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TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"DEFINING AND IMPROVING SUCCESS FOR STUDENT VETERANS"

MAY 8, 2014



Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on “Defining and Improving Success for Student Veterans.” As the premier advocate for student veterans in higher education, it is our privilege to share our on-the-ground perspective with you today.

In 2008, veterans in colleges and universities across the nation came together to form SVA. Using a network of peer-to-peer relationships, and determined to achieve beyond expectations, these veterans built on years of hard-learned lessons of how to succeed in higher education after – or sometimes during – service in our military.

Last June, SVA testified on “The Value of Education for Veterans at Public, Private, and For-Profit Colleges and Universities”. In that testimony, we noted the shortcomings of existing data on student veterans. Since then, SVA has completed the first phase of the *Million Records Project (MRP)*, the results of which we will detail at greater length below. This work is the most comprehensive research on student veterans in over 70 years, and was performed in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse.

We can now conclusively state, for the first time ever, that veterans of the Post-9/11 Generation are succeeding in higher education. How that success is defined is something that we at SVA are keen to share our perspective on.

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The Importance of Higher Education for Veterans

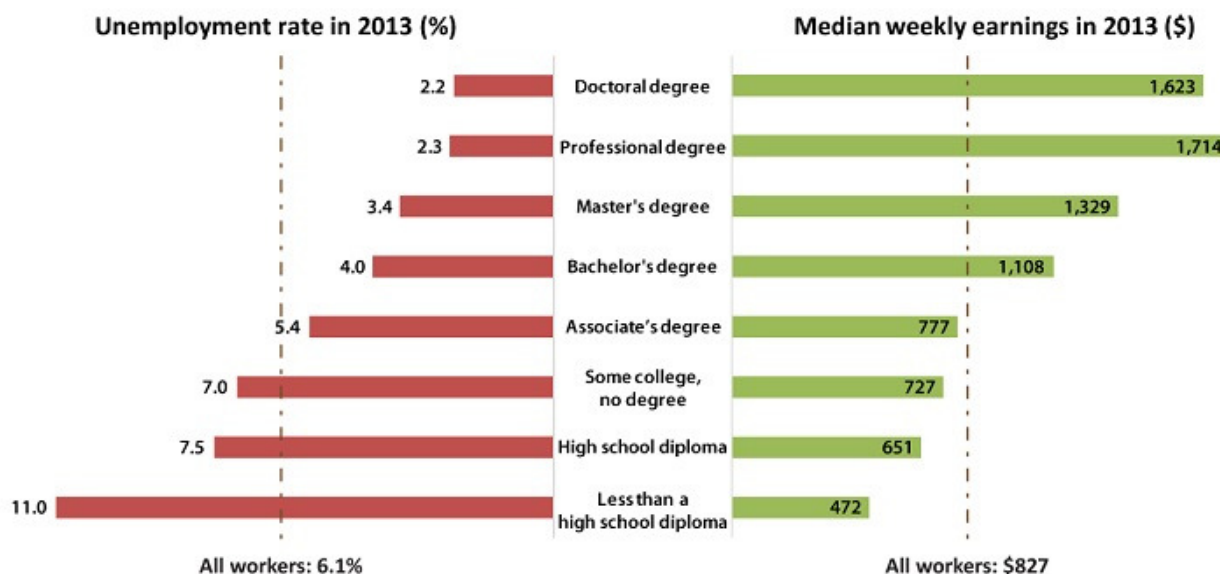
As quintessential nontraditional students, student veterans faces a myriad of challenges that most of our peers in the classroom do not. Fortunately, this generation of veterans has proven that they are well-equipped to succeed. Take, for example, Abby Kinch. Abby served as a Chinese linguist in the Air Force for more than two years before leaving to have her first child. Today, Abby attends classes part-time in pursuit of her PhD at Florida State University while caring for two children and working full-time to support her family. She is the perfect example of a student veteran who successfully keeps many balls in the air while attending school.

Abby, and millions of other student veterans like her, recognize the importance of achieving their academic goals in order to get ahead. Using data from the last fiscal year, the Bureau of Labor Statistics illustrated the importance of higher education, as seen in Figure 1. For those who achieved an associate’s degree, unemployment dropped to 5.4% and for those with a bachelor’s or greater, that drops even further to 4% and below.¹ Today, veterans are using their GI Bill to achieve higher levels of education to ultimately begin realizing their professional goals.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, “Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment”, http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm (Access May 2, 2014)



Figure 1: Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor

SVA's MRP found that of those student veterans who first completed a certificate, 31.3% continued on to higher levels of education; of those who first earned a two-year degree, 35.8% continued on; and 20.8% of veterans who first earned a baccalaureate-level degree went on to earn another degree at a higher level.² Understanding this trend of veterans translating their GI Bill benefits into higher levels of education is critical to determining the impact of the GI Bill, as it shows that this important benefit opens the door for more education than just the initial degree attempted.

In addition to veterans achieving higher levels of education, SVA's internal research shows that more than one-third of veterans are first-generation students in their families. It is clear that as veterans achieve higher levels of education, their rates of unemployment drop drastically. The snowball effect of individuals earning degrees and being able to provide for their families is astounding. As productive members of our nation's economy, student veterans do not require social safety nets; they are contributing positively to society, creating what we term a "double-positive effect" in which they turn their GI Bill benefit into economic value for the nation.

In fiscal year 2014, the Department of Defense (DoD) budget request was approximately \$526.6 billion dollars.³ Of this half trillion dollar budget, training is noted as a top priority, which will likely continue to

² Cate, C.A. (2014). *Million Records Project: Research from Student Veterans of America*. Student Veterans of America, Washington, DC.

³ Department of Defense, "Defense Budget Priorities and Decisions for Fiscal year 2014", <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/DefenseBudgetPrioritiesChoicesFiscalYear2014.pdf> (Accessed May 2, 2014)



remain a focus for the coming decades. Unfortunately, the billions of dollars invested in training American servicemembers to be some of the most qualified and competent specialists in a variety of highly technical fields are often lost when they exit the service and re-enter civilian fields. Many service members opt to pursue degrees that can be completed in the timeframe that their GI Bill benefits will allow, sometimes disincentivizing pursuit of science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM), careers.

Each time these specialized fields lose servicemembers to different career options, the DoD's initial investment evaporates permanently. Making it possible for and incentivizing individuals to pursue degrees in STEM fields will allow our country to better retain and grow that investment. While current GI Bill benefits do not often cover the extra years it takes to complete these extended degrees, there may be opportunities to encourage these individuals to pursue those rigorous fields of study.

The “double-positive effect” along with a capture of the investments made in our veterans when they were in the service by the DoD will pay dividends to the American taxpayer for many years to come.

How We Define “Student Veteran Success”

SVA defines student veteran success as student veterans making well-informed educational decisions, achieving personal academic goals without incurring student loan debt, and securing gainful employment that propels them forward in their career aspirations.

A Focus on Outcomes

Typically, success in higher education is defined as, “graduating with a bachelor’s degree after four years of college immediately following high school,” and indeed we should note that that path is the primary path that the Department of Education tracks when determining graduation rates. For most veterans, however, their paths will be different than that traditional path. As nontraditional students, many are entering school with credits earned through their military experience or through other modes of education, many are working full-time, and others are also supporting their families. In light of these considerations, we feel that the focus is much better kept on *outcomes and not the pace of attainment*.

Additionally, there are different pieces to the puzzle that must be identified for the student veteran to fully achieve their goals. We refer to these as the “Three Pillars” that contribute to student veteran success, and we encourage this subcommittee and other researchers to focus on them individually as well as collectively:

- **Pillar 1—Institutions:** Institutional support for student veterans is an important aspect of maintaining a strong pipeline of successful veteran graduates. The ability of the college or university to efficiently process student veteran benefits, transfer credits, or assist in job placement, is of crucial importance to the success of veterans. Flaws at this level, as well as unwelcoming or distrustful academic or professional environments, continue to act as major barriers to the success of some student veterans.
- **Pillar 2—Individuals:** Establishing an environment for the student veteran to fluidly interact with the institution and the community is a determining factor in whether or not they will achieve their goals, as those who do not feel welcome may not persist in their studies.



- **Pillar 3—Communities:** An established network across various university offices, academic networks, and career services enables the student veteran to make the transition from the campus to a fulfilling career. This may start with the institution’s outreach to potential employers, but is ultimately the responsibility of all of us to ensure that employers understand the strengths of veterans in the workplace.

As important as these factors are, special emphasis must be placed on the student debt issue. As veterans graduate across the country, we believe that their debt burden will ultimately be the single largest inhibiting factor to long-term success. There is a common misconception that veterans who go to school on the GI Bill have a “free ticket”, but we know this is simply not true.

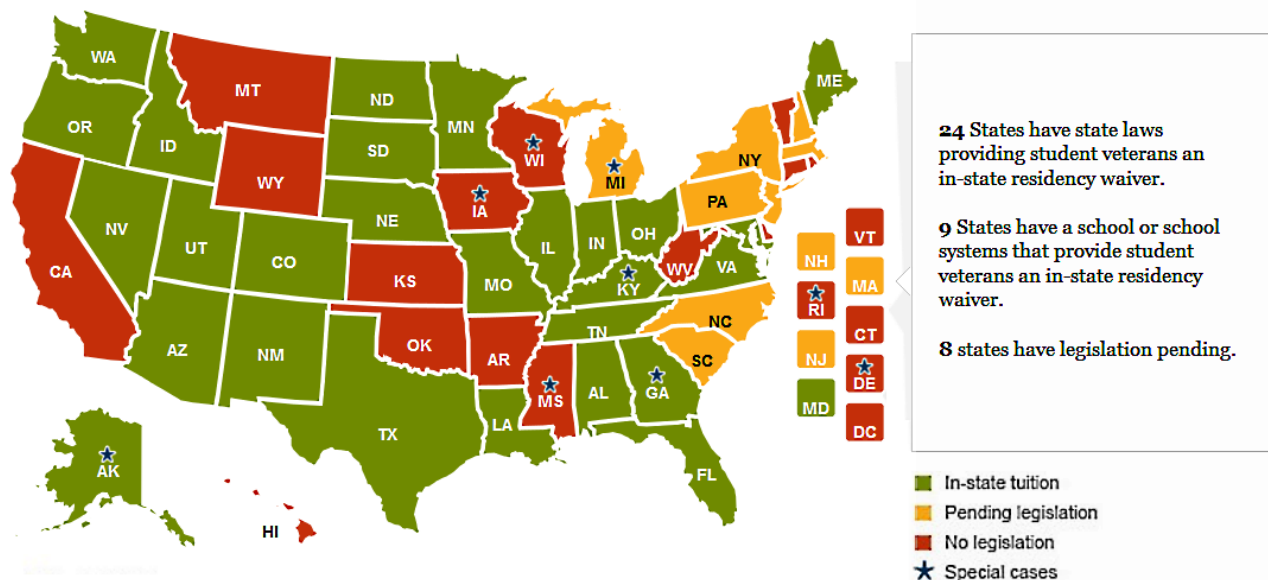
As an earned benefit, not only is it not free, it often does not cover the full cost of an education. As the MRP results indicate, some student veterans take longer to complete their degree, due to being nontraditional students. In such scenarios, student veterans likely take on additional loans to complete or risk withdrawing short of graduation. While many veterans may not have a clear understanding of how much their education benefits will impact their overall cost of attendance, others face abusive and misleading practices across sectors of education that can result in undue and unnecessary debt burdens.

We also remain concerned with some of the technical and career colleges that claim to offer credentials and certifications whose exams students are not able to sit for at the end of their course of study due to a lack of proper accreditation, leading to the loss of valuable benefits and years of study. We applaud the bipartisan efforts of the dozens of State Attorneys General working to curb this practice among the worst offenders, and would like to work with this subcommittee and the Congress to improve the laws preventing this despicable practice.

We would be remiss if we did not emphasize that many student veterans continue to be forced to pay out-of-state tuition costs, despite being “state-less” as a direct result of their military service. It is for this reason that the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and SVA continue to ardently fight for in-state tuition for all veterans at the state and federal levels. As shown in Figure 2, less than half of all states offer in-state tuition for veterans and we continue to press the importance of this issue as a top contributor to education debt.⁴ We call on this subcommittee to continue to work both with the Congress as well as your home state governments to end this unnecessary and unjust punishment for the transient lifestyle our military is called to serve in.

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

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 2, 2014)



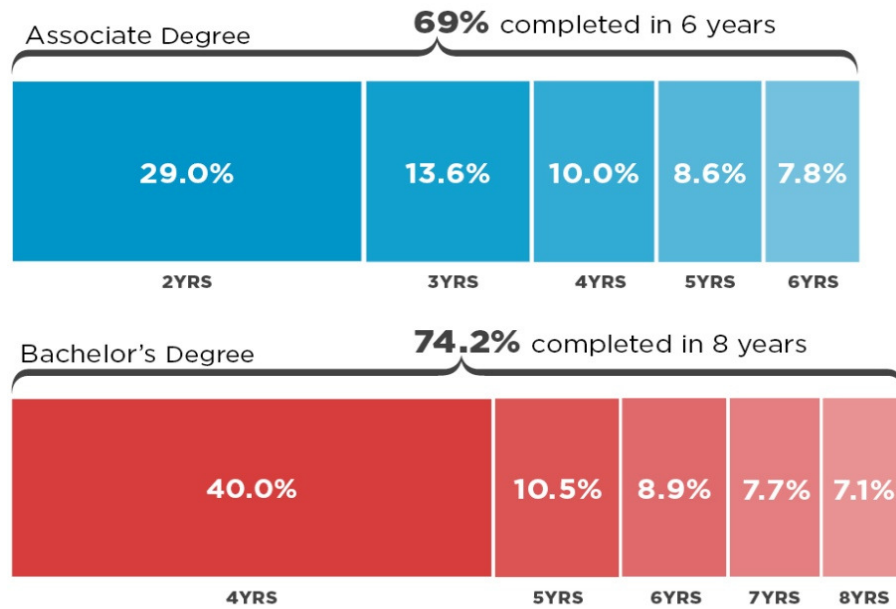
Note: The In-State Tuition Map is a collaborative effort with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and Student Veterans of America (SVA).
Source: Student Veterans of America

Beyond the typical understanding of success in higher education, we also believe it is important to recognize that, due to the nature of Post-9/11 conflicts, traditional definitions of ‘time to completion’ forces a false narrative of poor completion rates upon student veterans. Many of these veterans faced multiple deployments that interrupted their academic efforts, or put their education on hold to complete a tour of service.

For those who successfully completed their academic goals, MRP data analysis found that in spite of the challenges they face, and potentially longer pathways to success, today’s student veterans are completing their education. As Figure 3 below highlights, both at the two- and four-year degree level, the majority of those veterans who complete their degrees do so within two to three years, and four to six years, respectively, which is similar to the general population. However, when this timeframe is extended out by a few years, those completion rates increase significantly.⁵ This story illustrates the persistence of student veterans as they continue to work toward graduation, even if it takes them longer than traditional students.

Figure 3: Student Veteran Time to Completion

⁵ Cate, C.A. (2014). Million Records Project: Research from Student Veterans of America. Student Veterans of America, Washington, DC.



Source: *Million Records Project*, Student Veterans of America



Fostering Student Veteran Achievement

Prone to Excel

When the Three Pillars – institutions, individuals, and communities – are strong, student veteran achievement is high. These pillars set veterans up to succeed in an academic setting and after graduation. With programs like the Department of Veterans Affairs' 'VetSuccess On Campus' (VSOC), 'Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership' (VITAL), and institutional support from postsecondary institutions, veterans are operating in environments where they are prone to excel.

The VA's VSOC is intended to, "help Veterans, Servicemembers, and their qualified dependents succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling, leading to completion of their education and preparing them to enter the labor market in viable careers."⁶ As a program that operates in a similar capacity as the Transition Assistance Program as members exit the service, it is highly complementary to the transition process and we encourage its continued funding and expansion.

With a targeted expansion to a total of 94 schools, this program continues to show positive outcomes, and we have heard overwhelmingly positive feedback from our members at the campuses where it is in place. We should note that we feel the program is difficult to bring to a university if they have a need or interest due to the selective criteria of having large veteran populations of 800+ and a 25-mile proximity to VA medical centers. As such, some schools in rural areas or with smaller yet just as needy veteran populations may never be eligible for these services at the present requirements.

Similarly, VITAL is another valuable program that has received positive feedback from our members, though availability of services is also a constraining factor of the program's broader success. When these services are delivered in conjunction with the peer-to-peer support network of an SVA chapter, we have seen great success for our student veterans.

Communities of Success

Together with programs like VSOC and VITAL, the community around each student veteran is critical to their success. As noted previously, this community acts as a web of support to create an environment where veterans will succeed.

Through programs like SVA's "VetCenter Initiative," we have encouraged colleges and universities to recognize the importance of having a central location that allows this network to coalesce. Offered through a generous grant from The Home Depot Foundation, SVA selected 11 schools to receive funds to build their own "home on campus". Other schools are recognizing the unique role that this web plays in the achievement of student veterans and have created 'veteran liaison networks'. In these networks, schools like American University have established various points of contact in different offices to provide a holistic

⁶ United States Department of Veterans Affairs, "Welcome to VetSuccess.VA.GOV", https://www.vetsuccess.va.gov/public/vetsuccess_on_campus.html (Access May 2, 2014).



support system to student veterans. These touch points exist from the financial aid office to the career center to the tutoring center.

Even colleges and universities with newer SVA chapters have quickly seen the impact that forming this network can have on their university. At Saint Leo University in Florida, SVA's 1,000th chapter, Chapter President Nick Lanier, an Army combat veteran of 13 years before his medical retirement, along with the support of their Chapter Advisor, Dr. Jose Coll, have quickly established a thriving community. Building on the university's support for its student veteran population, the chapter is acting as a necessary link to valuable university resources.

For many, this link to their community is so crucial due to the unique challenges veterans face when they go to school. As a final example, consider student veteran Brian Hall. He began taking courses at his local community college after high school, but decided the Air Force was his true calling. While serving as an operations resource manager, Brian completed an associate's degree at the Community College of the Air Force. When he eventually left active duty nine years later, he enrolled at Penn State-Mont Alto as a junior, but not all of his Air Force credits transferred. He had to retake some courses and it took him more than two years to complete his bachelor's degree. In total, Brian's time-to-completion, dating way back to when he first enrolled in community college, was nearly 14 years. With a strong network and a level of perseverance that is common among many veterans, Brian's story is one of success that is often overlooked in most research on college outcomes.

Million Records Project

While these stories of success provide an important on-the-ground perspective, anecdotes do not tell the whole story of how veterans are succeeding in higher education. With the MRP, we now have a baseline understanding of how veterans are faring in higher education, and we now know that the majority of student veterans are achieving their academic goals, attaining higher levels of education, and completing their programs of study.

Given this new data, we feel there is more work to be done, and it has become abundantly clear that there are now more questions than answers as we have begun to peel back the layers of the onion. Identifying what practices and programs on campuses are truly having an impact, and which are not, is an additional area of study that there is simply not enough data available to analyze at this time.

A Look Ahead

Million Records Project: Phase Two

As we reflect on the lessons we learned from the first round of MRP research, we are looking towards our next endeavor and our recently completed study will enable us to pursue follow-on research. Our next phase or "MRP Phase II" will seek to build and expand upon the findings of the initial Million Records Project by beginning to explore what institutional factors influence student veterans' persistence and degree attainment.



In collaboration with our partners at the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Student Clearinghouse, and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, we plan to focus our next investigation on how specific school-level characteristics, policies, practices, and programs affect student veterans' persistence and degree attainment. The end goal of this research will be to inform institutions, policy-makers, and other stakeholders on what works.

Additional measures that are still needed to ensure student veterans are accomplishing their academic goals include the impact of student debt on student veteran's academic goals, military training and education, and individual characteristics among student veterans.

Making Informed Decisions

In addition to more data to support higher education and policy decisions, institutional- and individual-level information is necessary. There are other important resources in the space such as the National Student Clearinghouse's Meteor Program. This program seeks to deliver an integrated view of student debt and could be connected to the VA benefits database to provide the student veteran with a view of all financial aid, debt and benefits. As student veterans face issues of not being sure of what benefits they have left, what loans they have, and their personal debt, a dashboard like NSC's Meteor is a necessity.

Being able to access a full range of financial data is critical for institutions to be able to effectively counsel their students on their financial status, as well for the individual to have the highest level of consumer awareness. Through a greater degree of consumer awareness, student veterans will be able to make informed choices that are in-line with their personal career aspirations. VA's recently released college comparison tool is a great first step in offering some clarity in this regard, and we are very interested in working with VA to improve it based on feedback from our membership.



Our Final Thoughts

With the right tools and resources, SVA sees no limit to the achievement of student veterans in higher education and beyond. When empowered with environmental factors for success, the investment America has made in the GI Bill and its veterans becomes an even clearer asset to our economy. For student veterans, acting as leaders amongst our peers, balancing multiple competing priorities, and succeeding with limited resources are all natural challenges; indeed they are the very circumstances for which the DoD has so effectively trained them. Continued support for further research and discussion is necessary so student veterans like Abby Kinch, Nick Lanier, and Brian Hall—and the hundreds of thousands of others that are part of SVA—can continue to succeed in higher education

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We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the subcommittee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and the Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.