

Witness Testimony of Dr. Lawrence A. Braue, Lieutenant Colonel (U.S. Army, Ret.), Director,
Office of Veterans Services, University of South Florida
Hearing on 10/22/2015: A Review of VA's VetSuccess on Campus Program

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, on behalf of the University of South Florida, thank you for holding today's hearing and allowing us to share our experience with the VetSuccess on Campus Program (VSOC) and the impact it makes on our campus every day. By way of background, the University of South Florida (USF) is a high-impact, global research university dedicated to student success. It is the 8th largest university in the U.S. and serves over 48,000 students. In addition, over 2,000 veterans and their families are enrolled as students at USF. USF was ranked by Military Times Best for Vets magazine as the 5th best college for veterans. Under the leadership of President Judy Genshaft, the University of South Florida has become a national leader in serving student veterans.

In June, 2009, The University of South Florida became the first institution of higher learning to participate in the Department of Veterans Affairs VetSuccess on Campus program. Ms. Jeanine Frederick is our current VSOC Counselor and has served in this role since June, 2010 Ms. Frederick quickly became an integral member of the Office of Veterans Services team and an effective liaison between USF and the VA. Ms. Frederick is an amazing Counselor and has made this program a complete success on our campus.

Program Successes

Having the VSOC Counselor available to veterans on a daily basis has vastly improved the university's ability to meet the needs of our students. In addition, it has greatly increased the confidence of our student veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Through the VetSuccess on Campus Program, our Counselor developed an extremely effective outreach program that dramatically increased the awareness of VA programs and benefits available to student veterans. This calendar year, Ms. Frederick has helped over 300 veterans individually and reached over 750 students through campus outreach events. She is frequently called upon to advocate for veterans with faculty members who do not understand the challenges our disabled veterans face in the classroom.

In the Fall of 2013, Ms. Frederick initiated a highly successful Vet-to-Vet Tutoring Program where academically successful VA Work Study veterans would provide one-on-one tutoring for other student veterans. Since this program started in the Fall of 2013, over 165 students have received individualized tutoring services at no cost to the veteran.

Program Challenges

The VetSuccess on Campus program has not been without its challenges for the University of South Florida. It is important that I clarify that I can only speak for the University of South Florida and what we have experienced. The VetSuccess on Campus program is influenced by

two separate offices within the Vocational Rehabilitation and Education arm of the VA. Often times, those two offices provide our VSOC Counselor with competing or conflicting guidance. Because the Regional Office has very limited understanding of VSOC and is not involved in the day to day operation of the program, it makes it very difficult for them to provide effective supervision for the VSOC Counselor.

Over time, the VetSuccess on Campus program's purpose and goals changed without a collaborative effort with university.

For example: Recently, the VR&E Regional Office assigned a Chapter 31 caseload of 50 to our VSOC Counselor. This is approximately 1/3 of the Chapter 31 caseload for a full-time VR&E Counselor. This is a significant change which alters the way VSOC functions on our campus. This change is also inconsistent with the Memorandum of Understanding between USF and the VA which creates a hardship for the VSOC Counselor and the school. This effectively reduces her ability to have a positive impact on the academic and lifelong success of the total veteran population.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of our partnership, the university should be part of the program development and decision making process.

I believe with a few structural and leadership modifications, this program could greatly enhance retention and graduation rates for student veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

My recommendations are to:

1. Simplify the reporting structure for the VetSuccess on Campus Program by creating one office to manage the program and the VSOC Counselors and ensure that VSOC Counselors do not receive direction and guidance from multiple sources.
2. Establish and maintain consistent, meaningful dialog between the VA and the university ensuring that the university has a voice in program development and the decision making process.
3. I also believe it is critical that the VA include colleges and universities in the plan to develop success metrics for graduation and retention of veterans using the GI Bill.

Again, I want to thank the committee for allowing the University of South Florida to share our experience with the VetSuccess on Campus Program. It is an honor and a privilege to have this amazing program on our campus. I hope we can build upon the successes of the program and make the adjustments necessary to make the program even stronger for our future student veterans.

Thank you.