

**Joint Senate Hearing on Fostering Veteran Supportive Campuses**  
**Senate Education and Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee**  
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Senator Baker, Senator Piccola, distinguished guests and committee members,

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to testify here today on behalf of student veterans in Pennsylvania. With me today is Brian Hall, who is an undergraduate student from Penn State-Mont Alto and the President of the student veterans club there.

Currently, SVA has over 450 chapters or organizations at colleges and universities across the nation. These chapters provide peer-to-peer support to other veterans. Our vision is that all veterans will succeed in higher education, achieve their academic goals and gain meaningful employment. On a daily basis I interact with veterans, chapters and my peers, as well as other Veteran Service Organizations. The direct contact that I have provides me with a unique perspective on the needs and obstacles faced by veterans in Pennsylvania and across the nation as they return to their communities to enroll in educational opportunities and later, reintegrate into the civilian workforce.

My goal for this public hearing is to educate each of you on the issues and concerns of student veterans in Pennsylvania, with the end goal of creating legislation to ensure the Institutions of Higher Learning remain accountable to our service members and veterans. I'm very pleased to see that examining post-secondary educational institutions with respect to student veterans has finally taken notice. I recently was a guest speaker at the Governor's Post-Secondary Education Commission and one of my recommendations to the commission was to include a member that focuses on student veterans. In the weeks following, Mayor Bob McMahon from Media was asked by Governor Corbett to serve on the commission. I believe now that addressing transitioning service members who enter into college is one of the Governor's priorities.

Briefly, I want to describe my transition from the military and into college. I served in 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, Fort Bragg North Carolina, with one 15 month tour to Afghanistan. When I was deployed I applied to Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. It took me a couple of times to submit my application because the computers froze up on me.

When I returned from Afghanistan I went on military leave and due to not hearing back from the university I set up a meeting with the Shippensburg University Admissions Office. After pleading my case, I was finally admitted into the university. During the last few months of my active duty service I looked into additional financial benefits and resources that I could take advantage of. When I emailed Shippensburg University about benefits, scholarships, and resources I received a response of nothing. It wasn't until later when I became involved with veterans at Shippensburg University and later became the Pennsylvania Outreach Coordinator for SVA that I realized that there were several opportunities for veterans both in the community and state wide.

As I prepared to transition from my military service to college I was very fearful of what to expect. When I began college in January 2009 I had no friends to rely on and had no clue about what I needed to do to receive my GI Bill benefits. Finally, during orientation I was able to find the right office and was able to

figure out everything on my own that I needed in order to receive my educational benefits. This part of orientation was not part the universities traditional orientation program.

I moved into my dorm room not knowing my roommate who was 18 and found it very difficult to relate to him. But at the same time I was exposed to a whole new perspective on life.

I remember how excited I was the day before I would officially start college. After all of the hardships I was finally getting the opportunity to fulfill my destiny. I woke up at 5:30am just as I did in the military to prepare for the first day. I dressed in slacks and a buttoned shirt; prepared and ready to go. As I walked in to the college it was nothing like what I had expected. The stares I received/felt from other students gave me an empty feeling in my stomach. I counted the minutes until class was over and sat close to the door so I could leave as soon as class was dismissed.

It took me months to truly find myself as an individual, or to even open up and speak to my peers. I spent several months being a loner, not taking part in any other activities. One day I received an email from SVA, asking me if my school was affiliated with them which we were not. I didn't realize until later, but at that moment my life and the life of future veterans at my school would be changed forever.

I eventually started an SVA chapter at my school which allowed me to meet other veterans who shared the same interests or had similar struggles that they were experiencing.

I will now give Brian Hall an opportunity to describe his transition as well and then provide the premises of my testimony.

Let me first provide some background information to support my testimony. In 2010, there were approximately 22,000 veterans in Pennsylvania utilizing educational benefits with 12,000 veterans using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits alone. Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits for Pennsylvania totaled \$221 million over the last two years. With the current drawbacks of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars the Census Bureau projects more and more veterans to transition from a structured military environment to an unstructured college environment. For that reason, colleges and universities must be prepared to support transitioning service members.

When a veteran begins to out process from the military they usually have a short amount of time to set up their life as a civilian. They are often bombarded with information and don't know how to determine what is pertinent to their individual needs. They often have to figure out if they are going to school, where they plan to work, or how they are going to take care of their family. And let's not forget about both the visible and invisible wounds of war that they may have to deal with.

Veterans are often just a number when they leave the military. They may leave with no job, no education future, and may be suffering the wounds of war. Ideally the military should set up a veteran for success prior to transitioning, but the unfortunate reality of the matter is that the veteran bears the cost after serving his or her country. I encourage each of you to contact members of Congress urging them to push policies that create a much smoother transition for service members.

In Pennsylvania, it is crucial that we work together to ensure that educational institutions, non-profit, for profit and private institutions remain accountable to veterans that are now attending college.

Your constituents and other citizens of Pennsylvania expect a system that provides a quality education for veterans with limited difficulty. The people of the Commonwealth want to ensure that those who have served our country are provided with accurate information and guidance to succeed in higher education

and gain meaningful employment following graduation. Corporations and other businesses want to hire veterans because of their work ethic and leadership that they possess.

Choosing a college and university that fits a veteran's need can be an expensive and life-altering decision. Typically, veterans are the first people in their families to attend college. Many veterans have not been part of an educational setting for quite some time, let alone had career and educational guidance. This is one reason that post-secondary institutions must advise and provide benefit counseling for those using the G.I. Bill and other tuition assistance, so the veteran can make a decision that best suits their individual need.

When veterans make informed decisions, this will create a more efficient system and better use of taxpayer dollars. Pennsylvania doesn't want students who are so far in debt and are not prepared for the workforce.

It is my belief that institutions of higher learning target veterans for the financial gain and hold true to the claim to being a "Military Friendly" school. But year after year veterans are not a priority. If you look closely at these institutions there is typically no campus governing committee addressing veteran issues and concerns. These schools might recognize the issues but fail to take the lead to fix the problem. Veterans bring diversity, leadership and a commitment to succeed on college campuses. Today's veterans are the "Next Greatest Generation" of veterans and can accomplish anything when they are supported.

One of the major discussions in Pennsylvania concerning transitioning service members is lowering veteran unemployment. But let me ask; isn't it more fiscally responsible to have veterans enrolled in higher education institutions in Pennsylvania, so that they become more educated and expand their opportunity base? It good for Pennsylvania and it's good for veterans.

I often hear at meetings or hear the discussion of today's veterans, with respect to getting veterans jobs and cutting down on mental health issues. We cannot make the same mistake that we did by not providing the support to the Vietnam era veterans as they began college and cannot continue on the current track that we are. We need to create a system in Pennsylvania that supports student veterans, so in the future there will already be programs in place that provide the much needed support, thus creating a sustainable model. With the proper support, veterans will and continue to do great things for their community.

A veteran and military supportive campus provides veterans with an opportunity to excel in the classroom and after graduation. Statistically, a supportive campus will ultimately decrease mental health concerns, decrease veteran unemployment and the potential risk of high rates of homeless veterans, thus boosting the economy of Pennsylvania as a whole.

Let us ensure the colleges remain accountable to the veterans that they claim that they support. Each year colleges throughout Pennsylvania report the services and programs that they provide on their campus to veterans. If a school meets a certain criteria they are listed as a "Military Friendly" school. When I was the Pennsylvania Outreach Coordinator for SVA I was very saddened and disturbed of what I had discovered. I would go to the school's veteran or military website that were listed as "Military Friendly" and through my research I had realized that they did not provide the services that they had claimed they did. I visited many of these institutions and surveyed dozens of other veterans. Some schools did not even have a website for veterans to provide resources and others have not updated their website for two or three years. If I was a transitioning veteran I would certainly be confused and not no where to turn to have my questions answered. If an institution of higher learning cannot provide the resources to veterans on the simplest of levels then how can they call themselves a military and veteran friendly institution?

This is an injustice to the veteran community. Those who have fought for our country and simply just want a quality education just like the traditional college student. Veterans are told that they would be provided one thing and an institution does the total opposite. If a person buys something, their expectation is to receive in return what they had ordered. Not only is it an injustice to the veteran community. This is a clear example of fraud, waste and abuse, not to mention a misuse of tax payer dollars. It is wrong that school's claim to be military and a veteran friendly campus for just the PR. It is my hope that Executive Order 13607 will help to alleviate the pressure and unethical practices that institutions use against veterans.

To be listed as a "Military Friendly" school, institutions are given the opportunity to report as being a member of the Service Member Opportunity Colleges Consortium (SOC). The purpose of SOC Consortium is to provide educational opportunities for veterans and service members. The SOC's Military Student Bill of Rights states information about policies, getting called to serve their country, transfer of credits policies, and additional information and resources must be easily accessible. The problem is a lack of communication between the college and the veteran. One college administrator might tell the veteran one thing and another college administrator something totally different on various policies. The information needs to be made available once a veteran walks into the college and enrolls. Additionally, the information needs to be made available both in print and online and at one designated location for the veterans to access it.

There are additional principles that schools must follow under SOC, but through my experiences have not been keeping up to their end of the bargain. Under the criteria to be listed as "Military Friendly" is to accept the American Council on Education's recommendations for awarding credit and credit for military training and experience. ACE has a guide to assist colleges and recently created a website called *veteranfriendlytoolkit.com* to assist colleges. I have visited several college website and have not found such guide and have heard horror stories of veterans waiting a whole semester to figure out what was transferred in. ACE makes it extremely easy for schools, but it has been and will continue to be a failure on the school's if we don't act now. At the very least, colleges and universities should develop specific policies relating the military transfer of credits. How is a veteran supposed to maximize their 36 months of benefits if they have to retake training that they already had in the military? Whether you are a veteran or not and already worked hard to receive credit for the training that he or she completed and then had to retake the same course that wouldn't be fair. It's important that veterans at least know what is transferring in early so they can create an efficient degree plan with their advisor, so that they can maximize their benefits.

Another item that schools can report on is tracking student veterans. When school's report they report the number of students that are utilizing VA approved educational benefits and not accurately tracking how many veterans a college campus has. If we want to provide the support to veterans, family members and dependents then we need to have an accurate number, so we can track their success and create programs that can improve the academic success of student veterans. It is impossible to support any sort of group without identifying the group that you are trying to support.

Each year colleges and universities receive Federal dollars from veterans that are utilizing VA approved education benefits. With a supportive college environment for veterans it becomes a win-win situation for both the college and the veteran. It is statistically proven that with a military and veteran supportive campuses enrollment rates increase, thus increasing retention and graduation rates.

Colleges and universities limit the scope of their research that they complete annually. This research should be expanded to examine the programs and services that work and those that don't work. What you will find is veteran specific programs empowers these students to excel in the classroom and in the workforce. Several of the programs that I'm referring to are free of charge, have proven effective and just

require a little bit of initiative and will power for the institutions. So again, if these schools are claiming to be a veteran supportive campus then we must ensure that they are creating programs that do such thing.

When veterans begin the transition from the military and into college they often are only aware of the education benefit that they are eligible for. Most time veterans don't become aware of additional benefits and resources both locally and state-wide that they are eligible for. Colleges should have a specific orientation program that is set up for incoming veterans. I understand that several colleges don't have that many veterans on their campus and that it would not be cost effective for them to implement this program. However; each institution should at the very least have a designated person on their university who is Veteran Service Officer Qualified to by the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to provide benefit counseling to incoming veterans.

I have created both a veteran compact and best practice guide that I believe should be used by all institutions across Pennsylvania.

In closing, I hope the end goal of this joint hearing is to create a veteran educational package that will create a seamless transition for service members, so that they will excel in the classroom and following graduation. I have submitted all of my recommendations to both committees and I urge you to take them under serious consideration.

This legislation would include a veteran's task force that will address the concerns of veterans, veteran orientation to provide the resources and information to veterans, setting guidelines for transferring credits, availability of information on a veteran specific website, and a veteran resource center.

These components of this legislation will ensure accountability and transparency among colleges in Pennsylvania, thus ensuring efficient educational opportunities for veterans.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to working with each of you, so that Pennsylvania becomes the premier military and veteran supportive state in the Nation. I would happy to answer any questions that you may have.