who are looking to transfer to four-year institutions. Within two years, many schools “blew the doors off” their Pledge commitments. Some schools reached triple-digit numbers of veteran undergrads.

As they learned how to get vets on campus, administrators shifted their focus to new challenges they never anticipated, like crediting veterans for relevant advanced training and experience they received in the military. Most colleges have viewed military training as too foreign to map onto college transcripts. The foundation encouraged AVSI schools to reconsider. Not allowing veterans credit for skills they’ve already acquired is a waste of school resources, veterans’ time, and G.I. Bill money, they noted.

“When you’ve got somebody whose job it was to monitor Arabic communications chatter and then direct troops, they can pass three

semesters of Arabic. These aren't weak credits—the military refresher course for Arabic is a thousand hours. The military certificate in higher mathematics for an engineer on a nuclear submarine means something," states Ahmanson. "Schools were hesitant to do it initially, but they ended up figuring it out. They had to do a lot of that translation on their own." Occidental College stands out as one early adopter that saw the value of offering credit for military experience and helped lead the pack.

AVSI schools have also shifted some of their funding to allow veterans to graduate with less debt. The V.A.'s Yellow Ribbon program matches resources schools put up from their own funds to fill the gap between private tuitions and reimbursements allowed under the G.I. Bill. In many cases, Ahmanson funding opens up new Yellow Ribbon spots at these private schools.



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Trust and latitude yield programs that last

The Ahmanson Foundation intentionally set up its initiative with loose instructions. "We ask them to report back, 'what are you doing to recruit? What are you doing to retain? What are you doing to educate?'" says Ahmanson. So "we can see what they're doing, but we give them maximum latitude. Some things they do may not seem important to us, but may be important to their campus culture."

Every college is different, and letting them find their own ways of succeeding will ultimately result in better service to veterans, Ahmanson believes. He sets the finish line and lets each school experiment with how to get there. The foundation's only non-negotiable requirement is that schools not coddle veterans. "A lot of veteran centers I find are all about making excuses and babysitting. That's not what we do."

One important way the foundation has encouraged high standards and energetic experimentation to discover the best solutions for vets is by making a comparatively long commitment to the joint effort. The seven- to ten-year AVSI grant periods are an eternity compared to the one-year "funding whipsaw" it usually gets from government funding.

“Initially, they were pretty tight-fisted with the money because they didn’t know how long it was going to last. Now that we’re going into our fourth year, they’re starting to realize this has some longevity to it. They’re being more creative with it, and they know this is a population they’ll be able to continue to serve.”

The Ahmanson Foundation’s long-term goal is to make veterans a normal part of campus culture, so that when specialized funding eventually winds down, the schools will have a steady, normal stream of former military members. By investing in helping them learn how to serve student veterans, the foundation is helping colleges discover the intrinsic value of having them on campus. Because the grantees are allowed the flexibility to decide how to spend the money toward AVSI’s goals, they’re more likely to add their own resources and keep the program going after AVSI closes down.

Ahmanson explains that “this is where I think philanthropy is most helpful. We help identify important priorities. But we let them frame the response for themselves, without a lot of strings and restrictions, so they can make it their own priority. And they all have.”

After four years and \$5 million of funding, the signals are very positive. A total of 25 potent private schools have significantly increased the number of veterans on their campuses. They have overcome barriers that made recruitment difficult and prior credit rare. And they have kept enrolled all the way to graduation many individuals who would likely have dropped out. Some schools have even launched additional fundraising and made six-figure commitments to complement their \$50,000 annual gift from the Ahmanson Foundation.

One more non-traditional gift for non-traditional students

The Ahmanson Foundation’s most recent project supporting student veterans is a departure from the rest of its AVSI funding. Fully half of all veterans have families when they go back to school. This makes them completely different from most other undergraduates. And in most cases the housing allowances included in the G.I. Bill housing are not enough to fully cover the exorbitant rents of Southern California.

When Bill Ahmanson became aware that a set of family apartment units near the Occidental College campus was going up for sale, he made the school a proposal. The foundation would buy the building, then proffer specifically to house the families of students who are former servicemembers. Any units not occupied by Occidental students would

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be made available to other families of veterans attending AVSI colleges in that part of Los Angeles. And Occidental would only charge rents in the amount of the G.I. Bill housing allowance.

Occidental agreed. The college even offered to open certain other campus facilities to the families residing in the building. The Ahmanson Foundation put up the money to purchase the building.