



Office of the General Counsel and Vice President for
Public Policy and Government Affairs
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WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF ROSEZZA MILLER

To: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittees on Economic Opportunity and
Technology Modernization

From: Rosezza Miller, Senior Director, Financial Aid (Advising), Broward College

Re: Written Testimony for Hearing on July 20, 2022 entitled, "Modernizing Veteran
Education in the Shadow of COVID-19"

About Broward College

Broward College is a public community college located in Broward County, Florida. Broward College serves more than 58,000 students annually, offering a range of non-credit and credit bearing credential options, including, among others, associate and baccalaureate degrees - all with the focus of Broward College students starting or advancing their careers. Broward College provides a range of support services to all of its students, and particularly to its military and veteran students through dedicated services and community groups. Each year Broward College serves approximately one thousand students utilizing the GI and other military benefits. For its dedication to its students and the community at large, Broward College has consistently been recognized for its excellence by the Aspen Institute, and was recently named a top ten finalist for the coveted Aspen Prize.

Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, the CARES ACT, and the American Rescue Plan Act

Broward College thanks Congress for the creation of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (the "Improvement Act"), the CARES ACT, and the American Rescue Plan Act and ensuring that United States Veteran students were considered in the face of the unprecedented pandemic. We offer these comments and suggestions with respect to each of these acts.

Comments:

The initial digital GI Bill communication implementation is going well. The Ask VA (the "AVA") communication system allows students, Broward College staff, and the Veteran's Administration ("VA") to communicate securely via email. This communication portal provides an audit trail of a student's issues to ease the transition of conversations between VA representatives. This improvement in communication has saved time and frustration for many students working through their VA benefits process.



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In Section 1001 of the Improvement Act, the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program saw changes to incorporate new programs eligible for this scholarship. The expanded eligibility has been a tremendous benefit to students.

In Section 1010 of the Improvement Act, enrollment verification is a monthly requirement that students can now quickly complete through text message. This flexible option allows Veteran students to report their enrollment directly to their VA representative quickly and conveniently.

Prior to the Improvement Act, a Veteran work study student could not get paid until they accumulated fifty hours worked. This presented an issue for many students who could only work five to ten hours per week, as they would not get paid monthly. This issue has been resolved, allowing students to get paid for hours worked with no minimum hours.

Additionally, the option for students to pay debts to the VA online through pay.va.gov has been a much-needed enhancement. [Pay.va.gov](http://pay.va.gov) is also a more convenient method of repayment for educational institutions.

Funds provided for students in the CARES ACT and American Rescue Plan, student emergency funds were available to Veteran students through the same process that they were made available to other students. Veteran students could apply for need-based funding and block grant funding based on need. The emergency funds ultimately helped students with their pandemic related needs, but also often helped them with tuition, fees, books, transportation, healthcare, and other educational costs.

Finally, we would like to recognize the SCO Hotline staff for being most helpful in resolving student issues. They serve as our unsung heroes who are always willing to assist and go the extra mile.

Suggestions:

Though the modernization project is not yet completed, challenges remain that we hope are resolved in the future, specifically and tangentially related to the Improvement Act. For example:

1. In Section 1006 of the Improvement Act, the expanded list of work study activities is helpful. Though the list of work study activities has increased to expand work options, the work study application and timecards are still a manual process. This manual submission is cumbersome and time-consuming for the Veteran students and staff. We suggest the applications and contracts are signed online. Hours worked could be submitted online, and the site supervisor could quickly certify time worked and submit for payment.
2. In Section 1010 of the Improvement Act, the verification of enrollment to receive Post-9/11 Educational Assistance benefits requires educational institutions to submit certifications in two steps. The first step is certification of enrolled credits prior to the



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beginning of the semester. Once Broward College's add/drop period ends, tuition certification and enrollment verification begins. Veteran students who receive Post 9/11 (Chapter 33) benefits must also verify monthly enrollment by replying to a text which is sent from the VA system. If a Veteran student fails to verify for two consecutive months, the VA suspends the student's monthly stipend payment until the student submits such verification. Unfortunately, not all Veteran students are receiving the text messages that they must verify, or they do not receive the text until after the first of the month. This delay causes their BAH/MHA payments to be received "late" according to when the student expects receipt. Prior to the implementation of enrollment verification, Basic Housing Allowance ("BAH")/Monthly Housing Allowance ("MHA") payments were received by Veterans between the 28th through the 1st of the month. Some months Veterans receive the text on the first of the month, which results in their BAH/MHA payment reaching them around the 6th of the month or later. Most Veteran students rely on these payments for support because they are not working or are only working part-time so they can concentrate on their studies. Reminder inconsistency and late payment are burdensome on the Veteran student. Though the option of texting enrollment verification is a positive change, improvement in consistency would make this system even better for the Veteran students.

3. Section 1019 of the Improvement Act addresses overpayments to eligible persons or Veterans change how debts are created for Veteran students who withdraw from classes. Before the enactment of this provision, in some cases, the Veteran student would be responsible for directly repaying the tuition debt to the VA. A student could set up a payment plan with VA Debt Management where they could pay off the debt to the VA over twelve months if they were still enrolled in school. With this provision change, Broward College is responsible for all tuition debts created when a student withdraws from a class. The Veteran students now have a debt to Broward College when they withdraw from a class paid with VA funding. In Florida, state statute requires that an obligation to the College must be paid before the student can register for new classes. This creates a situation in which the Veteran student cannot continue their education until their balance at the College is paid in full, causing a burden to the student.

For example, a Veteran student who takes four classes, but must withdraw from one course. The school must submit an adjustment to VA, a withdrawal after the drop period with non-punitive grades assigned. This change in status is processed through the VA portal. The school then receives a debt letter from the VA for the tuition amount for the withdrawn class, which at Broward College is a about \$350.00 for a three-credit course. Broward College returns the funds to the VA and adjusts the student tuition payment from the VA on the student account. The student owes Broward College \$353.70 and cannot enroll in another class until that amount is paid in full.

We hope for a solution to this particular issue.



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4. The current system of debt management from VA for new student debt notifications to Broward College is managed through the United States Postal Service (USPS). Often Broward College receives the first or even second notification of a debt more than one month after the original notification date. This delay of notification creates a delay in processing, as described above. Creating access to debt letters online, providing access to retrieve the debt letters via AVA, or receiving them through email (addressed to main SCO) instead of through USPS would help to reduce the processing time for resolving student debts. This could, in turn, assist students with remaining enrolled.
5. Veteran students in full-time health science programs that require clinical hours do not receive a Basic Housing Allowance because clinical hours courses are typically on one or two credit hours. Full-time health science programs that require clinical hours include Dental-Hygiene, Diagnostic-Medical-Sonography, Emergency Medical Services, Health-Information-Technology, Nuclear Medicine Technology, Nursing, Physical Therapist Assistant, Respiratory-Care, and Vision-Care. Due to the way these programs are scheduled, students are only certified for six to eleven credits depending on the program, even though they are likely working in a medical facility sixteen to forty hours per week. Veterans students often cannot take on a part-time job during the semesters in which they are not enrolled in at least seven credits. Students in these programs often struggle if they do not have another income source. Some Veteran students take out loans during some semesters in order to remain enrolled. This affects students using all Chapters of GI Bill® benefits, but those most affected are Chapter 33 and Chapter 31 (Veteran Readiness and Employment).
6. The amount of book and supply stipends causes Veteran students concerns. The cost of textbooks and supplies increase over time, but the book and supply stipend has not. The stipend is \$41.67 per enrolled credit, which is about \$125 for a typical three-credit class. For the classes that do require textbooks, the textbooks are typically more than \$125. If a Veteran student takes more than twelve credits per semester in each semester (Fall, Spring, and Summer), a Veteran student will not have enough of a book stipend because the student will exceed the annual maximum of \$1000.
7. Broward College receives numerous complaints from Veteran students using Chapter 31 benefits about their lack of a personal computer or having an outdated computer. Students state that they cannot keep up with coursework as a result. Some Veteran students have no issues with their counselor approving the purchase of a computer and software, but other counselors require letters from Broward College to verify that the student needs a computer. If the purchase of the computer were part of the approval process for Chapter 31 benefits, it would eliminate much frustration and anxiety from the students.



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8. Limitations on approved programs for Chapter 31 benefits present issues for Veteran students. Veterans who have a chosen career path and are approved for Chapter 31 benefits often cannot pursue their desired route because of program approval. Situations include VR&E counselors that review the Veteran's disability documentation and determine that the selected track will make it difficult for the Veteran to perform the duties in their chosen field. Other Veterans have a chosen career path that will require them to complete an additional program before they can begin the degree program that will get them to their desired field. The assigned counselor may deny the preferred path and approve the student for a completely different program, which has no relation to the field the student wishes to pursue. The reasoning is that the Veteran is only allowed to pursue one program. However, some students can pursue more than one degree on their path, while others do not. We hope for a solution for this issue.

9. Broward College finds that many Veterans are unaware of their available educational benefits at the time of separation from service and thereafter. When students reach us, many of them have not taken steps to begin the approval process for their benefits and are unaware of the required Certificate of Eligibility document. We recommend additional efforts to assist Veterans at and beyond separation to inform them of their educational benefits and the application process. For example, step-by-step videos, fact sheets with step-by-step procedures or other similar aids might be helpful to Veterans once they reach the decision point of pursuing higher education.