



TESTIMONY OF

STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

May 17, 2023

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on the topic of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of dedicated chapter leaders. Every day, these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

SVA greatly appreciates the opportunity to speak to our research and the experiences of student veterans regarding TAP. We know that a positive transition experience, beginning with the decision to separate from military service and continuing through the rest of a veteran's life, is essential for a successful and meaningful return to a civilian society.

Transition Assistance Program

An effective transition program is invaluable for those separating from service at any stage – an E-4 completing a single enlistment to someone retiring after 20 years of service. However, from our research both before and after the 2019 reforms TAP has been utilized more as a bridge from the moment of separation to the moment of employment or enrollment. Across all transition research, however, the recommendation is that transition programs be designed beyond that bridge.¹²³⁴⁵ SVA recommends a “highway” approach when thinking about enhancements to TAP. It should carry transitioning servicemembers from a point well before their date of separation to well beyond their point of entry into their civilian lives.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) already stipulates that transition services should start no later than one year from the servicemember's separation date, but SVA research has found that this is not always the case. After separation, our research indicates support

¹ Blackburn, D. (2016). Transitioning from military to civilian life: Examining the final step in a military career. *Canadian Military Journal*, 16(4), 53-61.

² Hallett, R. E., Kezar, A., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2020). A typology of college transition and support programs: Situating a 2-year comprehensive college transition program within college access. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(3), 230-252.

³ Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A. (2018). Examining veteran transition to the workplace through military transition theory. In *Occupational stress and well-being in military contexts* (pp. 117-127). Emerald Publishing Limited.

⁴ Pedlar, D., Thompson, J. M., & Castro, C. A. (2019). Military-to-civilian transition theories and frameworks. In *Military veteran reintegration* (pp. 21-50). Academic Press.

⁵ Zaidi, B., & Morgan, S. P. (2017). The second demographic transition theory: A review and appraisal. *Annual review of sociology*, 43, 473-492.

services do not follow the then veteran through the continuation of transition. These primary issues, as well as others, are discussed below.

TAP is intended to be a robust program aiming to provide a successful holistic transition of military personnel and their spouses from military to civilian life. As subject matter experts in the intersection of issues facing veterans and higher education, SVA will focus on the higher education transition portion of the program. Our testimony discusses opportunities for earlier intervention, points of interest in delivery, and the insufficient emphasis placed on transition into higher education.

Statute lists those responsible for the employment assistance, job training assistance, and other transitional services that constitute TAP. Specifically, it requires the Secretary of Labor, along with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to “establish and maintain a program to furnish counseling, assistance in identifying employment and training opportunities, help in obtaining such employment and training, and other related information and services to members of the armed forces...”⁶ Education is an essential component to finding a career for most transitioning servicemembers, as we will demonstrate below.

The improvements made to TAP with the FY 2019 NDAA resulted in improved sentiment amongst transitioning servicemembers into higher education. SVA research prior to 2020 showed most student veterans had a negative or very negative experience with their transition programs, and a small portion had no experience with a transition program. Since the improvements were made, those sentiments have improved. In 2022, respondents indicated an increase in positive experience with TAP.⁷ The comments aligned with positive feedback were primarily focused on the increased information available in the education track.⁸

About 50 percent of enlistees at the time of enlistment indicate that they intend to use their G.I. Bill benefits after separation,⁹ but SVA estimates show that number may be closer to two-thirds, though sparse data on veterans in higher education makes that determination foggy. Nevertheless, appropriate transition support into higher education is essential for a large portion of the transitioning population, stressing the importance of the education portion of TAP.

The “Education Track” is a “two-day workshop designed to assist servicemembers in identifying the higher education requirements that support their personal career goals.”¹⁰ It “provides guidance on choosing an educational institution, preparing for the application process, and expectations upon

⁶ 10 U.S.C. § 1144(a).

⁷ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors; 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

⁸ *See id.*

⁹ From the House Hearing before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 112 Congress, “Examining the Re-design of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)” provided September 20, 2012

¹⁰ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

attendance...”¹¹ SVA’s research supports this component’s mission, in that almost 60 percent of veterans seeking a higher education degree are motivated by career goals and aspirations.¹² Of those, almost 70 percent chose higher education in lieu of an immediate career because they felt that they were ill- or under-prepared for employment following military service.¹³ Less than half of student veterans’ future goals align with their military occupation,¹⁴ which may contribute to this feeling of unpreparedness. This further supports the need for a transition program designed with the lifespan of the veteran in mind.

According to the program itself, “this two-day workshop is divided into the following topic areas: learning the basics, choosing a field of study, selecting an institution, gaining admission, and funding higher education.”¹⁵ In our longitudinal study on the decision-making patterns of servicemembers from pre- to post-enlistment, one of the most striking findings is what we refer to as the “lost guidance counselor.”¹⁶ As those about to graduate high school and make their way to college, 18-year-olds around the country may spend upwards of four years with a guidance counselor discussing career options and college planning. They choose programs of study, select institutions of higher learning, explore funding sources, and navigate the admissions process. Even conservatively, the better part of a college bound student’s junior and senior years are dedicated to regularly scheduled meetings with a guidance counselor on this impactful life transition.

A two-day workshop cannot replace the support experienced by traditional students with guidance counselors transitioning into higher education. Over half of our respondents rated both the on-base education offices and TAP “below average” in providing advising services.¹⁷ While on active duty, servicemembers are often not provided adequate guidance on utilizing Tuition Assistance (TA) with transfer in mind, but with the idea that they will earn a degree while serving.¹⁸ A large portion of the spending on TA goes to three universities (one non-profit and two for-profit).¹⁹ Transferability of courses from these institutions to the schools that veterans most often select after separation is very low,

¹¹ DoD Instruction 1332.35, 5.1a(4), (6)(b).

¹² 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹³ 2022 SVA Census (in process). Question asking respondents why they chose higher education as a transition medium. On file with authors.

¹⁴ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁵ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

¹⁶ This comes from qualitative findings in response to issues in the decision-making process from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. These portions of the study have not been published. On file with author.

¹⁷ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁸ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁹ Pulkkinen, L. (September 2021). Getting educated while on active duty is getting harder as military rolls back benefits. *The Hechinger Report*.

meaning much of the TA budget is going to credits that cannot be used to earn degrees that are not completed while serving.²⁰²¹

With this gap in service, student veterans arrive on college campuses with a deficit in planning that leads to a higher likelihood of program change. Student veterans are almost twice as likely as traditional students to change their major or program of study multiple times.²² Even with the generous funding from the G.I. Bill, student veterans find themselves graduating with student loan debt,²³²⁴ partially due to the lack of proper preparation and advising. Were proper interventions started sooner and with more emphasis on education, TA dollars could be more appropriately used to take courses that transfer or that are housed within the destination school. This would reduce the number of program changes made by beneficiaries and allow G.I. Bill funding to be maximized for use with longer STEM degrees, ensure degree completion, or even support graduate school.

Finally, what compounds this “lost guidance counselor” phenomenon more is the fact that almost two-thirds of student veterans are first-generation college students.²⁵²⁶ Not only do these students not have the professional college counseling afforded to high school students, but they also lack familial guidance, which has been proven to support student transition, retention, and success.²⁷²⁸²⁹ TAP has the opportunity, and in our opinion obligation, to fill this gap by working with college-bound servicemembers in an expanded capacity, replacing the lost guidance counselor with professional transition services into and through higher education. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) should further leverage the U.S. Department of Education, as part of the TAP interagency partnership, in providing this guidance, along with the nuanced approach not afforded currently.

²⁰ This statement is only applicable to those who start coursework on TA, do not finish a degree, and then complete a degree at a different university after separation. However, because a vast majority of student veterans attend public, nonprofit universities, the assumption is that this is a common case.

²¹ This is not to say that TA is a wasted benefit; only ill-advised. TA is a powerful benefit that entices many servicemembers into service and can be leveraged to continue to draw Americans into military service.

²² Unpublished findings from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. On file with author.

²³ Bhattarai, R., Brees, S., & Oliff, P. (2023). Veterans Borrow for Private and Public Higher Education Despite GI Bill Benefits. Pew Charitable Trusts.

²⁴ According to the Pew study, this debt is largely to cover costs associated with living expenses. Over half of student veterans are married and over half have children. Almost 20 percent are single parents, according to our research.

²⁵ Student Veterans of America uses the U.S. Department of Education definition of “first-generation college students,” or a student who had parents with no postsecondary education experience.

²⁶ This number has been consistent since the implementation of the SVA Census in 2016. See 2016-2020 SVA Census Reports, 2022 Census Report (in progress), held with authors. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>.

²⁷ Aruguete, M. S. (2017). Recognizing challenges and predicting success in first-generation university students. *Journal of STEM Education: Innovations and Research*, 18(2).

²⁸ Ives, J., & Castillo-Montoya, M. (2020). First-generation college students as academic learners: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 139-178.

²⁹ Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A. (2011). Why do first-generation students fail?. *College Student Journal*, 45(1), 20-36.

More holistically, student veterans find that isolation was a large contributor to their transition stress. Much research has been conducted in examining the loss of camaraderie following separation from the military. The shared-experience, peer-support structure of our chapters is what makes them so enticing to student veterans on college campuses. Despite this, our survey feedback on transition to higher education shows that a vast majority of student veterans felt TAP did not prepare them for these types of social and psychological struggles associated with their separation from the military.

“TAP was for getting a job. That’s it. I felt like I was leaving home and heading somewhere where I didn’t know anyone. The SVA chapter...gave me the opportunity to meet people and make connections. Without it, I would be alone.”³⁰

“Transition assistance program (TAP) was not comprehensive in addressing the actual struggles of transition out of the military (primarily psychological, financial, and medical/disability related...[sic] did not need help writing a resume for 3 days).”³¹

Combatting common feelings of isolation for student veterans with the camaraderie provided by an SVA chapter on college campuses also exposes these students to the larger campus community. We’ve noted through chapter conversations that student veterans who engage with their SVA chapter are more likely to engage with other areas of campus: student government; Greek life; industry organizations such as a business, law, or music student group; and identity organizations such as the women’s student union or PRIDE student union. Higher education research has shown that participation in campus organizations increases student success on all measures, and we have found the same for student veterans.^{32,33} Additionally, a survey conducted in 2016 showed that most student veterans have some level of service-connected disability,³⁴ though virtually none utilized disability offices or accommodations to support their academic experience. In a 2022 survey, the number of student veterans utilizing these services had increased to 26 percent.³⁵ Not only are SVA chapters a front door to other campus organizations, but they serve as a gateway to needed campus services.

³⁰ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to “please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share.” Report in progress, held with authors.

³¹ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to “please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share.” Report in progress, held with authors.

³² Foley, C., Darcy, S., Hergesell, A., Almond, B., McDonald, M., Nguyen, L. T., & Morgan-Brett, E. (2023). Extracurricular activities, graduate attributes and serious leisure: competitive sport versus social-cultural clubs in campus life. *Leisure Studies*, 1-18.

³³ Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K. J., Balotti, B. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2023). Post-9/11 Veterans’ Pursuit and Completion of Post-secondary Education: Social Connection, Mental Health, and Finances. *Journal of Education*, 00220574231168638.

³⁴ 2016 SVA Census. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>.

³⁵ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.

Most student veterans, unfortunately, do not discover their SVA chapter until late in their college career.³⁶ As trained, student veterans are focused on the mission – here, graduation is the only goal – and thus, these students miss out on many opportunities found on college campuses outside of the classroom. Were SVA and other Veteran Service Organizations connected with transitioning servicemembers during TAP, or earlier, this timeline to discovering support from their SVA chapter may be shortened, and we may see real impact that continues beyond immediate transition and beyond education. SVA chapters are often the first social contact on campuses for student veterans. Chapter members provide advice, resources, and feedback on housing, childcare, employment, and other necessities of civilian life. These conversations, should they happen earlier, have the potential to not only better prepare servicemembers for their transition into higher education, but reduce the stress caused by that transition. Further, organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and America’s Warrior Partnership (AWP) provide essential services to veterans that would likewise be better served if they were introduced earlier in the transition process.

The updated TAP structure also fails to appropriately prioritize education. A straightforward comparison between the length of online workshops shows that a more robust curriculum has been developed for career-related tracks than education. At only 240 minutes, a transitioning servicemember cannot obtain the needed guidance required to make informed decisions, particularly those that carry such weight and impact on their futures. With the addition of Skillbridge, and the emphasis placed there, as well as other programs offered toward transitions into careers, servicemembers, again a majority of whom transition through higher education, are not shown the value or importance that DoD places on education transition services. There is simply an imbalance in the emphasis placed on transition tracks.

The prioritization of TAP by the chain of command is also an issue. Anecdotally and in response to surveys, some student veterans have reported that the culture of their unit is unsupportive when it comes to TAP. Some transitioning servicemembers do not understand the importance of the program because its importance is not stressed to them. Some within the command structure of the transitioning servicemember do not see TAP as important. For example, many survey respondents noted the struggle in making time to complete the education workshop where requests for that time were denied. This aligns with Government Accountability Office findings that roughly a quarter of transitioning servicemembers who needed maximum support did not attend a two-day class and that, overall, 70 percent of servicemembers did not begin the TAP process at least one year prior to separation.³⁷ While these are not the most common complaints and were certainly more common before the FY 2019 NDAA changes to TAP, the persistence of this mentality throughout the chain of command does not support a successful transition.

³⁶ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.

³⁷ U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-23-104538, SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE 11-22 (2022).

Lastly, we would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to add that, while TAP is defined as an outcomes-based approach to transition, the lack of data available on those who make that transition through higher education – count of individuals degree choices, successes, debt, and post-graduation earnings – stands as an impediment to any outcomes assessment of a transition program aimed at successful transitions through higher education. Data sharing between the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Education, and U.S. Department of Labor to identify the true outcomes of veterans' post-transition is imperative.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. Today's student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chair, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education.