



University Veteran Services
STUDENT AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

September 20, 2023

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation. I'm excited to share my testimony before the Subcommittee on your topic, "Less is More: The Impact of Bureaucratic Red Tape on Veterans Education Benefits." I'm here today on behalf of the veteran and military-connected students at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and our staff that serves them. I've also consulted with colleagues in our University of Wisconsin System as well as my peers across our Big Ten Academic Alliance and our independent colleges and universities in Wisconsin.

Before directly addressing today's topic, I'd like to start with a bit of background and the perspective I'm bringing. I serve as the Director of University Veteran Services at the University of Wisconsin. More importantly, I'm the Grandson of two World War II Veterans, the son of a Vietnam Veteran, and I proudly served on active duty in the Marine Corps from 2002-2006. I returned to Wisconsin, navigated my way through earning a bachelor's and master's degree in social work from two Wisconsin state schools with the support of the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

The reason I share who I am is important, it's because my story is common among my peers. My experience and those I represent is firsthand, front line, and always determined first by what's best for our veterans.

I plan to share how we can do better for our student veterans and military-connected students. My comments are informed by my experiences. I'm also going to share the impacts of who is most important in this process, our student veterans.

1. Risk Based Surveys are a good idea. I support the concept that resources are limited, and focus should be placed where it's going to best help student veterans.
 - a. We need more coordination with education professionals to set standards and we need a lot more transparency.
2. There's too much 'Red Tape' in this process. A lot of GI Bill policy and practice needs to be readjusted to ensure that it's best supporting student veterans.
 - a. Higher education has adjusted and too many GI Bill rules haven't followed suit. We need to update rules for higher education professionals working with VA policymakers.
3. We all need to center student veterans in this process, including how Return on Investment (ROI) is discussed. Veterans made the investment, and their returns should be the most important.
 - a. Each new change needs to look at the entire system and determine if it delivers better outcomes for student veterans.
4. When changes are made, education professionals need to be involved.

- a. I've personally asked numerous times to be involved in the VA's Advisory Committee on Education or any other avenue to help improve this system. VA Education Services should use workgroups to create policy like the Department of Education's partnership with higher education.

My testimony begins with how this process affects student veterans. I'll be sharing the story of Eddie, one of our Student Veterans. Eddie is currently a senior at UW-Madison, studying finance, and works locally in an insurance company. He grew up in Florida, served on active duty in the Marine Corps, and moved to Madison from Southern California with his fiancé having never even visited the state. Eddie is a first-generation American, first-generation service member, and first-generation college student.

Like many student veterans, Eddie's military experience set him apart from his freshmen peers. Eddie had a hard time finding his place among a campus of nearly 50,000 students. In fact, this is an all-too-common scenario that plays out across the country. Our data from a UW-Madison based study, The Veterans Education to Workforce Affinity and Success Study (Benbow & Xie, 2021) shows that most student veterans do not have close ties with their college peers. However, VETWAYS also tells us that student veterans who engage with Veteran Services offices on campus show higher results in areas that are more likely to lead to academic success. When I think about today's topic, I do so always with the question – How does this help Eddie? Eddie made the investment in his time and earned the right to use this fundamental benefit. The GI Bill is the reason many chose to join the service and we are the ones entrusted with fulfilling that promise and ensuring that Eddie can succeed.

Recent legislation and GI Bill changes in policy have created a lot of turmoil in the veteran education world. I'd say that the last 3-4 years have produced more changes than the previous decade. Unfortunately, during this time, higher education hasn't had a great opportunity to be involved and we often are reacting to change. Each time we need to react to change, it takes more and more time away from providing that direct support our student veterans need.

Our Student Veteran, Eddie, trusts me and my staff. We speak the same language, have had the same experiences, and show up every day to make sure he and our other student veterans can find their educational and personal success. However, every minute taken up by unnecessary change or supporting an audit (survey) is time that we can't spend with Eddie. And every change we're not ready for makes staff look less reliable – it's eroding the trust we built with our student veterans.

Risk Based Surveys

The Risk Based Surveys should be a tool to focus time and attention on supporting veterans. It should allow VA to focus on places that need the extra help and make sure resources are not devoted to auditing an institution that poses little to no risk to our student veterans. However, after speaking with colleagues who have been subject to Risk-based Surveys recently I've learned that many are not risky, but simply instead tripping criteria that is misinformed.

The pilot project of Risk-based Surveys was informed by a diverse group of veterans and higher education professionals. This new tool was truly built in a multidisciplinary fashion and should have been a near off the shelf solution to safeguarding student veterans, like Eddie.

What we need is an understanding into the metrics and methodology. Simply put, we're looking for the predictability that will allow us to do our job. I've heard that one of the metrics VA uses is an increase in GI Bill enrollment of 10 or more from one year to the next – at face value, an increase may be a factor to suggest a school could be involved in risky behavior. However, thanks to Congress, more and more military-connected students are eligible for in-state tuition rates across the country. These changes leveled the playing field for military families and gives opportunity and access to students to attend big name schools like Wisconsin, South Carolina, UCLA, or Arizona. This tied with veterans serving after 9/11 that are beginning to have college age children means a lot of schools will see increases for years to come. These increases are not risk, but simply the nature of children maturing and the intended positive outcomes from removing non-resident tuition charges.

Risk-based Surveys need to be informed by VA staff, the SAA, and higher education professionals. There's too much 'inside baseball' in higher education to do this solely in house. My colleagues are spending their important time focusing on audits instead of providing direct student veteran support. Moreover, the truly risky behavior could be missed because resources are being used in the wrong place.

Administrative Burden

The last several years have been the most difficult in my time supporting Student Veterans. The VA reinterpreted 85/15 several times, study abroad rules shifted, and full-time calculations were updated overnight. Meanwhile, VA Education Services dismantled the Education Liaison Representatives (ELRs) to fill other needs. The department put out a few Policy Advisories, but none were shared with schools. Many left a lot of questions with no one to turn to at the VA for help.

Enrollment Manager is a perfect example of recent changes that could have improved outcomes for student veterans but are currently causing harm. This new system was designed solely to make the process streamlined for VA Education Services, something that clearly needs to happen if tens of thousands of beneficiaries need to be paid, but it forgot about the most important equation – our student veterans.

The rollout of Enrollment Manager consisted of very little communication to education partners. The VA promised the new system would be an improvement over VA-Once and would maintain similar functionality, but we only got to see glimpses of the new system during development. I'm here to report that the improvements are obvious, the system looks more modern. It also takes much longer to use with more scrolling, doesn't always contain accurate information, and the quirks on the school side can only be solved by a complex set of steps not found on any VA document but are passed along through colleagues on listservs. When VA Education Services does communicate about the system, it is often to ask schools to take five extra steps on their end so that VA systems can automate.

We are now spending more time in Enrollment Manager and less time helping student veterans. This new system hasn't delivered promised functionality and VA Education Services never got even close to exploring efficiencies schools have been asking for. Simply put, the process is as slow or slower today than it was before Enrollment Manager.

Another example of burden to our veterans is related to rules outlined in the School Certifying Official's Handbook on course applicability. UW-Madison has created First-year Interest Groups (FIGs), which allow

20 or fewer students to take a grouping of courses related to their academic interests. The 66 FIGs UW offers this fall makes a large university feel smaller for students. FIGs offer courses around themes such as: "Game Design," "Fakes and Forgeries: From the Ancient World to Modern Times," or "Fresh Water Past, Present, and Future." Many students who complete FIGs have a better understanding of their academic discipline, know which specific major they want to declare, and have developed close ties with their peers as well as faculty. Unfortunately, most student veterans cannot join a FIG as GI Bill rules say undeclared freshmen can only get paid for certain 'General Education' courses.

Course applicability problems with GI Bill rules are also found with our upperclassman. Another GI Bill rule says undeclared student veterans in junior standing cannot be certified for benefits. Anyone working in education knows that student veterans are much more likely to be transfer students, and many come to campus already with junior standing. They may be closer to graduation than their peers, but they cannot declare in high demand majors such as engineering, computer science, or nursing without taking some specific prerequisites on campus.

According to GI Bill rules, we cannot allow student veterans to have the same high-quality experiences their non-veteran peers enjoy. However, if they wanted to take ROTC courses, even if they are undeclared or it doesn't fit in their major, GI Bill allows for that. These systems are not set up for most student veterans.

My experience is that these types of breakdowns are all too common. Many of our new student veterans, like Eddie, are coming to campus just weeks after leaving active duty and they need their education benefits. Our veterans are taking the right steps, yet the system just doesn't work. To make matters worse, we often don't know of the VA error until student veterans call us frantically when they don't receive their funds. Instead of focusing on Math or Chemistry, they spend time and energy trying to navigate this administrative burden with us.

Closing

I'm both proud and sad to say that we have a 'Veterans Crisis Fund'. Our campus community steps up to provide a campus food pantry and bridge funds when GI Bill payments are delayed. If we didn't have these campus resources too many of our student veterans couldn't pay rent and buy baby formula when the next error happens.

The missteps of Risk-based Surveys, Enrollment Manager, and administrative burden are all symptoms of the same underlying issue – VA Education Services needs more input, feedback, and collaboration from education partners and Student Veterans. Education benefits combined with quality schools equals a lot of success for our nation's Student Veterans. But success only comes when the system centers student veterans.

I've had the pleasure to meet Secretary McDonough twice in Madison in the last couple of years. Both times I presented the idea that schools and VA education benefits are the front door to a positive, life-long relationship with the VA.

My being here is likely a sign that I know the right information and have related to the right people. However, I sit in a place that not a lot of my colleagues do – I'm at a flagship institution and benefit from staff and support not enjoyed at many schools. This has meant my opportunities to reach VA staff or

others in positions of power, like this subcommittee, is not the norm. Every student veteran, regardless of campus, deserves honest communication and should expect their school has the power to reach out when there's an issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views to the Subcommittee. I look forward to working with all involved to make sure this process continues to be fair while offering a high-quality service. I hope you have seen my commitment and dedication to our student veterans, and I thank you for considering my statements and suggestions.

Joe Rasmussen
Director, University Veteran Services
University of Wisconsin – Madison
USMC Veteran 2002-2006

References

Benbow, R., & Xie, X. (2021, August). *VETWAYS Reserch Briefs*. Retrieved from <https://vetways.wceruw.org/research-briefs/>