

Terence Harrison
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Remarks to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Good afternoon. I'd like to thank Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for inviting me to participate in today's hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs' VetSuccess on Campus Program.

My name is Terence Harrison and I am the Manager for Veterans Programs and Services at the University of Cincinnati. The University of Cincinnati, or "UC," is a public research university, enrolling more than 44,000 undergraduate and graduate students in 2014. Our campus is made up of students from all 50 states and from 100 countries around the world. Recognized as a Military Friendly School, UC is both a leader and champion in military and veteran related issues. Currently, UC enrolls about 2,392 military-affiliated students, including active duty military, members of the National Guard and the Reserves, veterans, and family members. Of this total, 1,016 students are using GI Bill benefits. With the anticipated draw-down of active duty personnel, the University of Cincinnati is energetically positioning itself to accommodate these students. UC adheres closely to the VA's principles of excellence in providing a high-quality educational experience tailored to the unique needs of veteran students.

The University of Cincinnati continues to hold a positive view of the VetSuccess on Campus, or "VSOC" Program. UC is home to one of the three VSOC programs in the state of Ohio – with others located at The Ohio State University and Cleveland State University. The VSOC program aims to assist veterans and servicemembers, as well as their dependents, as they transition from active duty to postsecondary education. Through the VSOC program, a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor is assigned to UC to support student veterans and assist with any problems that arise that may interfere with the education of a student veteran.

At UC, student veterans regularly reach out to VSOC for assistance on a range of matters, including: expediting and resolving issues with VA education benefits; looking up pending VA payments and when they can expect to receive them; explaining VA payments clearly; assisting in applying for education, healthcare, and other VA benefits; questions about their remaining benefits; and understanding and resolving VA debt.

VSOC is a valuable resource for our student veterans, and ensures that they receive expedient service from the VA while they attend UC. Our VSOC counselor has been with the VA for over nine years and has been helpful in establishing a successful VSOC program at UC.

The University of Cincinnati's partnership with the VSOC Program began in September 2013. At UC, the VSOC office is housed within the same building as the Veterans Programs and Services Office to conveniently meet the needs of student veterans and to provide a cross-functional team approach to resolving challenges that our veterans face. Housing the VSOC office and our VSOC Counselor on campus also allows UC to coordinate with the VA.

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UC annually enrolls an average of 1,200 student veterans, active duty military, and beneficiaries using VA education benefits. Throughout the year, VSOC contacts all of these students several times to offer VA support. VSOC allocates time each semester to meet with student veterans at the University, including at both of UC's regional campuses. In addition to these meetings, VSOC also participates in numerous outreach events throughout the academic year, including Student Resource Fairs and awareness training sessions for advisors, faculty, and staff.

VSOC conducts additional outreach activities, including employment workshops focusing on translating military skills into a civilian resume, recognizing post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury symptoms, new student orientation, town hall meetings, job fairs, and health fairs in collaboration with VA Medical Centers.

VSOC also works with other groups on campus and within the community to collaboratively support the needs of UC's student veterans, including the Ohio beta chapter of Omega Delta Sigma, a co-ed, veteran-only fraternity; the Tristate Veterans Community Alliance; the VFW Ohio; and AMVETS, among others.

In addition to VSOC, the University of Cincinnati is also a Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership, or "VITAL," Location. VSOC and VITAL together have developed a streamlined approach in assisting veterans with VA Medical Center needs. This approach provides UC's veterans with expedited VA Medical Center service coordination at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

In order to best meet the needs and improve services for our student veterans, we believe it is important to expand the VSOC program to additional schools. For smaller schools that do not have a VSOC, we suggest the VSOC work with a number of schools in a geographical area. For example, in Ohio, one counselor could oversee Xavier University, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, and Mount St. Joseph University. The case load of these counselors could be comparable to the caseload at larger schools and give the student veterans at these institutions the support they need.

As for improved coordination between universities and the VA, we have found that housing our VSOC counselor on campus has allowed UC and the VA to easily collaborate, which is beneficial to our student veterans.

In closing, I want to thank you for allowing me to discuss the VSOC program and to share the great work that the University of Cincinnati is doing to accommodate veteran students. I look forward to working with you as you expand services for veteran students and again offer the University of Cincinnati as an example to inform policy and to guide schools in shaping their programs.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.