



**STATEMENT OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ON

DEFINING AND IMPROVING SUCCESS FOR STUDENT VETERANS

May 8th, 2014

**THE AMERICAN LEGION WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
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Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dan Dellinger and the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, we thank you and your colleagues for the work you do in support of service members, veterans and their families. The American Legion commends you for holding this hearing on a program near and dear to its heart, one conceived and made real by Legionnaires in 1944.

The American Legion, through its Veterans Employment & Education Division, helps to ensure that U.S. veterans have the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. We are experts in programs involving veterans' education, small business, employment, veterans' preference, VA home loans, homeless veterans, training, licensing and certification, transition, USERRA, and other issues related to economics.

As a grassroots organization, The American Legion draws upon the strength of its membership to provide guidance on policies in the form of resolutions passed during annual national conventions or at meetings of the National Executive Committee. The will of the membership of the Legion is expressed through these resolutions, which support or oppose policy decisions on a wide range of issues including veterans, the children and youth of America, a strong national defense, and the principles of Americanism. The support and positions of The American Legion on any legislation is derived from the guidance of these resolutions and the founding documents of our organization.

Background

Societies have often rewarded their citizens for faithful military service since antiquity. Ancient Rome rewarded her military veterans with a plot of land, a cash payment and citizenship after 20 years of service. France offers citizenship to Foreign Legionnaires who successfully complete a three year enlistment. These benefits share something in common: they are earned, and they empower the recipient to better themselves.

After World War II The American Legion led an effort to develop a readjustment plan for World War II veterans and thereby ensure that American veterans were treated in a manner consistent with the best traditions of veteran benefits. Harry Colmery, a former National Commander of The American Legion, wrote a draft bill in January 1944 which provided crucial transition assistance for veterans returning home from World War II. It was soon introduced in Congress as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – also known as the GI Bill of Rights — and was signed into law on June 22, 1944.

The advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill has restored an education benefit comparable to that provided by the original GI Bill, and as such, veterans are enrolling in higher education programs at high rates. Therefore, it is important that the success of these student-veterans be examined.

Student-Veteran Success

Joseph Cuseo, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Marymount College (California), has done extensive work in the area of defining and promoting student success. The American Legion strongly concurs with the definitions of and approaches to student success he lays out in an article entitled *Defining Student Success: The Critical First Step in Promoting It*.¹ In the article, Dr. Cuseo defines student success as “desirable student outcome”. From there he lays out several indicators of student success:

- *Student retention*: Students remain in degree programs
- *Educational attainment*: Students complete degree programs
- *Academic achievement*: Students perform at satisfactory or superior levels in academic work
- *Student advancement*: Students advance to graduate degrees or gainful employment

Dr. Cuseo goes on to note that education, properly understood, requires more than mere job training or information transmission. A true education takes a holistic approach to individuals, and strives to provide an environment where in the whole person can develop. Dr. Cuseo enumerates six areas which a successful education will cultivate:

- *Intellectual Development*: developing skills for acquiring and communicating knowledge, learning how to learn, and how to think deeply.
- *Emotional Development*: developing skills for understanding, controlling, and expressing emotions.
- *Social Development*: enhancing the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships, leadership skills, and civic engagement.
- *Ethical Development*: formulating a clear value system that guides life choices and demonstrates personal character.
- *Physical Development*: acquiring and applying knowledge about the human body to prevent disease, maintain wellness, and promote peak performance.
- *Spiritual Development*: appreciating the search for personal meaning, the purpose of human existence, and questions that transcend the material or physical world.

¹ ESource for College Transitions, Vol. 4, Issue 5, May 2007 published by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.

Too often modern discussions of education focus myopically on the employment aspect of education, thereby reducing education to mere job training. The American Legion believes that this is insufficient. While student veterans certainly should be able to attain employment upon graduation, The American Legion believes that this vision of education is impoverished. Holistic education promotes good citizenship amongst non-veterans, and promotes healthy transitions from military to civilian life amongst veterans.²

Ultimately, The American Legion believes that veteran student success should be defined in a similar manner as student success generally: veterans should graduate educational programs holistically developed as individuals, and prepared to continue the service to their country and community that they began in the military.

The GI Bill Today

The Post-9/11 GI Bill represents a substantial benefit for those who have served on active duty in the wake of 9/11. Like the original GI Bill, it represents a robust investment by the country into those who have served, and it represents a real opportunity for veterans to better themselves, should they choose to take advantage of its offerings. However, there remains work to be done.

A recent survey conducted by The American Legion of Legionnaires who either are themselves student-veterans, or who regularly deal with student-veterans indicates that veterans desire more counseling both in terms of how to use their benefits, as well as in terms of opportunities available to them, and how to best translate their military skills into student success.

The VA's VetSuccess On Campus (VSOC) is a program which places experienced VA councilors directly on college campuses. The program began as a pilot in 2009 at the University of South Florida, and by fiscal year 2013, had expanded to a total of 94 sites³. The American Legion believes strongly in VSOC program's ability to assist student-veterans in a holistic manner. Unfortunately, most who participated in our survey were unfamiliar with the VSOC program. Thus, The American Legion believes that the program should continue to be expanded and promoted as an important tool promoting student veteran success.

While there were few complaints about the certifying process, The American Legion believes that it is important to not become complacent in improving the process.

Another problem that The American Legion had found is that many veterans do not have a clear understanding of how much of their education benefits are used towards their education, how much of their benefit remains, and all face the challenge of navigating through a mine field of practices employed by institutions of higher learning that can result in inordinate debt. One area where student-veterans face undue burden is out-of-state tuition cost. Over the last couple of years, we have heard from countless veterans who, because of the nature of military service,

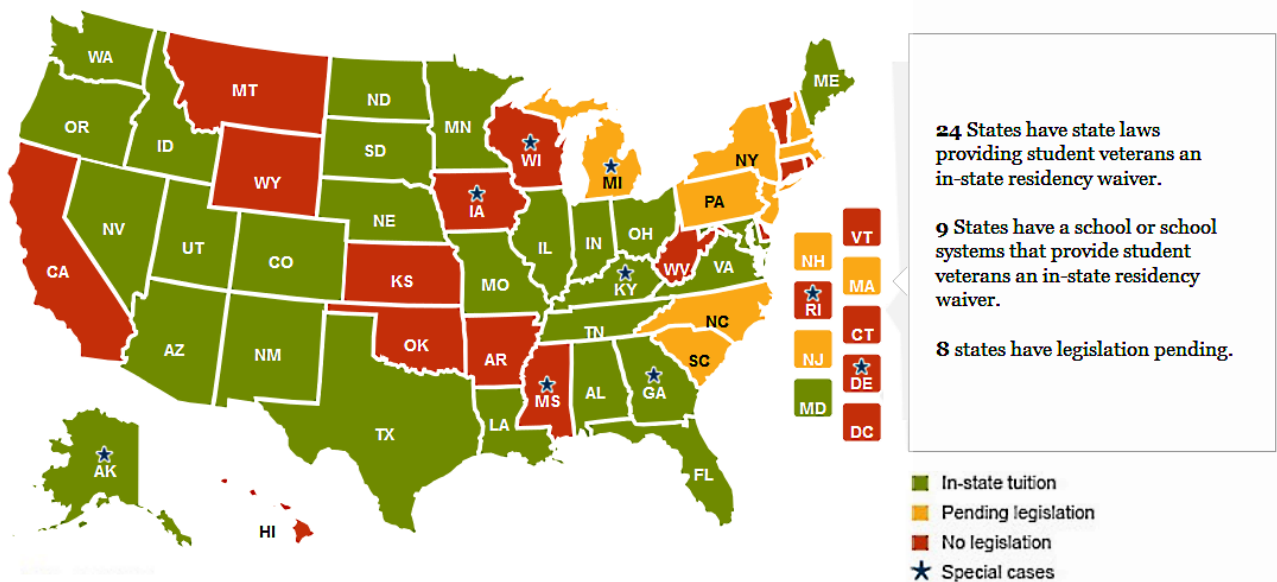
² Pragmatically speaking, Dr. Cuseo notes that studies show a higher rate of retention (the first indicator of student success) amongst students who are educated holistically.

³ <http://va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2475>

often have a difficult time establishing residency for purposes of obtaining in-state tuition rates. Under current rules 40,000 student-veterans have to pay the difference between in-state tuition, which is covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and out-of-state tuition if they are attending school as a nonresident. Because of this, many of our student-veterans are unable to use their GI Bill benefits at an institution of higher education of their choice or are required to pay thousands of dollars in out-of-pocket expenses in nonresidential tuition rates. Furthermore, public colleges and universities have significantly raised the costs of out-of-state tuition to offset decreasing revenues due to state budget cuts. Circumstances such as these pose significant challenges to using this important benefit.

For this reason, The American Legion, in collaboration with Veterans of Foreign Wars and Student Veterans of America, has led a state-by-state initiative to introduce, advocate for and support state legislation that would make all student-veterans eligible for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities, regardless of their residency status. Additionally, The American Legion is supporting current legislation which has passed the House and awaits action in the Senate which would tie school’s eligibility to receive federal funds to their willingness to grant in-state tuition to student-veterans. As shown in Figure 2, less than half of states offer in-state tuition for vets and we continue to press the importance of this issue as a top contributor to education debt.⁴

Figure 2: The Fight for In-State Tuition for Veterans



Note: The In-State Tuition Map is a collaborative effort with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and Student Veterans of America (SVA).

Source: Student Veterans of America

⁴ Student Veterans of America, “The Fight for In-State Tuition for Veterans”, <http://www.studentveterans.org/what-we-do/in-state-tuition.html> (Access May 3, 2014)

In addition to fighting for in-state tuition, The American Legion, in collaboration with Department of Defense, has led another state-by-state initiative to advocate for state legislation that would require public colleges, universities, and agencies to reassess and simplify the process for veterans to receive college credit for their military education or skills training when seeking occupational licenses. This initiative would establish a standard process to ensure student-veterans can apply their military education, experience, and prior learning – where applicable – towards college credit. This would also give student-veterans a better chance of obtaining a degree before their 36 months of GI Bill benefits runs out, and would allow for those individuals to make a quicker transition into the workforce

Overall, The American Legion applauds the strides that have been made toward protecting this benefit to our veterans, and ensuring that they are able to get the most out of it, and we thank the Subcommittee for holding this important hearing to examine what is working and what continues to need work.

For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Shaun Rieley at The American Legion's Legislative Division, (202) 861-2700 or srieley@legion.org.