

Pennsylvania Compact for Student Veterans

Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Institutions of Higher Education

Background:

In 2010, there were over 1,000,000 Veterans residing in Pennsylvania accounting for nearly 8% of the State's total population. Included in this estimate are more than 20,000 recent Veterans who have returned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The number of returning Afghanistan and Iraq era Veterans will continue to grow as long as these conflicts continue.

Our returning Veterans now have access to a new GI Bill that provides comprehensive educational benefits and many Veterans are taking advantage of these benefits. Pennsylvania colleges and universities have the opportunity to recruit and enroll these students, and by these efforts, contribute to the success and well being of a generation of citizens who have offered their service and sacrifice for our Nation's security.

These Veterans need our support to ensure their successful reintegration into civilian life including their success in higher education. This compact seeks to ensure the educational success of Veterans who choose to return to a Pennsylvania school by promoting opportunities for colleges and universities to enhance their awareness and understanding of both the academic and reintegration needs of these Veterans. The compact is also intended to encourage the dissemination of recognized best practices in the academic and support services provided to these Veterans.

While our returning Veterans typically bring a high degree of maturity and important military-related life experiences and skills to the classroom, many Veterans also return home after experiencing significant deployment and combat-related stress. As noted in studies by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs, military related behavioral health and relationship problems are serious risk factors for these returning Veterans. For some, reintegration from military service to civilian life is a major challenge. In addition, some of these Veterans begin their higher education experience without adequate high school preparation which often presents an additional barrier to their successful transition into higher education.

A number of Pennsylvania colleges and universities have developed inclusive campuses where student Veterans feel welcomed and quickly become an integral part of campus life. Many of these schools have also designed very successful academic transition programs and support services to further ensure Veteran success. One of the goals of this compact is to facilitate the sharing of these best practices among all of our public and private institutions with a hope that we can make higher education in Pennsylvania truly "Veteran Friendly" in both spirit and practice.

Purpose:

To ensure the educational success of our returning Veterans, including their recruitment, successful transition into higher education, retention, and eventual graduation.

Agreement:

We the undersigned commit our institution to provide the following services, within available financial resources, and to work toward full implementation as budgetary conditions improve:

- 1. Awareness.** Ensure that all members of our educational community, including administration, faculty, and staff have an appreciation of Veteran reintegration challenges by providing in-service training to enhance their awareness, knowledge, and skills specific to the strengths and challenges presented by these Veteran students.
- 2. Coordination.** Ensure effective communication and coordination of services available to ensure the success of Veteran students.

3. **3. Designated “One Door.”** Provide a “one door” system so that student Veterans are able to connect to their educational and support needs through the establishment of a Veterans Office or designated staff person responsible for such coordination. In addition to being the point on G.I. Bill claims and other veteran issues, this entity would identify and coordinate liaisons for services in key offices on campus (e.g., financial aid, admissions, academic advising) and off (e.g., employment, behavioral health counseling, housing information). Additional responsibilities may include (a) establishing a student Veteran orientation, (b) support for Veterans student groups, (c) advising the President, the Chief Academic Officer and the Chief Officer for Student Affairs on student veteran issues, and (d) dissemination of information about Veteran population to faculty, staff and student organizations.

4. **4. Behavioral Health.** Assist veterans needing behavioral health counseling and support resources through services provided on campus or through referral to appropriate agencies. As a counterpart, ensure that faculty and staff are well informed about post-traumatic stress symptoms, traumatic brain injury, and other behavioral health and relationship issues that are challenges for many returning veterans. Faculty and staff have an important role in helping to reduce the stigma often felt by these Veterans and can help them access appropriate support services.

5. **5. Financial Aid & GI Bill Support.** Veterans receiving GI Bill benefits should be viewed as a special population by the financial aid office. In order to avoid barriers to success, particular care should be taken to ensure that veterans who have their benefits certified do not experience hardship and continue their studies if their payments are late.

6. **6. Peer Support.** Promote and support student Veteran groups as an opportunity for these students to interact with fellow Veterans, while still participating in campus life. These groups enable student Veterans to compare experiences, assist each other with navigating through their benefits and college experience, and increase the chances for success for the student Veterans. Mentorship of newly returned Veterans by experienced student veterans is strongly encouraged.

Effective Date

This Compact shall become effective upon the signature of the parties. This agreement may be terminated at any time upon 30 days advance notice by one party to the State of Pennsylvania, and may be amended by the written agreement of the undersigned or the institution’s authorized designees.

Signatories:

 Tom Corbett
 Governor

 Name

 Institution

 Date