

Joint Senate VAEP & Education Committee Hearing
Veterans Education
20 Jun / 0900

Brigadier General (PA) Michael Gould
Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs

Senator Baker, Senator Piccola and esteemed Committee Members,

Thank you for hosting this important session for our student veterans, and allowing me to make a few comments today. First please allow me to publically and personally praise the incredible work and dedication of one of the Commonwealth's student veterans, Joshua Lang, for continuing to serve his country by serving his fellow student veterans. Without Josh's efforts, Pennsylvania would be unable to boast its better-than-average rating regarding student veteran challenges. Thank you, Josh.

Less than a month ago, I attended the Pennsylvania Student Veterans of America (SVA) second annual conference hosted by Penn State. Several of the topics to be discussed today were highlighted at that event. Although much has been done to improve and address the needs of our Pennsylvania Veterans on our campuses, much still needs to be done. So I applaud you for this endeavor.

More than \$17.2 billion dollars have been spent thus far on the post-911 GI bill and education of our heroes; more than 7,000 claims per day are filed for these benefits with The US Department of Veterans Affairs. Approximately 700,000 Veterans have taken advantage of this benefit and, unfortunately, 20% still require additional loans to accomplish their education goals.

A myriad of important topics will be covered here today and I just want to highlight a couple areas of interest and opportunities for improvement:

First, every college and university enrolling Veterans must consider a "life after the war" elective – a reflection on learning and experiences that these Veterans may share with their peers and their faculty - a "Veterans only" course. A few institutions across America have implemented this concept with great success, and I encourage all of our Pennsylvania institutions to do the same.

Second, every campus must have an active, effective veteran resource center. As I told the attendees of the SVA conference, you are Veterans first, then students. Veterans bring a unique set of experiences, challenges, and entitlements. County Directors of Veterans Affairs, community-based Veteran Service Organizations, state and federal Veterans Affairs Specialists must be made available to these Veterans. Additionally, every student veteran must reach out to and work with an accredited Veteran Service Officer to ensure they get every health care benefit and compensation-related benefit they deserve.

Third, university leadership should implement faculty development programs that enlighten their staff and faculty on the differences between a student veteran and a student fresh out of high school. The life experiences of a Veteran, especially a recently returning combat veteran, are drastically different from the average student. They should understand, embrace, and leverage these differences, not be intimidated by them.

Fourth, just as our federal government counterparts are doing at a national level, we must take on the review and publication of what are veteran friendly college programs. US Senator Pat Murray of Washington recently introduced Senate Bill 2241, “The GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act of 2012”, in an effort to measure, share, and expose the quality of education and services our student veterans are receiving.

The “Yellow Ribbon” program allows colleges and universities to provide funding above that which is the maximum amount provided by the GI bill. If you look at the list of schools in Pennsylvania, you’ll see a range of additional funding from \$99,999 -- some schools make up the entire difference for our Veterans and some give small grants. Why is there a disparity? To the schools that provide so much in support to our Veterans – thank you; I applaud you for coming on board so quickly to say, “We’ll pick up the rest for our heroes”. This is the definition of “veteran friendly” school. It’s no coincidence that many of these institutions have active veteran support organizations on campus.

In closing, a lifelong mentor of mine once told me, “There’s nothing more important than educating our children...they will be healthier, they will prosper, they will embrace a higher level of professional and personal ethics”. Ladies and gentlemen, these student veterans once wrote us a blank check saying, “cash this if you need to... I’m willing to pay the ultimate price to keep you free.” They now deserve that same commitment from us as we enable them to realize their dreams.

Thank you very much.

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