



SCHOOL ADVOCATES FOR VETERANS' EDUCATION AND SUCCESS

444 N Capitol Street NW, Suite 207 Washington, DC 20001-1511

Statement for the Record

March 17, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished members of the Economic Subcommittee, on behalf of the national association of School Advocates for Veterans' Education and Success, thank you for calling this hearing to discuss the educational opportunities at institutions of higher learning for the newest generation of veterans.

School Advocates for Veterans' Education and Success is a national, non-profit association whose members are college and university Veterans' Program and Service Managers. Our mission is to bring a consolidated voice to the issues that affect veterans' education and success by creating a strong network of partners to provide communication, advocacy, and support for educational and training institutions. Our perspective comes from all sectors: public, not-for-profit and for-profit private colleges and universities.

In the nearly seven years since the passage of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, and during its subsequent revisions, colleges and universities nationwide have "stepped up" to assist a new generation of veterans. To do so, institutions across the country have established Veteran Resource Centers (VRC) or other systems of veterans' services and support and have created permanent positions to staff them. To meet the needs of the veteran populations they serve, VRCs certify VA education benefits; monitor enrollment and academic outcomes; set up early alert systems; develop tutoring programs and study groups; connect veterans to faculty, staff, and student mentors; train student ambassadors; partner with our community veterans' service providers; manage veterans lounges; and educate faculty, staff and students about the student-veteran experience. As we do this and more, we continue the higher education tradition of promoting fairness and equality for all students to include under-represented and at risk populations – groups to which many of our student-veterans belong. Since the initial passage of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, the numbers of student-veterans has dramatically increased and the legislative and procedural requirements for federal veteran and military educational benefits have continued to change. It's fair to say that legislative changes and procedural modifications from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Defense, and our State Approving Agencies keep us on our toes. As processes evolve we share the hope that they will lead to the success of our student veterans.

In support of student-veteran success, we constantly strive to improve our services and address new needs as they are identified. This leads us to ask several questions. What's missing? What are we doing well? What can we do better? How can this generation of Veterans be better



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served? In our eyes, the most important question is, "How do we *know* how well Veterans are doing on our campuses?"

To answer those questions, we must measure the strengths and weaknesses, the successes and failures, of our programs both quantitatively and qualitatively. According to the Executive Order 13607, establishing the Principles of Excellence "The Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education shall develop a comprehensive strategy for developing service member and veteran student outcome measures that are comparable, to the maximum extent practicable, across Federal military and veterans educational benefit programs, including, but not limited to, the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program" [Sec. 3. (c)]. To fairly compare institutions, we must be asking the same questions to ensure standardized data points, which must be clearly articulated to our institutions and their Institutional Research departments. A few institutions can't be using the metric system while the rest are using yardsticks, and a yardstick is not a very efficient way to measure a mile. As institutions, we're good at measuring outcomes so, to the extent practicable, the student outcome measures should rely on existing administrative data. This will minimize the reporting burden on institutions participating in these benefit programs. Student outcome measures should permit comparisons across federal educational programs and across institutions and types of institutions. To do so, it is time to establish a common set of standards and a common measuring device that allows point in time comparisons and trends.

The Department of Veterans Affairs will begin to post graduation, retention and persistence rates using data collected through VA-Once on the GI Bill Comparison Tool. This data only includes students using the Post 9/11 GI Bill when and if they complete their program. Students who exhaust benefits before completion will not be reported as completing. This will significantly underestimate the percentage of Post 9/11 GI Bill recipients who actually graduate; therefore, vastly underestimating the value of the benefits to those veterans for whom a college degree would not have been possible without this program. Additionally, students who attend a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year school to complete a degree will never be included in the two-year school's data. Additionally, only those using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits will be reported, which excludes anyone using any other chapter of benefits.

Therefore, the proposed GI Bill comparison tool will not provide accurate data regarding the success of veteran students. It may, in fact, provide misleading information to service members considering using this benefit upon completion of their military service. Department of Veterans Affairs, Central Office (VACO) has indicated that institutions can submit their own outcome measures, which would result in a multitude of site specific data sets that would not provide a sound basis for cross-institutional comparison. Therefore, VACO should work with



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institutions to create a standard set of data points, measures, and definitions to ensure that the data provided is comparable.

Given the importance of data to inform and support evidence based decisions, SAVES also recommends the Secretary of Veterans Affairs enter into a contract with a non-government entity to conduct a survey of individuals who have used or are using their entitlement to educational assistance and conduct a survey of institutions of higher learning whose programs are approved by the Department of Veterans Affairs for educational assistance.

The current emphasis on only the Post 9/11 GI Bill, suggests that the primary interest is in return on the investment of money spent on an academic program, not student success in general. Indeed, failure to consider the graduation of students who have completed a significant portion of their education using the GI Bill, only to exhaust their benefit and complete their programs using other financial resources undervalues the important contributions the GI Bill makes towards students' ultimate educational success.

We are gravely concerned that this under-reporting using existing criteria will serve only to cast doubt on the efficacy of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Additionally, we have not answered the most important question, "How well is the newest generation of veterans doing at our institutions?" In the final analysis, the only entity that can accurately answer that question is the veteran, but we can do a much more accurate job of reporting comparable data on degree completion if we ask the right questions and include completion data for all students who both *are using or have used* federal veterans' education benefits.

The Long Term Solutions System

The Long Term Solutions system or LTS has come a long way in the last year or so. Payments for continuing students (supplemental claims) are paid promptly and accurately if no changes have been submitted. The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) is paying the way LTS is programmed to pay (rules based), while somewhat consistent, not always correct or consistent with the governing laws. For Example, The VA is still recouping student debts from their Yellow Ribbon contribution because LTS cannot adjust the entitlement or Cap for private schools.

The DVA has asked schools to report graduation retroactively back to Fall 2009 (initial request/requirement to report graduation was only implemented in 2011 DVA Resource Handbook) which has caused erroneous payments to be generated by the LTS for students who were fully paid at that time and have not been enrolled at the institution for years. Example: we received one day of prorated tuition/fees and YR for a student from 2009-2010 timeframe who had been completely and accurately paid at the time of his enrollment.



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The LTS system is currently paying schools for tuition and fee costs, which are *not* charged and or reversed, to the student. Current practice by the VA is to pay the schools for tuition and fees based on a prorated formula. There is no provision in the law that allows for prorated tuition and fee payments when there are no charges. Schools typically have a period ranging from a few days to a week in which students can drop or add classes with no financial or academic penalty. In addition, many, if not most, have a policy or practice, which considers mitigating circumstance for withdrawing or ceasing to attend a class or classes, which may be referred to as a “non-start.” In this case the school is forgiving all cost for the course or courses just as though the students never enrolled and/or dropped during the official drop/add period receiving 100% refund of tuition and fees.

The VA is prorating the days that the students were in class and sending payment to the schools. This is causing a great deal of trouble at the schools as they do not want the money and cannot refund it to the student or the VA. The law reads as follows:

(PL 111-377, SEC 102., (a) AMOUNTS OF EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE, (1) In General--Section 3313(c) is amended—(A) ...leading to a degree at an institution of higher learning...(A) An amount equal to the following: “(i) in the case of a program of education pursued at a public institution of higher learning, the “**actual net cost**” for in-State tuition and fees assessed by the institution for the program of education after the application of....)

SAVES recommends that the VA amend their current policy to reflect the language of PL 111-377 and to pay only the “**actual net cost**” for tuition and fees assessed by the institution for all eligible enrollments. Paying the actual amount reported will alleviate the issues with reconciling payments the institution should not have received according to their tuition and fee policies. This will also reduce student debt to the VA.

The Debt Management Center’s debt collection procedures seem to be working very consistently and reliably. Although, agreeing with the debt as assigned by the RPO can be problematic as shown above and in the example of school debts (which are repaid) being sent to the student and the DVA reinstating their entitlement.

Implementation of the Veterans Access Choice and Accountability Act

The implementation of the Choice Act, Section 702 is an uphill battle as states are being pressured to pass legislation. Institutions have been processing exceptions for instate residency for active duty and traditional students for quite some time. The effort to scrutinize compliance



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before the law is in effect has resulted in confusion and some fairly bold public statements about who “will” be in compliance in July. The language is straightforward about who are eligible, the exemption from paying out of state tuition and fees and the timeframe around eligibility. Allowing schools due process to change policies and put agreed upon processes in place would alleviate the expense of valuable time and energy on interpretation and legislation.

What Are Institutions Doing Well?

In our opinion, institutions that have dedicated space with a point of contact or a Veterans Program and Services Manager whose sole responsibilities are programming and services for Veterans, Service Members and Dependents are integral to the programming necessary to support student veterans. It's important to note that a ratio of 150 students to each School Certifying Official is a concept that has yet to be officially endorsed but will become increasingly necessary to adhere to as we continue to add programming and responsibilities.

Beyond the basic responsibilities of benefit processing, reporting, debt management, monitoring enrollment and academic outcomes, early alerts, setting up tutoring programs and study groups, and providing faculty, staff and student mentors, transition programs are necessary to create a solid foundation for student veterans to integrate to student life. A few programs and services that have proven to aid in student success include:

- Veterans Clubs and events to recognize veterans on campus along with identifying faculty and staff who are veterans help with integration.
- Humboldt State University's transition program based in the principles of the Outward Bound program and has shown to be effective in providing tools for veterans to transition effectively.
- The “VET NET Ally” program from California State University, Long Beach and the California Community Colleges' “Welcome Home: Creating a Climate of Wellness for Returning Veterans” training are examples of highly successful awareness programs that educate faculty, staff, students, and administrators about military culture, veterans' mental health, and student life for veterans.
- The evaluation of military transcripts that shorten time to graduation is also important for veterans who are racing the benefit clock to finish objectives.
- Collaboration between institutions and Veterans agencies and organizations in their communities provide wrap around services that include the mental health, medical and claims processing services necessary to support veterans and their families.
- Referrals and job fairs hosted by college and university career services or state agencies such as the California Employment Development Department. Veterans' representatives of this agency provide key services such as resume writing, workshops focused on how to apply for federal jobs, networking with employers, and job placement.



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Conclusion

SAVES believes that improving communication and collaboration between stakeholders such as the Department of Education, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, Veterans Service Organizations and Institutions of Higher learning, we would improve practices and increase opportunities for service members and student veterans. This population's needs are diverse but with the help of the many, many organizations and programs that are already in place, we can remove barriers and continue to add this valuable asset to our nations' workforce and communities and allow them to continue to serve their country.

Thank you for this opportunity to take a broader look at what we are doing and can continue to do well for this generation of veterans.

Chairman Flores, Ranking member Takano, members of the subcommittee, thank you.