

STATEMENT BY
DR. THOMAS L. LANGDON
DIRECTOR, STATE LIAISON AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES
FOR
MILITARY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY POLICY,
READINESS AND FORCE MANAGEMENT
REGARDING
VOLUNTARY MILITARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND
PENSIONS
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Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the HELP committee, it is an honor to be able to contribute to today's discussion on the Department of Defense's (DoD) Voluntary Education Program. I will highlight the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between DoD and individual institutions of higher learning and the new interagency Postsecondary Education Complaint system.

The Department's Voluntary Education Program provides valuable learning opportunities for Service members, contributing to enhanced readiness of our forces. Education helps our Service members be better Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. Through education and experience, using tuition assistance (TA), we grow leaders, who will sustain our force readiness and continue to make valuable contributions in support of our nation. Allow me to share the profile of typical TA users.

- They work full-time and are part-time students;
- They take an average of three courses per year and less than 1% ever reach the \$4500 annual ceiling;
- The majority complete their education after leaving the military;
- They attend multiple institutions and take about seven years to earn an Associates Degree;
- They do not usually graduate from the school where they took their first course;
- They blend how they attend school between traditional classroom and online (79% take some online courses);
- They do not immediately seek employment upon earning their degree;

- They have breaks in their education due to circumstances such as deployments and transfer of duty station.

For many, the decision to go to school is a complicated one and proper oversight by DoD and the Services, education counseling, and access to important information allows Service members to make informed choices. DoD programs are designed to meet the unique needs of the military off-duty student and, therefore, attract a large percentage of the eligible military population.

Approximately one-third of our Service members enroll in post-secondary courses leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees or certificates each year. Colleges and universities, through an extensive network, deliver classroom instruction at hundreds of military installations around the world and on-line, to an ever increasing percentage of our Service member students. Additionally, Service members can also earn college credits for learning that takes place outside the traditional classroom through College Level Examination Program (CLEP) testing and assessment of their military training.

DoD has increased its assistance over the last year through its Voluntary Education programs and services, ensuring that opportunities for learning continue to exist for Service members throughout their military careers and preparing them for lifelong learning after they leave the military.

Oversight of Military TA –Facilitating Service Member Success

Participation in DoD-supported Voluntary Education requires Service members to visit an education center, either in person or on-line through their Service education portal. There are approximately 200 DoD education sites worldwide, including contingency areas in Afghanistan. At these centers, professional education counselors present Service members with an extensive

menu of options, provide details about specific programs, recommend tailored courses of study that meet Service members' goals, and provide information on education financing, including information on the TA program, grants, loans and other available funding options. Prior to using military TA, Service members must establish an education goal and an education plan. Service members, through their Service's education portal, request TA for a course(s) outlined in their approved education plan, and an education counselor reviews the Service members' education record and education plan prior to granting approval.

Even with the financial support DoD provides, nearly all Service members, and especially those taking graduate level courses, incur out-of-pocket expenses. This gives each student a financial stake in their success. Also, Service members failing to complete or receiving an 'F' in a course must reimburse DoD for the TA received for the course, and Service members' failing to maintain a 2.0 undergraduate or 3.0 graduate grade point average (GPA), must pay for all courses until they raise their GPA sufficiently.

Oversight of Military TA – Ensuring Quality Education Programs

Over the last year, the Department's priority was to finalize implementation of our efforts consistent with Executive Order 13607: Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses and other Family Members. This includes multiple initiatives, such as the launch of a centralized online reporting system, enhancements to the DoD Voluntary Education Partnership Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and development of postsecondary education outcome measures. All of these efforts are part of a robust interagency collaboration among DoD and the Departments of Education, Veterans Affairs, and Justice, along with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Federal Trade Commission. These agencies are working together to enable military students and

their families to make good educational choices using comprehensive information about the available programs and institutions that offer them.

The quality of education provided to our Service members is essential to the Department, and underpinning this effort is DoD's requirement that all post-secondary institutions participating in the TA program, whether they are physically located on our installations or elsewhere, be accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Currently, over 3,200 institutions with more than 4,400 sub-campuses, have signed the DoD MOU. The new MOU was published in the Federal Register on May 15, 2014, as part of Change 2 to Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1322.25, and it requires all participating institutions to adhere to the Principles of Excellence as listed in Executive Order 13607:

- Provides students with an education plan;
- Informs students of the availability and eligibility of Federal financial aid before arranging private student loans;
- Ensures new course or program offerings are approved by the institution's accrediting agency before student enrollment;
- Allows Service members to be readmitted to a program if they are temporarily unable to attend class or have to suspend their studies due to military requirements;
- Provides a refund policy for military students consistent with the refund policy for students using Department of Education Federal student aid (Title IV); and
- Designates a point of contact for academic and financial advising.

DoD is also working on other education initiatives. The interagency effort to identify postsecondary education outcome measures will provide information on available educational

programs to support informed decision-making about educational choices, especially as they relate to Veterans and Service members. The Departments of Defense, Education, and Veterans Affairs have worked together to propose a set of outcome measures to capture important information on students' experiences during school, upon completion of a degree or certificate, and post-graduation, using existing administrative data.

DoD also participates in the interagency Military Credentialing and Licensing Task Force. The President established this forum to identify opportunities for Service members to earn civilian occupational credentials and licenses without the need for additional training. The Interagency Academic Credentialing Workgroup is dedicated to identifying, supporting, and sharing strategies for institutions of higher education to use when evaluating military training and experience in order to award appropriate amounts of academic credit for the skills and knowledge Service members gain through their service. For example, we have developed multiple webinars for the education community to help them better understand the Joint Service Transcript (JST) and the American Education Council (ACE) evaluation process.

The JST provides documentary evidence to colleges and universities of the professional military education, training, and occupation experiences of Service members and veterans. JST is an official transcript tool that validates and documents those courses and occupations for service members and veterans. From November 1, 2014 through April 7, 2014, 4,873 transcripts were requested and sent to colleges and universities.

ACE's Military Evaluations program has reviewed and made college credit recommendations for thousands of military courses since the early 1940s and, in 1974, began the evaluation of military occupational specialties. More than 2,200 higher education institutions recognize the ACE course credit recommendations for granting credit to their military students.

The webinar sessions clarify the review process and the quality measures that are used in determining credit recommendations and increase the awareness, use, and benefit of the JST.

The explanation of both the ACE evaluations and JST will be included in the updated Transition GPS Accessing Higher Education curriculum, which will communicate the transfer of academic credit and military training to transitioning service members. The goal was to update portions of the Education part of the Transition Assistance Program to better educate transitioning Service members on the proper award of academic credit. While some postsecondary institutions have active policies in place to award credit, the ultimate goal of the workgroup is expanding the number of institutions with effective military credit policies.

Finally, the Defense State Liaison activities have been integral to facilitating change at the state level. As of May 15, 2014, 45 states have passed legislation or an executive order requiring their educational institutions to evaluate military training and experience toward the award of academic credit. In addition, 31 states have enacted legislation regarding in-state tuition impacting newly separating Service members.

DoD Oversight of Military TA - Preventing Predatory Practices

DoD has strengthened its policies regarding on-installation access to our Service members. Institutions' access to military installations is allowed only in order to provide education, guidance, and training opportunities, and to participate in education fairs. Marketing firms or companies that own and operate higher-learning institutions do not have access. Institutions must meet the following requirements:

- Have a signed MOU with DoD;
- Be chartered or licensed by the State government in which the services will be rendered;
- Be State-approved for the use of veteran's education benefits;

- Participate in Title IV programs (eligible and participating under Department of Education rules, students are eligible for federal support) ;
- Be accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education; and
- Have an on-base student population of at least 20 military students.

On January 30, 2014, DoD along with agency partners Veterans Affairs, Education, Justice, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the Federal Trade Commission launched the new Postsecondary Education Complaint System (PECS). The online reporting system, part of the Executive Order on Principles of Excellence, is intended to help ensure that students are equipped with comprehensive information to make school and program choices that meet their educational goals. It is designed to empower military students and their families to report negative experiences with educational institutions and provide the federal government the information it needs to identify and address unfair, deceptive and misleading practices.

The initial reaction to the PECS has been overwhelmingly positive. Within 24 hours of launch, the PECS received over 1,740 unique web page views and 37 complaints. As of May 15, 2014, DoD has processed 146 complaints. DoD is committed to working with each educational institution and student to reach a resolution that satisfies both parties. Over 60% of the complaints are regarding DoD or institutional processes or policies as opposed substantiated complaints against a school such as deceptive recruiting and marketing practices. The complaint records and their resolutions are contained within a centralized repository, the Consumer Sentinel Network, making the information accessible by the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Education, all of whom review schools for compliance and program eligibility, as well as the law enforcement agencies that would prosecute any illegal practices. The inter-

agency team is also engaged in establishing Service Member and Veteran Outcome Measures directed by Executive Order 13607 that will assist in ensuring continued quality at both the program and institution level. These measures will attempt to determine performance through metrics such as retention rates, persistence rates, and time-to-degree (or credential) completion.

Conclusion

Service members rely on the DoD Voluntary Education Program to help them become better Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and citizens. During Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, approximately \$540,400,000 taxpayer dollars supported 277,800 Service members who took 827,100 courses and were awarded 55,700 degrees/certificates. This was possible because DoD and the entire federal government are unified when it comes to placing a high value on educational programs that support the professional and personal development and the successful transition of Service members to the civilian workforce. It is an honor and a privilege to work among a team of professionals dedicated to providing our Service members and their families with high-quality educational opportunities in pursuit of their personal and professional goals. The Department of Defense remains committed to effectively delivering voluntary education programs that meet the changing needs of the military. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement.