



OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

Statement by  
Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education and  
Veterans' Education Advisory Committee before the  
Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

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Wednesday, February 25, 2015

The State System commends chairmen Vulakovich and Costa, as well as members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee for holding a hearing to discuss veterans' issues, including what the Commonwealth's public institutions of higher education are doing to embrace military service members and veterans as students and to ensure their success on campus.

With just under 2,400 students who identify themselves and/or are receiving Veterans Administration benefits on campus, inclusive of military affiliates and those who received transferred educational benefits earned under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the State System universities have taken specific actions to provide the requisite services and policies to enable returning veterans to earn their credentials in a supportive, collegial, environment. All have gone beyond those requisites, and have a long history of support for veterans returning to school as well as to current students in the military who volunteered their service on behalf of our commonwealth and nation. In many ways, it is now the universities' duty to selflessly serve returning veterans in a similar way as those veterans selflessly served all of us.

The State System's 14 universities have been working collaboratively and effectively to receive and support military members. In 2012, the State System formed the Veterans Advisory Network. It is organized and led by Dr. Rhonda Luckey, Vice President for Student Affairs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and co-facilitated by me. The Network's mission is—

*The PA State System of Higher Education Veterans Advisory Network exists to advance the recruitment, retention, and graduation of military-affiliated students, at our respective institutions and within the System, by providing opportunities for PA State System of Higher Education colleagues to learn from one another, share resources and best practices, and promote System-wide collaboration, communication, and military friendly policies and practices.*



In conjunction with the Network, Slippery Rock University hosted a two-day “Skills Learned, Respect Earned: Valuing Veterans in Higher Education” conference in late March of last year. The event brought together higher education, business, and government professionals to collaborate and share best practices in making higher education campuses more military supportive. To further increase collaboration, the university will host an on-campus event on March 25, 2015 to allow participants working in health-related positions across the State System’s 14 universities to gain a better appreciation for the unique needs of service members and veterans.

Eleven of the State System universities recently were designated as “Military Friendly School(s)” by Victory Media, a foremost resource service members use in evaluating institutions of higher learning. Several of the universities have received this designation for consecutive years. The Military Friendly title is reserved for those schools that excel at providing military students with the resources needed to succeed both in the classroom and after graduation. Only the top 20 percent of colleges, universities, and trade schools in the country are given this prestigious designation.

State System universities receive and support military members in a variety of ways including on many, if not all, campuses: awarding postsecondary credit to student veterans for military training while serving in the armed forces including the Pennsylvania National Guard; coordinating peer-to-peer mentoring; working to create an alternative status that reflects a student mobilization due to active federal or state duties; connecting veterans to services offered by the VA and in communities; providing career development services; course scheduling priority; and waiving of admissions fees.

These are just two examples of how the universities honor those who serve the nation in all branches of the armed forces. Virtually all of the campuses provide a variety of services to military members, veterans and their families. Many have dedicated student veterans’ centers that serve as “one-stop shops” for those making the transition from military to college life as well as a basis of support, comradery, and information during their tenure at one of our State System universities.

Five State System universities participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program, which allows U.S. colleges to voluntarily enter into an agreement with the Veterans Administration to provide special tuition assistance to military veterans.

All 14 universities provide military veterans with preference in course scheduling, in accordance with recently passed legislation. The universities are also on track toward implementing the July 1, 2015 date for offering in-state tuition to qualified veterans and their dependents regardless of state residency status under the federal Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act.

Below are examples of some of the special programs and services State System universities provide to military members, veterans, their spouses and dependents.

**Bloomsburg University** enrolls more than 200 veterans as students and employs about 100 veterans and service members among its faculty and staff. BU’s Office of Military and Veterans Resources provides resources and services to current and former service members, veterans, family members, ROTC cadets and interested supporters through special events, such as luncheons, guest speakers and fundraisers. The office supports work-study and employs military students, utilizing funding from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

**California University of Pennsylvania** is among the top universities in the nation when it comes to serving the educational needs of military personnel stationed overseas. Cal U also is ranked among the top schools in the nation highly by Military Times EDGE for its commitment to helping military veterans pursue higher education. The university is a GoArmyEd provider of online education for Army personnel and their families. Service members around the world are enrolled in degree programs through Cal U Global Online, where a dedicated military coordinator helps to integrate them into the university's online learning community.

**Clarion University** provides sensitivity and awareness sessions for students, faculty and staff each semester and will open a veterans' student lounge this spring. It also has contracted with the Butler VA to offer Tele-Health counseling services to student veterans. The university's Department of Library Science is partnering with the Library of Congress to conduct interviews for the Veterans History Project. Clarion provides two veteran's certifying officials and veteran clubs on both the Venango and Clarion campuses.

**East Stroudsburg University** officially opened a Student Veterans Center in spring 2013. The center processes all veteran education benefits including Federal Tuition Assistance, the Educational Assistance Program and GI Bill. A Veterans Task Force meets regularly to identify issues that student veterans are experiencing, and the center's website contains up-to-date information about how student veterans can apply for educational benefits and scholarships. The center also hosts a series of weekly meetings for veterans on a variety of topics ranging from employment opportunities to health care.

**Edinboro University** founded its Veterans Success Center in 2012 to better serve returning soldiers as they transition to civilian life and seek a higher education. The center serves as a "one-stop-shop" with expert guidance for all GI Bill programs, including regular visits by a service officer from area veteran organizations to help student veterans file VA claims.

Recently, Edinboro University and the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center formed a partnership to make VA Telehealth Services available to veterans through the university's Ghering Health Center. The university also collaborated with Erie Together and other organizations in 2014 to host a Veterans Portal as a single-point resource for veterans, family members and service providers in the Erie region.

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania's** Veterans Affairs Office assists student veterans and dependents of veterans with their educational benefits. The university also opened its Military Resource Center in January 2014. The center, which is funded through the president's Strategic Initiative program, includes a conference room, a lounge and an area for one-on-one counseling and assistance in completing required paperwork for receiving military benefits.

IUP, which will commission its 2,000th cadet in May, recently was recognized by the publication Military Advanced Education as an "MAE 2015 Top School" for exhibiting best practices in military and veteran education. Schools were evaluated based on categories including military culture, financial aid, flexibility, on-campus support and online support services. The university's ROTC program features a unique partnership with the Journalism Department, in which undergraduate journalism students "embed" as reporters with the ROTC cadets at field training exercises at Camp Dawson, W.Va.

**Kutztown University's** Veterans Services Center serves as a single point-of-contact, providing a place where students can study, relax, have access to computers and printers, meet other veterans and members of the Military Club and receive assistance with their GI Bill and other benefits. Specifically, it offers individual guidance and assistance regarding educational benefits as well as counseling, support and disability services that provide support to students experiencing adjustment challenges and military-related trauma such as PTSD, TBI, and MST.

"Green Zone" training is offered to faculty, staff and interested students throughout the institution to become knowledgeable about issues faced by military-affiliated students and the resources available to assist them. Participants who complete the Green Zone training agree to become battle buddies (partners) to military-affiliated students, helping them to achieve their goal of academic success.

**Lock Haven University** operates a Veterans Group that meets monthly to help meet the needs of veteran students. The university also waives admissions deposit for veterans.

**Mansfield University** also was named a "Top School" for 2015 by Military Advanced Education. The university's Office of Military and Veterans Affairs offers counseling on benefits, career resources and more. The Mansfield Military and Veteran's Organization, formed last year, is open to all students, faculty and staff who have served or are serving in the military. The organization holds regular meetings, is involved in community service projects and has a Facebook group page that allows for the exchange of information and ideas. Two scholarships established through the Mansfield University Foundation over the past two years provide recognition and financial assistance to veterans and active-duty personnel.

**Millersville University's** Student Veteran's Association on campus provides a place for veterans to receive support and assistance in attending and successfully graduating from college. It allows veterans to share their experiences in service with other veterans and provides a house that can be used to host meetings and for a quiet study place. Millersville also participates in the Concurrent Admissions Program with the Army, Army Reserves, and Army National Guard. It is a partnership among the Army Recruiting Command and more than 1,900 participating colleges to mutually advance the goals of lifelong learning and postsecondary education for future soldiers.

**Shippensburg University** opened a veterans' resource center in the Ceddia Union Building in September 2012. The space gives student veterans a dedicated place on campus to meet, study, eat or just hang out. While much of what the university's Veterans' Services Office does focuses on helping students complete all of their necessary government and university paperwork, the office also strives to meet other needs that student veterans have.

"We try to get them more involved in campus life. We try to do things that will be meaningful for them and make them feel more at home," said Robert Smith, veterans' services director.

Much of that work centers on social activities—ways that student veterans can not only connect with each other, but also serve the university and the larger community around it. The office works closely with the Student Veterans of America chapter on campus and the Army ROTC Raider Battalion in its efforts.

**Slippery Rock University** last spring opened its new Student Veterans' Center, providing veterans, veteran-dependents, active duty personnel, reserve and National Guard members and ROTC cadets a place to gather, share information and relax. The center is located in the Smith Student Center.

SRU received a \$54,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for an equine-assisted recreation program, which provides recreational therapy to veterans at the university's Storm Harbor Equestrian Center.

SRU was the first university in the country to participate in the Veterans Administration's Tele-Health system. Working in conjunction with the Butler Veterans Hospital, SRU established space both in the Smith Student Center and the McLachlan Student Health Center that allows veterans to confidentially link to the VA's Telehealth system and Veterans Administration health benefits system online. The program allows for online counseling and other services needed by student-veterans.

Slippery Rock recently teamed with VA Butler, the regional Veterans Administration Hospital, to connect volunteer students and veterans for both lunch and dinner. The events allow the students to hear firsthand from the veterans and to offer friendship and thanks for their service. Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder or addiction issues participate in the Slippery Rock University TRAIL to Wellness program. Veterans are assisted by SRU students majoring in therapeutic recreation.

**West Chester University** serves as the North Atlantic Region office of Troops to Teachers, a federally funded Department of Defense program that helps eligible military personnel transition into careers as K-12 public or charter school teachers. The program provides personalized counseling and referral assistance to all military members, past or present. Troops to Teachers registration is open to all veterans who have served honorably regardless of time in service who have an interest in teaching in qualified schools.

WCU also provides a variety of services through its Veterans Center and the Student Veterans Group, which serves as an open forum for student veterans to come together and discuss issues related to being a veteran, a student and everything that goes in between.

In closing, veterans are a diverse student body, and our universities recognize the unique needs of this student population. They have and will continue to create campus environments that are supportive of their needs and recognize their contributions to society. As service members return home and decide to obtain their higher education, the State System is fully committed to ensuring their academic success. Thank you.

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Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education is the largest provider of higher education in the Commonwealth, with about 110,000 students. The 14 State System universities offer degree and certificate programs in more than 120 areas of study.

The universities are Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania. The universities also operate branch campuses in Oil City (Clarion), Freeport and Punxsutawney (IUP) and Clearfield (Lock Haven), and offer classes and programs at several regional centers, including the Dixon University Center in Harrisburg and in Center City in Philadelphia.