

THE DOVE PLAN: “Developing Opportunities in Veterans Education”

A Report from the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

Statement of the Problem

As the combat mission draws to a close in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pennsylvania’s service members are returning home in vast numbers, with many endeavoring to rejoin the job market or pursue higher education upon their return. Despite a proven work ethic and a philosophy of service-above-self cultivated by the military, our new veterans still face an anemic economy and record-high unemployment. According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, this rate reached 20 percent for male veterans age 24 and under in 2012. With this influx of service members comes a heightened need to understand the military community and its culture. Most educators and administrators have indicated a strong desire to better serve this growing population, but they also admit to a lack of information about how they can serve them most effectively.

For many of the 90,000 Pennsylvanians who have been deployed since September 11, 2001, reintegrating into civilian life and transitioning from combat to campus can present a host of challenges. A Pew survey published in the PATRIOT-NEWS/Pennlive.com on March 19, 2013, found that almost half of all post-9/11 veterans reported having trouble adjusting to civilian life. In contrast, only one in four pre-9/11 veterans reported the same difficulty.

Understanding the patchwork of benefits and obtaining credit for military service can be among the many hurdles veterans face on the journey to academic success and a family-sustaining job. Thanks to the advocacy of the Student Veterans of America (SVA), and many of Pennsylvania’s 980,000 veterans, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Pennsylvania must provide increased support and specialized student services to our returning soldiers and airmen.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) reported that 13,000 veterans in the Keystone State were receiving federal GI benefits as of June 2012. However, this number may not reflect all veterans enrolled in our community colleges and four-year colleges and universities because these institutions are not required to track veterans or report enrollment trends, credits accepted, completion rates and other parameters of success.

Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation in the number of colleges and universities it has to offer, behind only California and New York, and its National Guard is one of the most frequently deployed forces in the nation. But the Commonwealth lags behind many other states in making its institutions of higher education military-friendly in key areas, such as on-campus veteran support, faculty education, and credit acceptance.

Because many student-veterans are eligible to receive only 36 months of educational benefits, allowing them to enroll in the classes they need and to obtain the credits they have earned to graduate on time is pivotal.

Many outstanding nonprofits, corporations, veterans service organizations (VSOs), and individuals support veterans and service members. However, no single umbrella organization or office is dedicated to veterans' higher education in Pennsylvania. The Commonwealth's support services are divided among the PDE, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), the VSOs, and the county directors of veterans' affairs. Those on the front lines of service delivery frequently report confusion over educational benefits, as do veterans themselves. Not only does a lack of complete and accurate information exist at the state and county levels and at many colleges; but veterans are also finding a lack of peer support, and of funding and access for mental health services, financial aid, career counseling and other needs.

Couple these trends with the grim reality that state support for higher education has fallen in recent years. Cognizant of the fact that some recommendations to improve military-friendliness could be costly, Pennsylvania must be careful to avoid measures which could ultimately raise tuition on students already burdened with debt.

Senate Hearing on Military-Friendly Higher Education – June 20, 2012

The Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee held a hearing on June 20, 2012, in conjunction with the Senate Education Committee, to explore Pennsylvania colleges' progress on military-friendly higher education policies and to identify ways to help veterans transition more easily from combat to classroom. Testifiers included DMVA, PDE, the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP), the State System of Higher Education (SSHE), the University of Pittsburgh, Robert Morris University, the College Board, and the American Council on Education (ACE). Additional comments were received from the Pennsylvania State University (PSU) in the weeks following the hearing.

Testifiers stopped short of advocating mandates that would require schools to furnish certain information to veterans and service members, due largely to the diversity of Pennsylvania's schools, which vary in both student body size and composition. Most colleges expressed a reluctance to see the passage of requirements to accept certain military service for credits as a "one-size-fits-all" mandate, in an effort to protect their academic integrity and retain each individual college's control and discretion. For example, ACE representatives said their workers perform careful evaluations, make recommendations, and provide guidance, but ultimately, they leave it up to the institution to decide which credits to award and how to apply them to a student's program. They urged policymakers to keep in mind that it is the institutions themselves that are awarding the degrees and certificates service members and veterans are attaining. Therefore, schools should retain the freedom to render academic judgments about whether recommendations are comparable in terms of the content, scope, and rigor of their programs.

Hearing Recommendations

The recommendations advanced at the June 20, 2012 hearing had common themes. In short, institutions were encouraged to provide additional flexibility for veterans, while fostering a sense of belonging and giving them a stronger voice. Also acknowledged was a need for some basic uniformity across college campuses, because each differs on its level of support to student-veterans.

These suggested courses of action included encouraging colleges to:

- Track student veterans via the admissions application to include how many applied, were accepted, attended, received aid, graduated, etc.
- Waive admission fees
- Establish a centrally located, “one-stop-shop” veterans’ resource center on campus.
- Post veteran-specific information on websites, to include transfer of credits policies and voluntary separation policies in the wake of a deployment.
- Offer a single point of contact for all veterans on campus.
- Cooperate with local VSOs and other veteran agencies.
- Identify military occupations that correlate with degree programs and develop bridge courses to fill gaps in training.
- Develop transfer of military credit policies and withdrawal procedures related to mobilization or a permanent change of station (PCS) move.
- Offer “Life after War” elective courses, along with veterans’ programs, veterans’ clubs and speakers.
- Train faculty and staff more effectively in veteran issues, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).
- Designate specialty veteran staff such as social workers and mental health counselors.
- Encourage recruitment of peer-to-peer veteran mentors.
- Inform veterans about the state’s Division of Veterans Education within PDE, which helps veterans navigate GI Bill benefits.
- Host conferences/trainings for faculty, staff, and administrators on best practices when working with the student veteran population to include workshops on military culture, regaining civilian identity, critical needs and reintegration issues, and creating a military-supportive campus.
- Encourage attendance at Yellow Ribbon events.

And directing the state to:

- Develop a “Best Practices Guide” or “Military-friendly” checklist and encourage schools to establish policies relating to student-veterans.
- Appoint a leader to coordinate campus-based efforts and articulate programs.

ACE

ACE represents 1,800 institutions and associations from across every sector of higher education, including public and private, two-year and four-year colleges and universities, to meet the postsecondary education needs of America's service members and veterans.

Today, ACE evaluates hundreds of military courses and occupations each year. In addition to publishing the results of these evaluations in the *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services*, ACE collaborates with the Department of Defense (DOD) to detail this work on transcripts for members of the Army, Army National Guard, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

The registries for these transcripts, operated by the DOD, hold the records of more than six million service members and veterans.

ACE reports that credit for military training has been a popular topic for some time, but interest has been heightened by the increase of student veterans pursuing higher education following the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008. ACE has continued its role in assisting the more than 500,000 veterans in higher education by discussing the implementation of this valuable financial aid benefit, and responding to calls from institutions of higher education to assist in developing practices to serve student-veterans. Institutions of higher education strongly desire to support this population to every extent possible, but guidance was needed –and continues to be needed-- in determining best practices.

To assist institutions of higher education in developing these programs, ACE recently launched an online Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions. Located at www.vetfriendlyToolkit.org, this resource provides users with an overview of more than 30 areas an institution might create or enhance policies and programs to serve their military and veteran populations.

State and Federal Law

According to a January 2013 report issued by the Pennsylvania Senate Policy Development and Research Office, 19 states have enacted legislation requiring or recommending the development of policies to consider granting college credit for certain military education, training and service. These states include Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. For example, Texas requires a commission to develop and support methods to maximize academic or workforce education credit awarded by institutions of higher education to veterans and military service members or experience, education and training obtained during military service.

Indiana and Minnesota both require state institutions to adopt policies to award credit to veterans with military course credits, based on ACE recommendations. Indiana's policy also requires the Commission for Higher Education to establish uniform guidelines for state educational institutions to follow when implementing the requirements. Indiana further allows occupational or professional licensure boards to issue a license certificate registration or permit to a military service applicant or military spouse who meets certain requirements or to issue a temporary practice permit or provisional license while the military service applicant or military spouse is satisfying certain requirements as set by the board.

In Indiana, newly enacted Senate Bill 115 requires state educational institutions with at least 200 student-veterans to establish a Combat to College program. This legislation would require the school to provide a centralized location for admissions, registration and financial administration; provide reasonable accommodations for disabled veterans at the fitness facility; develop programs to provide academic guidance; develop programs to provide access to counseling services or resources to disabled veteran and those suffering from PTSD; and develop special job search programs. Each institution would also designate a veteran program coordinator.

Recently three states—California, Florida and Tennessee--enacted legislation to address priority course registration for veterans.

Since 2006, six states—Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and West Virginia— have passed legislation requiring more comprehensive on-campus, veteran-friendly higher education programs for all public institutions of higher education and recommending that private institutions do the same. Arizona passed similar legislation in 2011 but made the program voluntary. In Florida, each state university and college created or is creating its own schedule and plan for becoming veteran-friendly.

Six states use a VSO on campus; Arizona uses a campus steering committee, and West Virginia uses faculty liaisons and counselors. Four states—Arizona, Georgia, Oregon and West Virginia—require some type of certification or training for these support staff. Five states specifically require an actual office or center on campus. Four states—Arizona, Illinois, Minnesota, and West Virginia—require an annual report to be submitted by each campus or university. Georgia requires reporting to some degree by each campus or university. Illinois limits the requirement to offer a program to campuses with more than 1,000 full-time students.

Federal law—primarily the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008—addresses issues such as transfer of credit policies, dissemination of information, and readmission of military personnel who withdraw due to deployment. Public institutions of higher education must charge in-state tuition to a member of the armed forces who has served on active duty for more than 30 days, and whose home or permanent duty station is in a state receiving assistance under this Act. This rate also applies to the spouse of the member and the dependent children and continues even if the PDS of the member changes to a location outside the state.

The federal Improving Transparency of Education Opportunities for Veterans Act, signed into law in January 2013, directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop a comprehensive policy to improve outreach and transparency to veterans and members of the Armed Forces through the provision of information on institutions of higher learning and to explore the use of an online tool that allows veterans to determine whether they are academically ready to engage in postsecondary education and training opportunities.

New Pennsylvania Laws Related to Military Higher Education

Act 128 of 2012 permits the spouse of a person on active duty to obtain an educational leave of absence. Previously, leave was only available to members called to active duty. The new law restores members and spouses to the educational status they had before being ordered to military duty, without loss of credits, scholarships, fees or tuition.

Additional legislation has been proposed in the 2013-2014 Session:

- House Bill 107 (Heffley) requires the consideration of military education when fulfilling professional certification requirements. It also recognizes the qualifications of military spouses who are certified in other states.
- HB 472 (Barrar) amends the law to provide in-state tuition rates at community colleges and state related/state-owned institutions for veterans, their spouses and dependent children. Currently, in-state tuition is provided to military personnel, their dependents and civilian personnel assigned to an active duty station in Pennsylvania. However, individuals who complete active duty enlistment obligations and want to move to Pennsylvania and attend college here are charged out-of-state tuition unless they take a year off to establish residency.
- House Bill 841 (Painter) amends Title 51 to require the establishment of a “Combat to College” program at state educational institutions—PASSHE, state-related institutions and community colleges-- in order to provide a veteran-friendly education environment. The bill requires schools to provide postsecondary credit for military training; creates a statewide task force to recommend best practices; and requires each education institution to designate a veterans’ coordinator.
- House Bill 1164 (Murt) provides that student-veterans should receive priority course scheduling at public institutions of higher education.
- Senate Bill 232 (Dinniman) establishes the Transfer and Articulation Oversight Committee to assess the feasibility of developing uniform standards and methods to grant academic credit for experience, education and training obtained during military service, including recommendations related to the transfer of credits between institutions.
- Senate Bill 373 and Senate Bill 374 (Baker) provide that the children of a fallen soldier are eligible for the educational death benefit as long as their parent was a resident of Pennsylvania at any time during his or her service.

PDE

The Division of Veterans Education in the Office of Postsecondary/Higher Education is under contract with the VA to approve programs in Pennsylvania so that veterans and eligible dependents can use their GI Bill, as well as conduct compliance surveys of the educational institutions and training establishments approved for veterans’ benefits. They report that they participate in various outreach efforts to encourage and educate veterans about GI Bill usage.

The Division is interested in working more closely with the SVA at their PA Advisory Council on Veterans/Military Education (PACVME) and plans to send out information in the SVA’s Welcome Home Packet for all recently discharged veterans. Division representatives said they

are willing to consider implementing an active, effective veteran resource center, helping veterans with financial aid at orientation, and participating in the Yellow Ribbon campaign and believes a Best Practices primer could be developed.

PDE can further the cause through existing outreach efforts and by supporting grassroots student organizations and veterans resource centers. It also recommended that they begin:

- Accepting ACE's recommendation for awarding credit for military experience.
- Requiring schools to develop policies relating to military transfer credit.
- Requiring schools to expedite decisions regarding transfer of credit.
- Publishing concise information on transfer credit for military experience.
- Assessing skills of returning veterans and expanding articulation agreements to include credit for military training.

PDE would like to be able to provide schools with contact names for helping veterans with emotional/physical trauma, PTSD, TBI, depression and anxiety. It may be prudent to designate them to serve as a clearinghouse for that purpose.

Proposed Solutions

Senate Bill 1004, legislation proposed by Sen. Lisa Baker, would establish the DOVE program ("Developing Opportunities in Veterans Education") to require each college, community college and university to:

- designate a single point of contact for veterans.
- post veterans' services and programs on websites and other accessible places.
- post withdrawal policies for mobilization, deployment and credit transfer.
- track veterans through the application process and report the number of veterans to PDE each year.
- explore becoming a veteran-supportive campus.

A college or university could make a request to be certified by the PDE as a "Devoted to Our Veterans" Campus, which includes any postsecondary institution that offers:

- a survey of student veterans to identify needs.
- a campus steering committee consisting of student-veterans, faculty and staff to share information.
- sensitivity and awareness training on military and veterans culture, including issues related to TBI, PTSD, suicide, and physical and mental disabilities.
- student-veteran orientation programs and at least one veterans-only course taught by a veteran or trained volunteer on veterans issues.
- peer mentoring and peer support programs.
- outreach to local military bases.
- one-stop resource and student centers on campus for student-vets, their families and student family members of the Armed Forces who are currently deployed.
- community-based collaborations to allow the private sector to support veterans resource centers through financial aid and in-kind gifts.

Conclusion

Through legislation such as the DOVE plan, Pennsylvania's higher education community would be given clear direction on how to make schools more accommodating to veterans, while also being given the discretion to make decisions that align with each school's overall academic mission. The goal is to strengthen the understanding of, and empathy for, the veteran experience and bolster investments in veterans' long-term success. It is our hope that our institutions of higher learning will become increasingly aware of the many differences between student-veterans and the traditional college student; develop a deeper understanding of the mental health needs of today's service members, veterans and their families; and create relationships with student-veterans, both on campus and in the larger community.

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