

**Defining and Improving Success for Student Veterans
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity (EO)
334 Cannon House Office Building Washington, DC
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**Witness Testimony (Full Testimony for the Record)
of
Thomas W. Ross, President
The University of North Carolina system**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about defining and improving academic success for student veterans.

I am Tom Ross, President of the University of North Carolina system. We enroll more than 220,000 students on 16 university campuses, and employ roughly 50,000 faculty and staff across the state. Approximately 8,000¹ of our current students use VA educational benefits to pay for some or all of their post-secondary education.

North Carolina is a big military state. We are home to 800,000 veterans. Our state has six major military installations with the third-largest active military force in the country, comprising 120,000 personnel, 12,000 members of the National Guard, and their nearly 145,000 spouses and children.

I know that this subcommittee and Chairman Miller have a special interest in public institutions of higher education extending in-state tuition rates to certain veterans who may not qualify under current state law. I want to be clear that the University of North Carolina supports—and has *always supported*—extending in-state tuition to certain veterans and their families. We appreciate the leadership shown by Chairman Miller and this subcommittee on this issue. While North Carolina is not currently one of the states that offers in-state tuition to certain veterans and their families, please know that we are working aggressively with members of the North Carolina General Assembly to enact legislation to change this situation in the short session that begins later this month, and we are optimistic we will be successful.

As the state's public University, we are committed to offering students access to high-quality, affordable educational programs. We are working hard to enroll, educate and graduate as many academically prepared service members, veterans and their dependents as possible. Our motivation is simple: the success of student veterans and their families attending UNC institutions is vital to the success of the University and our state's future.

Federal Oversight

After the Post 9/11 GI Bill became law in 2008, UNC institutions experienced a surge in applications for admission from military-affiliated students for the 2009-10 academic year.

¹ UNC: Fall 2013 data.

Programs such as the VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program emerged. Military-affiliated students were often confused about how their Montgomery GI Bill and the new GI Bill worked together. In 2010, Congress made changes to the Post 9/11 GI Bill. In parallel, in March 2011 and again in December 2012, the Department of Defense (DOD) asked institutions participating in the “Voluntary Education Partnership” to sign new Memoranda of Agreement as a condition of permitting active-duty military to use Tuition Assistance funds to pay for their higher education on campus. The DOD continues to refine the agreement.

Concurrent with these changes and requirements, President Obama in April 2012 issued Executive Order 13607, “Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members.” Subsequently, in May 2012, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs asked institutions of higher education to commit to certain “Principles of Excellence” contained in the President’s Executive Order by August 1, 2012. In August 2013, the Department of Education launched an effort to have campuses sign its “8 Keys to Success” pledge in support of student veterans.

To be clear, the University of North Carolina system agrees with the spirit of and intent behind each requirement or program. We hope that the federal agencies involved in these initiatives continue to work toward coordination of effort. We also ask to be included—on the front end—in any new federal initiatives, programs or requirements of higher education in support of veterans. UNC is proud of our self-imposed standards of excellence, and we believe we are well positioned to offer perspective and constructive feedback as future endeavors are contemplated. We have much to contribute to the national dialogue.

The UNC System Self-Imposes Strong Standards for Serving Veterans

In October 2010, the University of North Carolina system convened a working group of students, faculty, and administrators from across the 16 campuses to evaluate and recommend specific action steps for improving how the University and its individual institutions serve veterans and their families. Called UNC SERVES (UNC Systemwide Evaluation and Recommendation for Veterans Education and Services), this working group was presented with four questions:

- How are UNC campuses currently serving active service members, veterans and their families?
- What are the accepted best practices for serving these students?
- What can the University reasonably do to improve access to, retention and graduation of active-duty and veteran students?
- What are metrics of success for the University in serving these students?

The UNC SERVES working group was charged with developing a comprehensive report to the President with recommendations for:

- Evaluation of current state of military and veteran affairs on UNC campuses;
- Institutional, systemwide, and state/federal statutory policy changes, regulations and/or guidelines to improve access, retention and the graduation of active service members, veterans and their families on UNC campuses;

- Institutional and systemwide best practices to improve access, retention and the graduation of active service members, veterans, and their families on UNC campuses; and
- Opportunities for institutional and systemwide improvement.

The working group also was asked to consider the following factors:

- Diversity of campuses, including size, capacity, and number of active service members, veterans, and their families;
- Constrained resources – Consider all options, but prioritize no-cost, low-cost recommendations;
- Return on investment; and
- Costs should accompany each recommendation, if possible.

The UNC SERVES working group issued its report to me in April 2011. The report included recommendations for improvement at both the system and individual campus levels. The Chancellors and I quickly embraced the recommendations, and our UNC (system) Faculty Assembly passed a resolution in support of UNC SERVES.

UNC System Progress With Self-Imposed Standards for Serving Student Veterans

The University is making great strides toward implementing these recommendations. As a follow-up to the initial UNC SERVES report, the University system office issues an annual “UNC SERVES Resource Guide” that summarizes campus and system progress toward each action item. The Resource Guide also offers examples of campus initiatives, such as North Carolina Central University’s Veterans Law Clinic and Fayetteville State University’s Veterans Business Outreach Center. Within the Resource Guide, we publish a “matrix” of campus-by-campus progress toward each UNC SERVES recommendation. The most recent matrix is attached to my testimony. The UNC SERVES report and Resource Guides also are found online at:

<http://www.northcarolina.edu/frc/uncserves/serves.html>

Because serving student veterans appropriately requires leadership from the top, I am working with our 16 university Chancellors to aggressively implement UNC SERVES recommendations. To improve coordination of effort, our campuses have established Military Affairs Committees, and the UNC system periodically convenes the Military Affairs Council, a coordinating body with representatives from every campus.

The UNC Board of Governors is equally engaged. In June 2013, the Board approved a Military Student Success Policy that provides framework for a comprehensive network of services for military-affiliated students. In August 2013, the also Board established a Special Committee on Military Affairs, with a particular focus on fostering success for the University’s student veterans. A copy of the Military Student Success Policy is submitted with my testimony.

In very short order, I will establish internal University regulations for implementing the requirements of the Board’s policy and promoting the general welfare of service members, veterans, spouses, and dependent family members attending our constituent institutions. Under

this new policy, any individual who has completed at least two years of cumulative active-duty service in the United States Armed Forces will be considered a transfer student in the admissions process. The service branch is the transfer institution of record, and the military transcript is the starting point for evaluating the veteran's military learning for academic credit.

Data Collection and Reporting

The University of North Carolina has implemented systemwide, uniform data collection procedures to ensure that we can identify and track the academic progress of service members, veterans, spouses, and other dependent family members. The University will evaluate and publicly report matriculation trends, including retention rates, graduation rates and length of time to degree. This information will also help us better understand preference trends among student veterans, including program choice and preferred delivery methods.

National efforts to gather and provide information on student veteran success are also important. If we wish to truly understand matriculation and graduation trends of student veterans, the data used must be accurate. The Student Veterans of America (SVA) Million Records Project is a great step in the right direction. I am especially glad that the Million Records Project uses National Student Clearinghouse data for its analyses, as this is currently the most reliable database for tracking student persistence and outcomes. The University of North Carolina enjoys a great working relationship with the SVA, and we routinely provide our enrollment data to the National Student Clearinghouse.

UNC Institutions Aligning Academic Programs to Student Needs

Individual UNC campuses have a long history of working with military-affiliated students and North Carolina's military installations. Several of them—Fayetteville State University, University of North Carolina Wilmington, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and East Carolina University—have academic advisors located on post at Fort Bragg, aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, or at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. These campuses' geographic proximity, coupled with their regional focus, naturally align with serving these specific communities.

Representing all UNC institutions, the UNC system office has academic advisors at Fort Bragg, aboard Camp Lejeune, and at Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City. UNC system personnel also hold academic advising office hours at the Camp Lejeune Naval Hospital, where the academic advisor is available to all hospital personnel, Marines and sailors from the Wounded Warrior Battalion East, the Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic, and Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point.

UNC campuses offer specialized programs of interest to veterans and active-duty military service members. Veterans are attracted to these programs because their military learning and experiences align with the academic programs and help prepare them for their desired career. In addition, many courses are structured to accommodate an adult student's lifestyle. Many student veterans have family responsibilities, part-time or full-time employment, and other obligations. Examples of such academic programs include:

East Carolina University: Bachelor of Science, Industrial Distribution and Logistics

Fayetteville State University: Bachelor of Arts, Intelligence Studies
North Carolina A&T State University: Ph.D., Leadership Studies
North Carolina Central University: Bachelor of Science, Criminal Justice
North Carolina State University: Bachelor of Arts, Leadership in the Public Sector
North Carolina State University: Master of Geospatial Information Science and Technology
UNC-Chapel Hill: Master of Arts, Military History
UNC-Chapel Hill: Master of Business Administration (MBA@UNC)
UNC-Chapel Hill: Master of Public Administration (MPA@UNC)
UNC Charlotte: Bachelor of Science, Neurodiagnostics and Sleep Science
UNC Greensboro: Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Studies
UNC Pembroke: Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Public and Non-Profit Administration
UNC Wilmington: Master of Arts, Conflict Management and Resolution
Western Carolina University: Bachelor of Science, Emergency and Disaster Management
Winston-Salem State University: Master of Science in Rehabilitation Counseling

Centralized Information Sharing and One-Stop Shopping for Veterans

We understand that veterans are nontraditional students. Student veterans come to us from the highly structured, bureaucratic environment of the military and are often uneasy with the loosely structured, bureaucratic environment of the University. University admissions and enrollment processes for veterans can be complex, sometimes requiring visits to different departments across campus. One of our top priorities is *centralizing information sharing*, using a technology-based platform that provides a virtual “one-stop-shop” for veterans. This enables us to provide reliable and consistent information in response to the questions most commonly posed by veterans. In addition, as unique situations arise, veterans always have the name and contact information for specific campus-based staff who are readily available to ensure that their questions can be answered. All campuses are encouraged to go beyond a technology-based solution and provide a centralized physical location where veterans can access the resources they need. Many UNC institutions already have veteran’s centers in place, and several others are working to establish them. To access the University’s virtual one-stop-shop:

<http://www.uncserves.northcarolina.edu>

Another technology-based resource now in development is the North Carolina Military Educational Positioning System, or “NCMEPS.” This website provides military-affiliated students the resources they need to explore with greater ease North Carolina's higher education options—both public and private—the tools to successfully navigate the application, admission and enrollment process; and the knowledge to persist, graduate and pursue their career goals. To cite one example, the GI Bill module allows users to answer a series of questions about their personal circumstances to learn more about how to maximize their VA benefits. While the website was conceived by the UNC system, the goal is to help prospective students find, apply, and pay for the North Carolina college or university that is right for them. The website, which is live and available to student veterans now, will be fully functional by July 1, 2014. To access the NCMEPS:

<http://www.ncmileps.northcarolina.edu>

Working With Community College Partners

The University of North Carolina system works closely with the North Carolina Community College System to create degree programs and transition pathways that are geared toward active-duty service members, veterans, and their families. A Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) between the two systems, revised and expanded in February, helps facilitate a smooth and seamless pathway for students transitioning from a community college to the University. This statewide agreement governs the transfer of certain academic credits among all North Carolina community colleges and North Carolina public universities.

In addition, some UNC institutions have separate articulation agreements with selected community colleges that are specific to certain majors and enable students to progress from an Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree to a bachelor's degree. Major study areas include Information Systems and Engineering Technology, both directly applicable to military education requirements. Specific examples include:

- Fayetteville State University, North Carolina State University, UNC Pembroke, and Western Carolina University have partnered with Fayetteville Technical Community College and the United States Army Special Operations Command, Special Warfare Center & School at Ft. Bragg to develop an Associate of General Education (A.G.E.) degree that awards credit for military learning with seamless transition to Bachelor degree programs in areas such as Intelligence Studies, Criminal Justice, and Interdisciplinary Studies (<http://www.soc.mil/swcs/education/>). This Associate's to Bachelor's degree pathway was created specifically for active-duty soldiers in the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.
- UNC Wilmington and Coastal Carolina Community College have partnered with the United States Marine Corps to offer undergraduate and graduate courses and the Associate, Bachelor's and Master's degrees on the community college campus and aboard Camp Lejeune for active-duty and veteran Marines and their spouses or dependents (<http://www.uncw.edu/onslow/>) and (<https://www.coastalcarolina.edu/military-partnerships/>).
- NCSU Engineering Online is a unique partnership between North Carolina State University and other North Carolina institutions to extend the offering of NC State's undergraduate engineering instruction throughout the state. Through Engineering Online, students can complete a site-based pre-engineering program at Craven Community College, Johnston Community College, UNC Asheville or UNC Wilmington, and later transfer to NC State to complete their Bachelor's degree in Engineering.

Closing

We believe that this “one-stop shop” approach works well for the University, for student veterans, and for the military. But the primary reason we have taken this approach is because we care deeply about the whole soldier. (I use to the term “soldier” to represent all of the men and women in uniform, including airmen, marines, guardsmen, and sailors, as well as our veterans.) We care about providing them with access to a high-quality, affordable education in support of their personal or professional goals. We care about the families that

they leave behind when they deploy or return to upon separation from service. We care about the kit and equipment they carry down range.

Our efforts in this regard are not because a government agency requires us to do something. We are committed to supporting student veterans because of North Carolina's longstanding pride and support of the military. The service member who deploys may be our family member, friend or neighbor. The family that they leave behind may be our family. Higher education is crucial to the mission because the most important weapon that a service member carries is not an assault rifle, but rather his or her mind. They need to be able to adapt to changing environments, use critical thinking skills, learn a foreign language, employ negotiation skills, and apply conflict management lessons. Their kits and equipment must be the latest and greatest things because they need the ability to gather intelligence, execute a mission, and come home safely. And, when our service members make the transition from active duty to veterans in civilian society, we selfishly want them to remain in North Carolina for the long term. It is no secret that veterans make great employees, often start and grow successful small businesses, and make other economic and civic contributions, as well.

The University of North Carolina can and should be a natural place of transition for veterans. They have earned an educational benefit, and that benefit can be the ticket to a brighter future. It is our duty to help make it happen.

Our faculty report that they enjoy having veterans in their classes. I've attached to my testimony is a letter from a faculty member about her personal experience with service members in her classroom. As a group, student veterans attend classes regularly, take their assignments seriously, are attentive and provide a unique perspective in class discussions. All students benefit from their presence in the classroom.

Finally, the University of North Carolina system is committed to partnering with the military because national security should be a priority for all us—not just for the less than one-half of one percent of us who serve in the armed forces. We can all do something to contribute. The faculty, staff and students of the University of North Carolina stand ready to do our part.

Thank you, Mister Chairman. This concludes my testimony.