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**OPENING STATEMENT OF
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STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

BEFORE THE

HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

U.S. SENATE

LEGISLATIVE ROUNDTABLE ON THE TOPIC OF:

**“EXAMINING ACCESS AND SUPPORTS FOR SERVICEMEMBERS AND VETERANS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION”**

MAY 22, 2014



Senator Sanders, Senator Burr and esteemed members of the HELP Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our thoughts on “Examining Access and Supports for Servicemembers and Veterans in Higher Education.” As the premier advocate for student veterans in higher education, it is our privilege to share our on-the-ground perspective with you today.

In 2008, veterans in colleges and universities across the nation came together to form SVA. Using a network of peer-to-peer relationships, and determined to achieve beyond expectations, these veterans applied years of hard-learned lessons in the service to the classroom, and they succeeded.

SVA’s top priorities include improving access to higher education and scaling effective services that empower student veterans to graduate on time, with little-to-no student debt, while preparing student veterans for fulfilling futures. We look forward to this important conversation and hope to share the perspective of student veterans in higher education with you today.

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A Look at the Current Landscape

Setting the Definition of “Success”

To begin, we believe it is important to outline how we define “success” for student veterans. Success is when a student veteran makes well-informed educational decisions, achieves personal academic goals without incurring student loan debt, and secures gainful employment that propels them forward in their career aspirations.

The Importance of Higher Education for Veterans

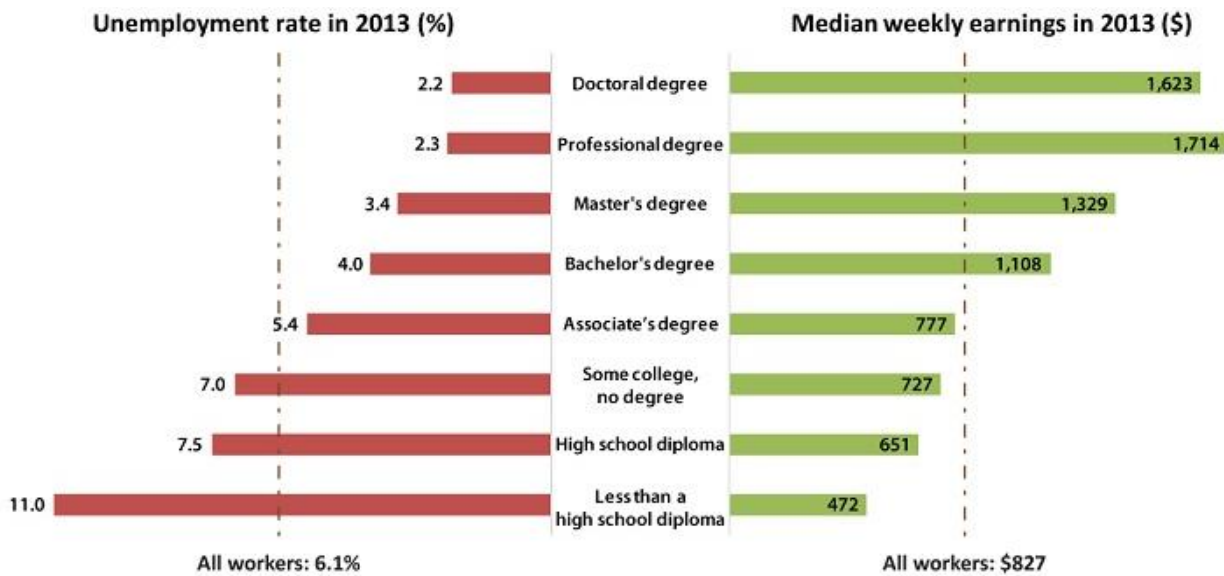
As quintessential nontraditional students, student veterans face a myriad of challenges that most of their peers in the classroom do not; they are generally older, more likely to have families, and often have significant financial responsibilities not shared by most 18 to 22 year olds. However, unlike other nontraditional students, many veterans deal with the added challenge of juggling academics with their transition to higher education. In some cases, temporary withdrawals from school to deploy or train are the norm for many National Guardsmen or Reservists, which often elongates their path to completion or it can put it on hold altogether.

Regardless of the challenges, it is clear that a postsecondary degree or credential is critical for success in today’s global economy. Using data from the last fiscal year, the Bureau of Labor Statistics illustrated the importance of higher education, as seen in Figure 1. For those who achieved an associate’s degree,



unemployment dropped to 5.4% and for those with a bachelor's or greater, that drops even further to 4% and below.¹

Figure 1: Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor

Increasing Access to Higher Education

The Key Components of Consumer Awareness

The decision to pursue a degree in higher education can be daunting for some, but recent developments like the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) GI Bill Comparison Tool have made that process more approachable. We continue to work with the VA to refine this tool so future generations can access critical information to support their decision-making process. We believe this is a good first step, but this tool is not the complete solution. Further consolidation of information on how to make the most of the GI Bill benefit is necessary. This information could potentially help veterans avoid wasting months of GI Bill benefits, which may lead to veterans taking out unnecessary loans.

As veterans graduate across the country, we believe that their debt burden will ultimately be the single largest inhibiting factor to long-term success. There is a common misconception that veterans who go to school on the GI Bill have a "free ticket", but we know this is simply not true.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, "Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment", http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm (Access May 2, 2014)



As an earned benefit, not only is it not free, it may not always cover the full cost of an education. Some student veterans take longer to complete their degree, due to being nontraditional students. In such scenarios, student veterans likely take on additional loans to complete or risk withdrawing short of graduation. While many veterans may not have a clear understanding of how much their education benefits will impact their overall cost of attendance, others face abusive and misleading practices across sectors of education that can result in undue and unnecessary debt burdens.

We remain concerned that some technical and career colleges claim to offer credentials and certifications, but students are not able to complete specific exams due to a lack of proper accreditation, leading to the loss of valuable benefits and years of study. We applaud the bipartisan efforts of the dozens of State Attorneys General working to curb this practice among the worst offenders, and would like to work with this committee and the Congress to improve the laws preventing this despicable practice.

We also find that being able to access a full range of financial data is critical for institutions to be able to effectively counsel their students on their financial status, as well for the individual to have the highest level of consumer awareness. Greater awareness allows student veterans to make informed choices that are align with their personal career aspirations.

A Continued Fight for In-State Tuition

Many student veterans continue to be forced to pay out-of-state tuition costs, despite being “state-less” as a direct result of their military service. It is for this reason that the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and SVA continue to ardently fight for in-state tuition for all veterans at the state and federal levels. Less than half of all states offer in-state tuition for veterans and we continue to press the importance of this issue as a top contributor to education debt.² We call on this group of leaders to continue to work towards ending this unnecessary and unjust punishment for the transient lifestyle in which our military is called to serve.

Supporting Student Veteran Achievement

There are different pieces to the puzzle that must be identified for the student veteran to fully achieve their goals. We refer to these as the “Three Pillars” that contribute to student veteran success, and we encourage this group of leaders and other researchers to focus on them individually as well as collectively:

- Pillar 1—Institutions: Institutional support for student veterans is an important aspect of maintaining a strong pipeline of successful veteran graduates. The ability of the college or university to efficiently process student veteran benefits, transfer credits, or assist in job

² Student Veterans of America, “The Fight for In-State Tuition for Veterans”, <http://www.studentveterans.org/what-we-do/in-state-tuition.html> (Access May 2, 2014)



placement, is of crucial importance to the success of veterans. Flaws at this level, as well as unwelcoming or distrustful academic or professional environments, continue to act as major barriers to the success of some student veterans.

- Pillar 2—Individuals: Establishing an environment for the student veteran to fluidly interact with the institution and the community is a determining factor in whether or not they will achieve their goals. Those who do not feel welcome may not persist in their studies.
- Pillar 3—Communities: An established network across various university offices, academic networks, and career services enables the student veteran to make the transition from the campus to a fulfilling career. This may start with the institution’s outreach to potential employers, but is ultimately the responsibility of all of us to ensure that employers understand the strengths of veterans in the workplace.

When the Three Pillars – institutions, individuals, and communities – are strong, student veteran achievement is high. These pillars set veterans up to succeed in an academic setting and after graduation. With programs like the Department of Veterans Affairs’ ‘VetSuccess On Campus’ (VSOC), and support from postsecondary institutions, veterans are operating in environments where they are prone to excel.

Our Final Thoughts

With the right tools and resources, SVA sees no limit to what student veterans can achieve in higher education and beyond. When empowered with environmental factors for success, the investment America has made in the GI Bill and its veterans becomes an even clearer asset to our economy. By increasing access to higher education and removing barriers to degree-attainment, we can set our veterans up for long-term success.

We thank Senator Sanders, Senator Burr, and our present colleagues for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions on this important topic.