

## Joint Senate VAEP & Education Hearing, June 20<sup>th</sup> 2012

Senator Baker, Senator Piccola, and esteemed committee members,

Thank you for convening this hearing to address the methods colleges and universities in Pennsylvania can employ to welcome and support student veterans. We are honored that you have invited the University of Pittsburgh to speak on this issue. We would like to take this time to discuss the programs and services the University offers to student veterans, present an overview of the veterans on our campus, provide a student profile, and submit recommendations to the committee.

In 2009, recognizing that veterans would soon be returning to college and universities in greater numbers, the University of Pittsburgh established the Office of Veterans Services. The Office's mission is to facilitate the transition of veterans from military to University life, support their ongoing academic success, and assist veterans, guardsmen, reservists, and dependents in receiving their military education benefits. The Office has four full time staff members, including a Director, Outreach Coordinator, Benefits Coordinator and a Program Assistant. The Office and the University as a whole have been recognized as military friendly by national publications such as *Military Advanced Education*, and *GI Jobs*.

To help prospective students navigate through the admissions process, the Office of Veterans Services offers preadmission counseling sessions. The outreach coordinator meets with Veterans and dependents one-on-one to discuss the University application process, the prospective student's educational interests, and information on obtaining GI Bill benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs. In addition, the University waives application fees for veteran students. In terms of financial support, the University participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program, as well as provides its own Pitt Grant to out-of-state veteran students. While the Yellow Ribbon program provides veteran students 100% educational benefit eligibility from the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the Pitt Grant assists out-of-state veteran students with less than 100% benefit eligibility. Students with 70-90% eligibility can receive a grant paying the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition rates. Student veterans eligible for 40 to 60% of the GI Bill educational benefit would also receive the grant covering the difference in costs between in-state and out-of-state tuition. These students, however, would still be responsible for any difference between their VA payment and any remaining tuition costs at the in-state rate. Lastly, the University provides an involuntary resignation process for veterans called to active duty, offers a financial aid counselor to answer questions, and has a fund to support wounded student veterans or family members of a wounded veteran.

The Office of Veteran Services provides numerous programs to support the academic and career success of veteran students. An orientation program, as well as a first term success course is offered to help veterans transition into academic life. In addition, ROTC cadets provide tutoring to students, and the Boots to Business career recruitment program is offered regularly. The Office communicates with student veterans about these programs through its monthly newsletter, Facebook and Twitter accounts. In addition, the Office works with and promotes the activities of the University's chapter of the Student Veterans Association. Lastly, the Office also sponsors events such as a talk by Colonel Edward Shames, an original member of the 'Band of Brothers' and the National Roll Call, where students, faculty and staff honored service members who lost their lives in combat operations since September 11, 2001.

Since 2009, total veteran and dependent student enrollment at the University of Pittsburgh has increased from 251 students to 536 students in fall 2011. Veteran students spent an average of 5 years as active duty service members prior to enrollment at the University. Approximately 68% of all veterans attending Pitt have been deployed to a combat zone with almost 25% having served multiple deployments.

Veteran and dependent students are enrolled in every school at the University. During the 2011 fall term, approximately 80% of these students were pursuing undergraduate degrees, with the remaining 20% in graduate programs. Approximately 30% of veteran students are pursuing degrees at a branch campus. The majority of undergraduate students were enrolled in the College of General Studies, the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, or the Swanson School of Engineering. The majority of graduate students were enrolled in the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, School of Law, School of Health and Rehabilitation Science or the Swanson School of Engineering.

While there are many stories of veteran success at the University of Pittsburgh, we would like to highlight one of our recent graduates. Peter Lahoda was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He enlisted in the Army in 2005 as an Infantryman and saw his first deployment to Iraq from 2006 to 2008. In 2008, after multiple combat post assignments, Pete returned to the Pittsburgh area and sought to use his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to complete his education. When Pete inquired about enrolling in the Swanson School of Engineering at the University, he learned about the work-study position in the Office of Veteran Services. Pete applied and was offered a position assisting other veterans who were applying for their education benefits. After being enrolled as a full time student for one year in the Swanson School of Engineering, Pete was mobilized for a second fifteen month deployment, and was able to withdraw expeditiously from his classes.

Returning to the University in the fall of 2010, Pete continued both his studies in Electrical Engineering and his work-study employment. Pete graduated in 2011 with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering and a certificate in Nuclear Engineering. By utilizing the career and military-to-civilian employment workshops offered through the Office of Veterans Services, Pete secured a position with PKMJ Technical Services. As a successful alumnus, Pete gives back to his alma mater and fellow veterans by conducting workshops through the Office of Veterans Services. Representing PKMJ, Pete teaches veterans valuable job-searching techniques, informs them about internship opportunities, and collects resumes for full time employment with PKMJ. As a direct result of these workshops, PKMJ hired Aaron Mroczkowski, another recent veteran student and graduate of Pitt.

Finally, we would like to make the following recommendations on how to best support veteran and dependent students success in higher education:

- Establish an Office of Veterans Services that employs and trains certifying officials to work specifically with the veteran population.
- Hire an outreach coordinator to conduct pre-admissions appointments and instruct veterans and dependents on how to apply to the University and use their GI Bill benefits.
- Provide academic support through workshops and career opportunities.
- Employ career counselors that can translate military experience to civilian terminology.
- Provide psychological counselors that recognize the signs and treat veterans with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.
- Establish a veterans' organization on campus.
- Offer university-wide faculty and staff sensitivity training.
- Set aside a space on campus for a veterans lounge.

Thank you,

Cristina Ruggiero, Interim Associate Dean College of General Studies and Acting Director of Office of Veterans Services, University of Pittsburgh