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Online and for-profit schools have been the rising stars of the education industry for years, and the 2011-12 school year was no exception, according to military tuition assistance data.

When EDGE began tracking the most popular colleges for active-duty students in 2009, American Public University System — specifically its American Military University — was second only to the University System of Maryland, which has a long history of serving those who serve overseas on military bases. By fiscal 2010, AMU had edged out UMUC as the top tuition assistance school and widened its lead this past year with a 15 percent jump in students receiving TA.

That comes as no surprise to Jim Sweizer, AMU’s vice president of military programs. The school has instituted some changes in the past few years that he believes may help explain the growth — such as increased office hours on some military installations and designated representatives at AMU’s home base to help education coordinators in the field. But he noted that online schools in general have taken off.

“I think that’s a testament to what the students want,” Sweizer said. “It’s providing a service to those students who want affordable and portable courses, so I think that’s why not only we’re doing well, but some of the other online for-profits are doing well. And at the same time, you’re seeing probably somewhat of a decline in the more traditional universities that are serving the military.”

Another for-profit school, Ashford University, No. 38 on our list in 2009, is now up to No. 4. Between fiscal 2010 and fiscal 2011, Ashford saw a 36 percent jump in students receiving TA. The school has both satellite campuses and fully online degree programs.

Bridgepoint Education, Ashford’s parent company, credited the school’s growth in students using TA to new degree programs, specialized support services and the training given to instructors on how to meet military students’ needs.

“We haven’t changed our marketing message or mix because we’ve always understood that military students want accessible, affordable, relevant, high-quality programs that help them succeed while on active duty and beyond,” said Douglas Abts, Bridgepoint senior vice president for strategy and development.

Army Sgt. Maj. James Grady said he chose Ashford because of many of the factors Sweizer cited, including the flexibility of online courses and Ashford’s price tag, which slid in precisely at the TA cap of $250 per credit hour. In fact, Grady said he was able to continue his studies while deployed to Afghanistan until a suicide bomb
brought a flood of casualties into the hospital where he served as enlisted personnel manager. When that happened, he added, Ashford didn’t punish him for dropping the class halfway through. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in organizational management in April 2011 after just three years.

“I enjoyed Ashford enough that I got my mom to go,” Grady said. His mother was also in the military and looking at retirement after 27 years. “We actually did the same degree program and graduated together.”

By staying within his tuition assistance budget, Grady added, he saved his GI Bill benefits for his daughter, who is attending Tennessee State University.

While online for-profit universities have seen gains in TA students, many top community college systems are seeing a decline. The community college systems in Washington state, Florida and Virginia all edged downward on our list from last year, with each losing more than 10 percent of their active-duty military students. At the same time, though, all of them saw a rise in TA revenue.

The California Community College System saw a rise in students of about 40 percent — thanks in large part to Coastline Community College, which offers some online programs tailored to the military — but its increase in revenue far outpaced that, with TA income nearly doubling.

Michael Dear, who specializes in military student programs at the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, said the diverging trend is easy to explain: The system’s fees, which were $26 per unit during the 2010-2011 school year, went up to $36 per unit last year and are going up again to $46 per unit for 2012-2013.

California Community Colleges spokeswoman Paige Dorr noted that the state still has the least expensive community college system in the country and that $46 per credit hour is still far below the TA cap.

Dear said GI Bill students have also gone up dramatically. Like many other community college systems, California’s public two-year schools seem to be far more popular among vets than active-duty students. The California Community College System was the No. 1 choice for students getting GI Bill money.