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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

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS' VETSUCCESS ON CAMPUS (VSOC) PROGRAM"

OCTOBER 22, 2015



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

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on “The Department of Veterans Affairs’ VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) Program.” With over 1,200 chapters across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by this subject with this committee.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research development seeking ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, nothing is more paramount than their success in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.

With this opportunity to address the VSOC program, we will discuss the program’s successes, areas for improvement, and the related issue of Post-9/11 GI Bill processing challenges that we saw this fall.

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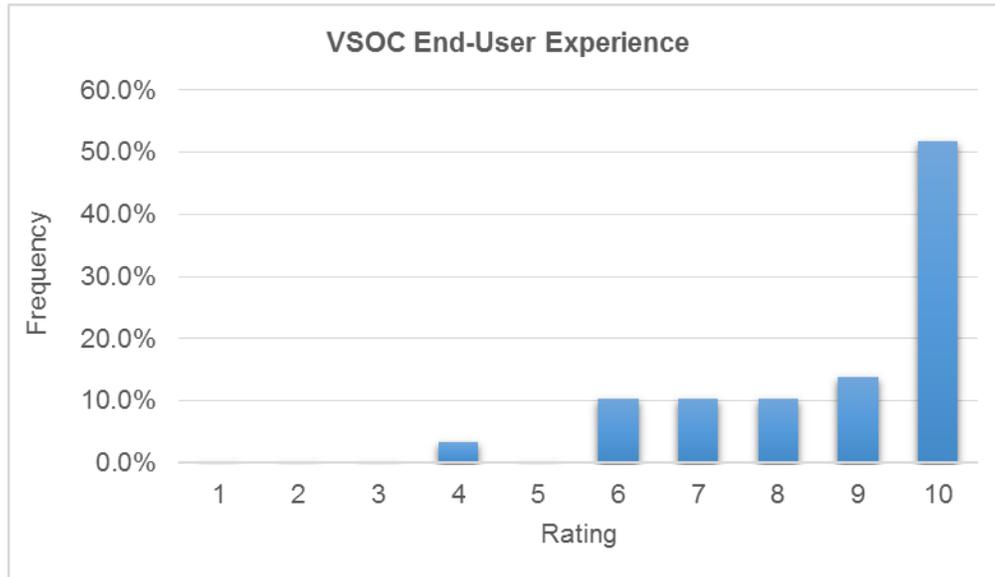
Areas of Success

Once student veterans arrive on campus, the tools and opportunities they have access to in their first few weeks often dictate the tone of their career in higher education. For student veterans at 94 campuses across the country, they have the benefit of a VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. The VSOC program entails the campus having a VSOC Counselor, or full-time VA detailee, right on campus. We are highly supportive of the program’s intent, which we believe to be quite complimentary with our own mission. As VA specifically notes, VSOC is intended to, “help student Veterans 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.”¹

We frequently hear student veterans identify the VSOC program as a top benefit that they find to be most valuable for their higher education experience. When surveying over 30 student veterans from 12 schools that participate in the VSOC program, the response was overwhelmingly positive. More than 85% of stakeholders including SVA Chapter Presidents, Chapter Members, and Chapter Advisors rate VSOC as a 7 out of 10 or higher on a 1 – 10 scale. Additionally, three out of five respondents say they rate their program as a 9 or 10 (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. VSOC Stakeholder Ratings

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015, <http://www.benefits.va.gov/vocrehab/vsocfactsheet.asp>



We asked our student veterans and stakeholders who self-identified as being highly knowledgeable or somewhat knowledgeable about VSOC to share what impact VSOC has had on their experience with higher education. One student veteran shared, “We have a VSOC Counselor from the VA come to the school twice a month so Vets can start a new claim or ask questions concerning a claim. This helps immensely as the VA hospital is a 35 minute drive from school and keeps our Vets on campus. Vets can ask our counselor any type of question concerning their benefits. They are also a Vocational Rehabilitation (VocRehab) counselor for a few of the Vets on campus. We are incredibly lucky to have this program on campus.”

In addition to appreciating the on-site access to a qualified VA counselor, many alluded to a direct personal impact on their academic performance. Another student veteran shared, “The VSOC has been there to help me through the transition from soldier to student. Counseling, advising, financial help, even tutoring has been afforded to me through the VSOC. The VA representative has gone above and beyond to help me succeed, especially when school and life became overwhelming for me.”

These comments are indicative of the general feedback we received from members over the past several months in our field research on the program. In addition to the general support provided by VSOC counselors, student veterans noted the ability of counselors to quickly correct and process certifications as a major benefit to their campus. They often appreciated the connection counselors make with school administration as well. We believe the VSOC program is highly beneficial to student veterans and would like to see it expanded as resources allow.

Opportunities for Improvement

While the feedback we received was almost uniformly positive—in fact, when asked what they would change, respondents commonly replied, “nothing”—we have identified several opportunities for improvement of the program. The three most common improvements included: awareness of the program, expanding to more campuses, and increasing additional personnel support for the program.



Unsurprisingly, a top issue identified was the number of campuses that are afforded the opportunity to participate in the program. Given the presence on only 94 campuses in a field of more than 4,000 IHLs in higher education, the program's prevalence is an issue we hope to see addressed; the positive reaction to the program shows a high return on investment for those who opt to participate. The challenge of awareness was also a common issue we identified, which is equally unsurprising given the many activities and opportunities that compete for the attention of student veterans.

One student veteran noted the issue of raising levels of participation, noting, "We have approximately 600 veterans on campus. We have a large day-room which averages 50 veteran visits daily. We also host a number of events each semester but turn-out to those events usually results in approximately 10 participants. We would love to have higher participation in off campus events and fundraisers." Others identified and interest in having more VA personnel on-site to support the program. We understand that increased support is a factor of resource constraints, and would prefer to see more campuses programs established before additional staff are added to current sites.

In addition to the most common issues, several individuals cited that counselors appeared to be distracted by the "many directives from national." As a program requirement, VSOC counselors are directed to participate in community engagement activities which has been cited to be burdensome and time-consuming for some. In one instance, a student veteran supporting the VSOC office as a work-study aid noted, "National told us to host an event but barely gave a week's notice. Then they wanted us to do media engagement and said we were required to send the results up but we weren't ready for that with such short time."

Another issue is that VSOC counselors are perceived to have "lighter workloads" than their peers at regional offices. As result, some counselors are given the most challenging and time-consuming cases that may prevent them from effectively focusing on their VSOC duties. Also, in some instances vacation schedule have conflicted with the school schedule in some cases. We recommend that counselors are encouraged to take vacation days during less busy periods versus the peak times such as the first few weeks of the fall semester. These blackout periods may help ensure that student veterans gain as much value from the VSOC program as possible.

Lastly, several student veterans reported challenges with the process of entering the VSOC program. One student veteran shared, "I would change the intake process and be upfront about qualifications for all program tracks. I see a lot of veterans who are qualified but do not want to go through horrible intake process. Many veterans drop out of program due to lack of intrusiveness. Scuttlebutt is rampant between veterans on how to game the system. This has to change in order for program to be effective and genuine."

Processing Issues

This fall semester highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early to mid-September, it became increasingly clear that many student veterans were experiencing significant delays in the processing of their GI Bill benefits. We heard comments from student veterans like, "We just cannot figure out why enrollment forms keep getting lost" and, "Unfortunately, it is affecting many veterans who rely on that for rent. These are veterans who were certified before even July." Much speculation among the student veteran population ensued, and we appreciated VA's commitment to responding in a timely



manner. Within days of SVA highlighting the issue, VA presented clear and user-friendly information directly to the student population through social media avenues (See attachment).

Unfortunately, the hundreds of comments VA received over just a few days after posting the statement made it clear that the delays were causing a significant ripple across campuses nationwide. Part of this backlog of delayed processing could be attributed to miscommunications. One student veteran noted:

“Before I joined SVA, I came right off deployment and started using what was left of my GI Bill. I enrolled as soon as I could and still had massive delays. I would contact the VA and they said they wouldn't have my certifying info. I'd go back to the registrar's office and they would say they sent it. Then I would go back to the VA and they said no they didn't have it. Come to find out somehow they would mix up my SSN with some other number. Well, the VA didn't enquire if something sent was incorrect and the university VA office would assume what they sent was correct. They weren't communicating at all. Their process in certifying students wasn't helping either.”

However, a more systematic issue could be attributed to the delays. Another student shared, “Part of the backlog is due to overtime not being allowed sooner because they were diverting overtime resources to the disability claims process, and then finally allowed overtime later than usual for education claims.” This message was consistent with what VA staff discussed with SVA prior to the semester. VA staff specifically requested to know if student veterans within SVA chapters were seeing delays so they could be addressed readily. We are appreciative of VA's responsiveness, and feel that communicating that message earlier might have helped to avoid some confusion.

Ultimately, the core challenge remains VA's reliance on overtime hours for full-time employees during the peak periods of fall and spring enrollment. We agree that hiring seasonal staff to address these spikes would be both uncommon as well as costly. At the core of it, one student veteran highlighted the issue well, noting, “The biggest issue is managing throughout at both the school and the VA. There are not enough people managing such a manual-labor intensive job, and to do everything required for compliance, it is next to impossible, especially when you have larger populations changing schedules.”

Potential Processing Solution

The issues of labor, compliance, and timeliness may all be addressed by a potential solution through one of our mutual partners, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). As a partner of both VA and SVA on the *Million Records Project (MRP)*, NSC demonstrated a high level of professionalism and ability during the MRP, traits which make them an ideal partner in any project. NSC presently works with the Department of Education (ED) on processing and reporting Title IV funds, including Direct Subsidized/Unsubsidized Loans, Direct Graduate PLUS Loans, Direct PLUS Loans, Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), and Federal Perkins Loans. Their data collection capabilities are not limited to student loans, however.

A partnership with NSC would facilitate the data exchange between IHLs and VA for certifications, recertifications, status changes and completion data. In practical terms, the NSC would act as a consolidation warehouse where data could be vetted and instantly sent to VA without requiring any additional steps. As an analogy, consider that when Americans pay their taxes, many choose to pay a tax



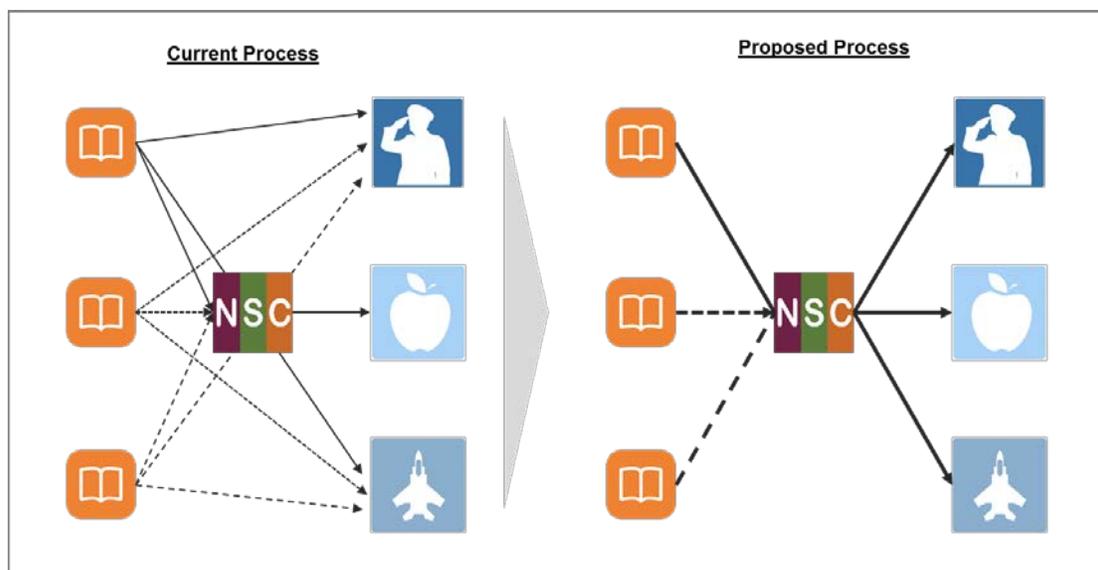
accountant to prepare the forms, which allows them to avoid mistakes while gaining from the expertise of someone who knows how to ensure compliance. Similarly, NSC would act in the capacity as a tax accountant does, allowing the school to have peace of mind that their data is being properly filed, while giving VA the benefit of having pre-screened and fully-compliant data submissions.

Since VA and ED would be collecting data through a centralized source, the requirement for schools to submit redundant data is negated; most student data is standard, while only a small percentage is unique to any department or agency which is easily accounted for and sorted through NSC. NSC presently has access to the student full enrollment profile, not only students with Title IV loans, for over 97% of all students in higher education.

Under this proposal, VA and taxpayers incur no additional cost since schools select to send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with ED data. The ability to have real time measurement of completions and program efficacy would be a major benefit to VA and the broader research community; this is essential given the lack of available data outside of the *MRP*.

The benefits of this proposal are clear: accelerated data submissions, fewer errors, increased compliance, and advanced research to benefit student veterans. It is our hope that we can with VA and NSC to bring this concept from possibility to reality. For a clear visual demonstration of what a partnership with VA, ED, and DoD would look like, see Figure 1 below. We believe that a process transformation would enable student veterans to get into the classroom with certification or processing issues presenting fewer challenges.

Figure 1. Process Comparison





Our Final Thoughts

Often overlooked, VSOC counselors are well-positioned to serve as ideal VocRehab counselors. Given their proximity to the school and frequent interaction with students, they develop a strong trust within the IHL. We are pleased to see this continue and encourage more emphasis to be placed on the unique opportunity this represents. Overall, the VSOC program is a great success and we believe it has had a clear impact on helping many student veterans to succeed on campus as intended. The support VA has provided directly to student veterans on the 94 VSOC campuses is always welcomed, and we strongly encourage VA to consider expanding to additional schools.

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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 entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.



Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2015, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.