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Committee on Military Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security

ESTABLISHING A CAMPUS COMPACT FOR STUDENT VETERANS AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

Issue Description

Florida has both a large population of resident veterans and a large number of returning veterans. With so many veterans living in Florida and more returning home from the military conflicts, there is a need to study the feasibility of the need to improve on-campus services at higher education institutions for the veterans of Florida.

The State of Maryland has established a Campus Compact for Student Veterans with 21 of its community colleges and four-year public universities to improve on-campus services for veterans. The Compact calls on Maryland's higher education community to do more for the men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces and seeks to ensure educational success of veterans who choose to return to a Maryland school through greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges student veterans face.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs is testing a program called "VetSuccess on Campus" at eight colleges, including the University of South Florida (USF), offering personalized assistance to every veteran on campus. USF was the first college to get a full-time VA-funded VetSuccess representative on campus. It hopes to add more in 2012.

Such programs may provide models of opportunities in which higher education institutions in Florida can create an easier transition of veterans from combat to successfully complete their education and re-integrate into the society as productive citizens.

Background

Florida has the third largest population of veterans in the nation, with over 1.7 million veterans. During the first week of December 2010, Florida had over 2,400 members of the 53rd Infantry Combat Team return home from Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn. There are currently 868 members of Florida's military serving in action in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other far flung places throughout the globe. With so many veterans living in Florida and more returning home from military conflicts, there is a need to improve on-campus services at higher education institutions for the veterans of Florida.

It is likely there will be an increasing number of veterans going to postsecondary schools, and likely that many of those returning to or serving in Florida¹ will go to school here. There are at least three reasons for this: enhanced federal funding for education, the significance of educational benefits as a primary motivation for joining the military,² and the significance of location of the school in selecting a postsecondary school³.

¹ Florida is also home to 20 military bases and 58,000 active duty military members.

² A recent report that examined the motivation to join the service stated that the promise of educational benefits was a primary motivator. Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students, available at <http://www.auburn.edu/~diramdc/ch1.pdf> (retrieved August 3, 2011), p. 5

³ According to a 2009 study by the American Council of Education, location of the school was the most important reason for choosing a particular educational institution for military undergraduates. Military Service and Veterans in Higher Education: What the New GI Bill May Mean for Postsecondary Institutions available at <http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CPA/Publications/MilService.errata.pdf> (retrieved July 29, 2011), p. 5

The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides significantly more benefits than either the Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty or the Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides financial support for education and housing to individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate service on or after September 11, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days. A servicemember must have received an honorable discharge to be eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

As of August 1, 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is effective for training. Approved training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill includes graduate and undergraduate degrees, and vocational/technical training. All training programs must be offered by an institution of higher learning (IHL) and approved for GI Bill benefits. Additionally, tutorial assistance, and licensing and certification test reimbursement are approved under the Post- 9/11 GI Bill.

The Post 9-11 GI Bill will pay eligible individuals:

- Full tuition and fees directly to the school for all public school in-state students. For those attending private or foreign schools tuition and fees are capped at \$17,500 per academic year.
- A monthly housing allowance (MHA) based on the Basic Allowance for Housing for an E-5 with dependents at the location of the school. For those enrolled solely in distance learning the housing allowance payable is equal to ½ the national average BAH for an E-5 with dependents (\$673.50 for the 2011 academic year). For those attending foreign schools (schools without a main campus in the U.S.) the BAH rate is fixed at \$1,347.00 for the 2011 academic year. Active duty students & their spouses cannot receive the MHA.
- An annual books & supplies stipend of \$1,000 paid proportionately based on enrollment.

This benefit provides up to 36 months of education benefits, generally benefits are payable for 15 years following release from active duty. The Post-9/11 GI Bill also offers some service members the opportunity to transfer their GI Bill to dependents.⁴

Under the Yellow Ribbon Program, initially, the Post-9/11 GI Bill paid up to the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition and fees. Effective August 1, 2011 the Post-9/11 GI Bill will pay:

- All public school in-state tuition and fees or
- Up to \$17,500 per academic year for a private school.

Tuition and fees may exceed these amounts for servicemembers attending a private school or are attending a public school as a nonresident student.

Institutions of Higher Learning (Degree Granting Institutions) may elect to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program to make additional funds available (veteran) for your education programs without an additional charge to the GI Bill entitlement. Institutions that voluntarily enter into a Yellow Ribbon Agreement with VA choose the amount of tuition and fees that will be contributed. VA will match that amount and issue payment directly to the institution.

Only veterans entitled to the maximum benefit rate (based on service requirements) or their designated transferees may receive this funding. Active duty servicemembers and their spouses are not eligible for this program (child transferees of active duty servicemembers may be eligible if the servicemember is qualified at the 100% rate).

Schools that intend to participate in the Yellow Ribbon program establish application procedures for eligible students. The school will determine the maximum number of students that may participate in the program and the percent of tuition that will be contributed. VA is currently accepting agreements from institutions for participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program.

To receive benefits under the Yellow Ribbon Program, the servicemember:

- Must be eligible for the maximum benefit rate under the Post-9/11 GI Bill;
- Must not be on active duty or a spouse transferee of an active duty member

To receive benefits under the Yellow Ribbon Program, the servicemember's school:

- Must agree to participate in the Yellow Program;

⁴ http://www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/post_911_gibill/index.html (retrieved July 29, 2011)

- Must have not offered Yellow Ribbon to more than the maximum number of individuals stated in their participation agreement;
- Must certify a servicemember's enrollment to VA, including Yellow Ribbon program information.⁵

In November 2010, the RAND Corporation performed a study entitled *Service Members in School Military Veterans' Experiences Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Pursuing Postsecondary Education* ("RAND Study"). The RAND study dealt with the experience of military veterans and their families using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and pursuing education in colleges and universities. It involved the collection of focus group data from student veterans and other GI Bill beneficiaries—including active-duty service members and eligible dependents—on four or five campuses in each of three states that were home to large numbers of veterans: Arizona, Ohio, and Virginia.⁶

The study sought to evaluate the differences in two-year and four-year, public and private, and for profit and nonprofit institutions in each state by using focus groups. Additionally, to broaden the pool of GI Bill eligible students, the RAND Study also conducted an online geographically diverse survey of 564 current and former service members and dependents. Part of their findings showed that, for both the survey group and the focus group participants, using the Post-9/11 GI Bill provided some positive benefits and presented some challenges.

Benefits and Positive Features from using the Post-9/11 GI Bill

- Living Allowance is a Major Draw of the New GI Bill
"In fact, across all institution types, the living allowance was cited as the Post-9/11 GI Bill's most important improvement over the MGIB."⁷
- The Yellow Ribbon Program Expands But May Not Drive Institutional Choices
"Focus group participants at not only private but also public institutions said they appreciated the existence of the Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program."⁸
- Other GI Bill Features Are Also Popular
 - The book stipend for each term (it pays up to \$1,000 per year for students taking at least 24 credit hours per year).⁹
 - Tuition is paid directly to the institution (no out of pocket expenses for the students).¹⁰
- Students appreciated that they no longer had to "call the VA or use the online Web Automated Verification of Enrollment (WAVE) system to confirm their enrollment each month."¹¹

Challenges Presented from the Early Implementation of the New Post-9/11 GI Bill

- Keeping Track of GI Bill Benefits is a Widespread Challenge
"Students mentioned in all 13 focus groups the difficulty of keeping track of their Post-9/11 GI Bill payments."¹²
- Late Payments Have Caused Financial Hardships for Some
"Many focus group participants reported that their Post-9/11 payments were delayed by several months in the first semester of Post-9/11 GI Bill implementation."¹³
- Late Payments Affected Enrollment Status at Some Public Institutions
"In September 2009, the VA had instructed institutions not to penalize students for late Post-9/11 GI Bill tuition payments. However, focus group participants reported that mistakes were sometimes made."¹⁴

⁵ http://www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/post_911_gibill/yellow_ribbon_program.html (retrieved July 29, 2011)

⁶ *Service Members in School Military Veterans' Experiences Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Pursuing Postsecondary Education*, available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1083.pdf (retrieved July 29, 2011), p. 19

⁷ *Id.*, 17-18.

⁸ *Id.*, 18.

⁹ *Id.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 19-20.

¹¹ *Id.*, 20.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*, 21.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 23

- Overpayments Presented an Additional Challenge
“As the VA worked to keep up with education benefit claims, errors in the form of overpayments sometimes occurred. Such overpayments may have been, in some cases, exacerbated by institutions’ confusion with the new Post-9/11 rules.”¹⁵
- Course Enrollment Barriers May Undermine Efficient Use of GI Bill Benefits
Across all institution types, in nearly half of the focus groups there was a challenge to gain access to the relevant courses.¹⁶
- Book Stipends Are Not Available to Spouses and May Be Perceived as Small
Although the children of service members receive the book stipend, spouses do not receive a book allowance or a housing allowance. The book stipend, paid once per term and is pro-rated based on course load (24 credits per year is considered a full course load) is \$1,000.¹⁷
- Confusion About Whether to Switch to the New GI Bill
Some 38 percent of the survey participants said that understanding their eligibility was a moderate or major challenge. The confusion with the Post-9/11 GI Bill by members of the focus group caused them not to change from the MGIB because of the “horror stories” they heard from their peers about delayed payments. “Another reason they gave was the 12 months of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits they would be entitled to after exhausting their MGIB benefits, bringing their total GI Bill benefits to 48 rather than 36 months.”¹⁸
- Tuition Rates and Yellow Ribbon Terms Vary Among States
“With regard to Yellow Ribbon Program benefits, one focus group participant, one campus administrator, and two national advocates we talked with also raised another point of concern: namely the discrepancies in the Post-9/11 GI Bill’s tuition benefits among the states. These discrepancies result from the fact that maximum in-state tuition and fees vary enormously from state to state.”¹⁹
- Active Guard Reservists Do Not Have Access to Post-9/11 Bill Benefits unlike traditional Reservists or Guardsmen, who may be periodically deployed overseas, AGRs work full time as service members for the National Guard to protect the homeland but are not currently entitled to benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.”²⁰

Findings and/or Conclusions

A. Transitional Issues

Veterans making the transition from the military to postsecondary education can experience challenges additional to those experienced by traditional students. In 2009, the American Council of Education performed a study to determine what the Post-9/11 GI Bill may mean for post secondary institutions where military service members and veterans sought to attend these institutions. The goal of the study was twofold: to compare and summarize earlier GI Bills with the Post-9/11 GI Bill; and to describe participation and experiences of the military servicemembers and veterans at institutions of higher learning.²¹ The study showed that the percentage of veterans who were aged 39 or younger was growing Post-9/11,²² the number of female veterans was increasing,²³ and as of 2000, about three-fourths of veterans were married, 90 percent had been married at some point,²⁴ most chose public postsecondary institutions,²⁵ they were likely to attend full time/full year,²⁶ and they were financially independent from their parents.²⁷

¹⁵ *Id.*, 26

¹⁶ *Id.*, 24.

¹⁷ *Id.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 25-26.

¹⁹ *Id.*, 26.

²⁰ *Id.*, 27.

²¹ Military Service and Veterans in Higher Education: What the New GI Bill May Mean for Postsecondary Institutions, available at <http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CPA/Publications/MilService.errata.pdf> (retrieved July 29, 2011)

²² *Id.*, 5.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*, 6.

²⁵ *Id.*, 10.

²⁶ *Id.*, 12.

²⁷ *Id.*

The final section of the study was an encapsulation of issues faced by military undergraduates. Some of the issues faced by military undergraduates are similar to those of other undergraduates and there are some that are specific to military undergraduates, such as: balancing family responsibilities; psychological and or physical health issues; cultural barriers; college bureaucracy; and transfers of college credits from the military.

Considering some 90 percent of veterans that are married or have been married at some point in their lives, a major issue facing military undergraduates is balancing family life. “Although the more generous benefits offered under the new GI Bill may reduce veterans’ need to work while enrolled, many military undergraduates still must balance family responsibilities with school. These responsibilities and demands on time make attending college difficult for undergraduate veterans.”²⁸

Another major issue facing military undergraduates is health related. “The transition to life after military service also can make attending college difficult for undergraduate veterans. They may be experiencing psychological and/or physical post-war trauma, readjusting to personal relationships, and adapting to a new lifestyle.”²⁹

After concerns of family responsibilities and health issues were dealt with, military undergraduates also had to deal with cultural issues. “Military undergraduates are not just adjusting to the transition from military to civilian life; they also are making a transition to college life, one that proves challenging for many students. Both military undergraduates and other nontraditional students can find it difficult to adjust after being out of the classroom for a significant period of time, and military undergraduates also may encounter additional cultural barriers in adjusting to campus life. Military and nonmilitary students’ perspective also differ, and sometimes nonmilitary students ask inappropriate questions of their military classmates (‘whether I killed somebody over there or not.’).”³⁰

As always, when dealing with large institutions, military undergraduates had to deal with the college and federal veterans’ bureaucracies. “Military undergraduates also sometimes have difficulty in their relations with college faculty, particularly when faculty disrupt their efforts at anonymity and unveil their military experience in class. Faculty members also may criticize the military and its personnel in the course of lectures, which may make military undergraduates, feel unwelcome.”³¹ Military undergraduates also can encounter bureaucratic obstacles at both the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the postsecondary institutions they attend. Military undergraduates have had difficulty receiving timely reimbursements for their educational expenses.”³²

“The new GI Bill’s direct payments to postsecondary institutions may ameliorate this problem for military undergraduates, but other bureaucratic barriers may remain, and new ones may be added as institutions and the VA adjusts to implementing a new program. Several studies have noted that information about veterans’ education benefits is not conveyed clearly to past and present military service members.”³³

“Staff at postsecondary institutions sometimes is not well versed in the details of veterans’ education benefits, which may cause additional problems for military students. School officials who do try to obtain information from the VA to help military undergraduates have reported that VA personnel often are not responsive or knowledgeable.”³⁴

Some military training and coursework is on a level that should be transferrable to a college, however, this is not easily done. “A final bureaucratic difficulty reported by military undergraduates is transferring credits between institutions and receiving college credits for military experience. Institutions could help military undergraduates earn their degrees more quickly and efficiently if they publicized that students can earn college credits for military training and clarified procedures for receiving and transferring credits.”³⁵

²⁸ *Id.*, 17.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*, 18.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*, 18-19.

³⁴ *Id.*, 19.

³⁵ *Id.*

The underlying focus of this report is to show best practices for military members and veterans to make the successful transition from combat to the college classrooms. Another report, *Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students* (“Transitions Study”) provides additional information on this topic.³⁶ “The purpose of (this) study was to investigate how combat veterans who become college students make the transition to campus life, in order to identify how administrators can acknowledge and support them.”³⁷ From the Transitions Study, there are a number of findings by researchers and concerns raised by the veterans, themselves, that are important to be mentioned.

“The focus of our study was the transition that combat veterans make when they become college students. For many with whom we spoke, this was the most difficult transition of all. The Veterans Administration, which handles educational and medical benefits, is not an easy bureaucracy to understand, although some negotiated it well. Not all campuses have functioning programs in place to assist veterans who have become students. Then there were the challenges of fitting in, of just being a student.”³⁸

Speaking of fitting in after returning from combat, the Transitions Study offered a truly instructive insight on these concerns in the words of a returning veteran who was impacted by this process.

It would be a great help not to be just thrown into college. All the paperwork and whatnot I have to go through, they could offer a little more help as far as that and other veteran’s programs. I’m probably eligible for things I’m not aware of. And I have nobody here to go and talk to [to] find out about [them]. I’d like to see them actually have a Veteran’s Department here. Because when I walked in, they just tossed a piece of paper at me and said, “Oh, here, fill this out.” That does not help.
[Regular Army serviceperson]³⁹

While the military does offer briefings to those transitioning out of combat, the Transitions Study showed that a number of veterans are more concerned with just getting home to their families. “At the end of deployments, the military provides opportunities as part of the activities of processing out of the combat zone. A National Guard member spoke of ‘tons’ of debriefing sessions in Iraq, Kuwait, and then stateside. He noted that for most, ‘80 percent did not apply... You get in the habit of tuning it out since there is so much that does not apply. They kind of implied to us that if you have problems, you’re going to stay longer; nobody wanted to stay longer.’”⁴⁰

Many of those military veterans, in the survey, spoke of some of the problems they had with the Veterans’ Administration. “The upcoming role of the Veterans Administration (VA) in the post-deployment lives of soldiers was outlined during their debriefing sessions that apparently did not hold the attention of those who had just left combat zones and who very much wanted to get home. Some of the problems with the VA ‘concerned the payment of educational benefits. An Air Force veteran complained, ‘It took eight or more weeks to receive benefits.’ In the meantime, he had to come up with out-of-pocket funds for tuition and related college costs. His complaint was echoed by others.”⁴¹

There is also a difference in the quality of transitioning services received by members of the military. “Members of the National Guard likely fared better than other servicepersons because each National Guard unit has an educational officer who can help sort out benefit issues. One example of this disparity involves transcripts of military training from the Army/American Council on Education Registry Transcript System. We spoke with several veterans who did not know that such a record existed, how a copy of the transcript could be obtained, or whether their college offered credit for military training. Generally, National Guard members had this information.”⁴²

³⁶ *Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students*, <http://www.auburn.edu/~diramdc/ch1.pdf> (retrieved August 3, 2011).

³⁷ *Id.*, 5.

³⁸ *Id.*, 8.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*, 9.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

Although postsecondary institutions offered services to returning veterans, the Transitions Study showed that all campuses were not equal in the quality of services they provided. “Campuses usually have a designated person to administer benefit programs for veterans. On one of the campuses represented in our study, students had established close working relationships with staff in the veterans’ service office, which provided connections for students beyond the processing of educational benefits. In one of the other situations, the program director was newly appointed and received mixed reviews. On the third campus, the veterans’ services office received only criticisms; veterans from that campus were unaware of any services available to them through the office.”⁴³

“We heard about an exceptional level of service provided by veterans’ services office from a veteran who had transferred from another campus to one that was included in our survey. When his unit was deployed, staff from the veterans’ services office handled the withdrawals from classes, dealt with financial aid issues, and kept in contact with the soldiers while they were deployed by e-mailing campus news updates. When the deployment was over, the office initiated re-entry and benefits paperwork and assisted with registration for classes.”⁴⁴

Returning Veterans also gave their definition of “veteran-friendly campuses” in the Transitions Study. “The students we spoke with mentioned ‘veteran-friendly campuses’, and while that term was difficult to define, we came to understand that veterans used it to refer to campuses where programs and people were in place to assist with the transitions between college and the military. These campuses...have made an active commitment to the success of veteran students.”⁴⁵

The bottom line in the Transitions Study was that for all veterans returning from combat, a major adjustment was required. “Even for those who had attended college prior to being deployed, there was an adjustment upon their return. A major aspect of the adjustment was ‘relearning study skills.’ After having been away from school and formal classroom instruction, re-entry was difficult. Several students mentioned the need for an orientation to college programs just for veterans. While some adjustment issues could be attributed to being away from school for an extended period of time, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was also a factor.”⁴⁶ Because of PTSD, some of the students reported that they had very short patience and attention spans.

One of the students “mentioned that when he returned from a year of driving supply trucks between Kuwait and Iraq, he could not sleep at night. Several of the veterans talked about anger and stress as a carryover from their time in combat. These memories of war, of being on constant alert, and of being afraid remained close to the surface and were, for some, difficult to manage.”⁴⁷

The Transitions Study found that a positive aspect of listening to the returning veterans is that campuses learned the importance of a mentoring program (i.e., veteran-to-veteran). “Not surprisingly, participants offered suggestions about what campuses could do to assist veterans in their transition to college. Almost every participant spoke about efforts to identify veterans on campus and about being dependent for support on others who have had similar experiences.”⁴⁸

Probably the greatest transition mentioned in the Transitions Study was for veterans as they struggled to adapt to a new way of life—from military to civilian. “Study participants described the structured life of the military and how difficult it was to move from a strictly defined structure to a loosely configured campus where there was no chain of command from which to get answers.”⁴⁹

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*, 9-10.

⁴⁵ *Id.*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*, 11.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, 12.

B. Efforts to Address the Transitional Issues

1. The Maryland Compact

To address some of these transitional issues, the State of Maryland has established a Campus Compact for Student Veterans with 21 of its community colleges and four-year public universities to improve on-campus services for veterans. It calls on Maryland's higher education community to do more for the men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. It also seeks to ensure educational success of veterans who choose to return to a Maryland school through greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges student veterans face.

In January of 2011, the Lieutenant Governor of Maryland, Anthony Brown, signed the Maryland Campus Compact for Student Veterans Memorandum of Understanding between the State and Maryland Institutions of Higher Education ("the Maryland Compact"). The Maryland Compact was also signed by 21 community college and public four-year institutions' presidents. The Maryland Compact grew out of the need for the postsecondary institutions to provide greater assistance to members of the military, who faced unique challenges, as they sought to make the transition from the military to institutions of higher learning in Maryland.

The Maryland Compact sets out the significant basis for its necessity by addressing the number and need of returning veterans.

In 2010 there were over 470,000 Veterans residing in Maryland accounting for over 8% of the State's total population. Of these, more than 22,000 have recently returned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and thousands more are expected as these conflicts continue. Veterans need our support to ensure their successful reintegration into civilian life, including in higher education. This compact seeks to ensure the educational success of Veterans who attend Maryland schools by promoting opportunities for colleges and universities to enhance their awareness and understanding of the reintegration needs of our Veterans. The compact also encourages the dissemination of recognized best practices in the academic and support services provided to Veterans.⁵⁰

The Maryland Compact seeks to develop veteran-friendly campuses throughout the state. "A number of Maryland colleges and universities have developed inclusive campuses where student Veterans feel welcome and quickly become an integral part of campus life. Many of these schools have also designed very successful academic transition programs and support services to further ensure Veteran success. One of the goals of this compact is to facilitate the sharing of these best practices among all of our public and private institutions with a hope that we can make higher education in Maryland truly 'Veteran Friendly' in both spirit and practice."⁵¹

Fundamentally, the purpose of the Compact is "to ensure the educational success of our returning Veterans, including their recruitment, successful transition into higher education, retention, and eventual graduation."⁵²

The Maryland Compact established best practices for postsecondary institutions seeking to become veteran friendly campuses. Those best practices require the institutions of higher learning, within their available resources, to improve the lives of veterans on campuses in six major areas:⁵³

1. **Awareness.** The goal is to insure that the entire organization of the higher education institution recognize the challenges for veterans' reintegration and provide further training to their personnel to improve their awareness of these challenges presented by veteran students.
2. **Coordination.** Provide effective communication to the institutions' staff and veteran students and coordinate those services that will lead to their success.

⁵⁰ Maryland Campus Compact for Student Veterans, Memorandum of Understanding between the State of Maryland Institutions of Higher Education, Signed by Maryland Lt. Governor Anthony Brown and the presidents of 21 Maryland institutions of higher learning, January 31, 2011, p.1

⁵¹ *Id.*, 1-2.

⁵² *Id.*, 2.

⁵³ *Id.*, 2-3.

3. **Designated “One Door”** “Provide a “one door” system so that student Veterans are able to connect to their educational and support needs through the establishment of a Veterans Office or designated staff person responsible for such coordination.”
4. **Behavioral Health** “Assist veterans needing behavioral health counseling and support resources through services provided on campus or through referral to appropriate agencies. As a counterpart, ensure that faculty and staff are well informed about post-traumatic stress symptoms, traumatic brain injury, and other behavioral health and relationship issues that are challenges for many returning veterans.”
5. **Financial Aid and GI Bill Support** “Veterans receiving GI Bill benefits should be viewed as a unique population by the financial aid office. In order to avoid barriers to success, particular care should be taken to ensure that veterans who have their benefits certified do not experience hardship and can continue their studies even if their G.I. Bill payments are late.”
6. **Peer Support** “Promote and support student Veteran groups as an opportunity for these students to interact with fellow Veterans, while still participating in campus life.”

2. Higher Education Initiative in Minnesota

In reviewing the study, *A Statewide Approach to Creating Veteran-Friendly Campuses* (“Statewide Veteran-Friendly Campuses”), staff identified the best practices for veteran-friendly campuses regarding the actions by the Minnesota Legislature. “There are no active-duty military installations in Minnesota. However, the Defense manpower Data Center...reported that a higher percentage than the national average per state of Minnesota Army, Air Guard, and Army Reserve soldiers have been deployed into combat areas since September 11, 2001.”⁵⁴

In 2006, the Minnesota state legislature enacted higher education initiatives, including the appropriation of \$600,000 to carry out the mandates of Minnesota Statute 197.585, the Higher Education Veterans Assistance Program. The statute mandates “central liaison staff and campus veterans’ assistance officers to provide information and assistance to veterans regarding the availability of state, federal, local and private resources.” The legislation also stated that “each campus of the University of Minnesota and each institution within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System shall provide, and each private college and university is encouraged to provide, adequate space for a veterans’ service office.”⁵⁵

In addition the legislation required that the “Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System must recognize coursework and award educational credits for a veteran’s military training and service, if the course or training meets the standards of the American Council of Education or equivalent.”⁵⁶

Another piece of legislation, Minnesota Statute 197.775 (Higher Education Fairness), directed the MnSCU and the University of Minnesota “to treat all veterans as Minnesota residents for undergraduate tuition rate purposes irrespective of their state of origin or residency.” Graduate students could also be considered residents if the person was a resident upon entering the military and begins a graduate program within two years of completing military service. Moreover, the Higher Education Fairness legislation mandated that “University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System institutions may not assess late fees or other late charges for veterans who are eligible to receive, have applied for, and are waiting to receive federal educational assistance, nor prevent them from registering for a subsequent term.”⁵⁷

In 2007, the state legislature increased MDVA-Higher Education Veterans Programs funding from \$600,000 to \$1,050,000 annually. The legislature also created the “Minnesota GI Bill” to provide tuition assistance for Minnesota veterans and members of the National Guard or reserves (with at least five years of continuous service) who have served on or after September 11, 2001, including some assistance for dependents. Beginning in July 2008, the program

⁵⁴ Wiley Lokken, J.M., Pfeffer, D.S., McAuley, J. and Strong, C., *A Statewide Approach to Creating Veteran-Friendly Campuses*, New Directions for Student Services, Wiley Periodicals, Summer 2009, Volume 2009, Issue 126, p.46.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, 47.

⁵⁶ *Id.*, 48.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

provides tuition benefits each semester if the cost of tuition exceeds an individual's financial support from the federal student aid and federal military benefits. The benefit is capped at \$3,000 per academic year and \$10,000 lifetime.⁵⁸

In July 2006, the MDVA-Higher Education Veterans Programs began operation by dividing the state into six regions and assigning a coordinator in each region to carry out the mandates of the veteran's assistance legislation. A program director was also hired to oversee three Minnesota higher education institutions providing some form of specialized programming for veterans, including centers for veterans, military members, and their families. By June 2007, forty-one campuses were operating veteran's resource centers and serving more than 3,000 individuals.⁵⁹

Increased legislative funding for July 2007 allowed the program to increase the number of coordinators from six to twelve. In addition, the program director was able to hire a full-time administrative assistant. As of June 2008, fifty-six campus veterans resource centers have been established, and more than 4,000 individuals were served in the 2007-08 academic year.⁶⁰

3. US DVA VetSuccess on Campus Program / USF

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) is testing a national program called "VetSuccess on Campus" at eight colleges, including the University of South Florida (USF), offering personalized assistance to every veteran on campus. USF was the first college in the nation to get a full-time VA-funded VetSuccess representative on campus. The VA hopes to add more in 2012. This is a national effort designed to come up with ways for all postsecondary schools to become veteran-friendly campuses.⁶¹

The VetSuccess Program is a comprehensive program that receives support from the leadership of the Veterans Administration. "Veteran-students transitioning from active duty service to civilian educational pursuits face unique challenges entering the college setting," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "The VetSuccess on Campus program continues this Administration's commitment and responsibility to meet the needs of Veterans and their families through effective peer-to-peer counseling and other services."⁶²

The VA's commitment to the VetSuccess Program is not limited to just platitudes; they are putting forth resources to support the program. "Under the VetSuccess on Campus program, a full-time, experienced Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and a part-time Vet Center Outreach Coordinator are assigned at each campus to provide VA benefits outreach, support, and assistance to ensure their health, educational, and benefit needs are met."⁶³

The VetSuccess Program has now been expanded to additional postsecondary institutions around the country, including:

- Cleveland State University
- San Diego State University
- Community College of Rhode Island
- Arizona State University
- Texas A&M Central Texas
- Rhode Island College, and
- Salt Lake Community College.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*, 49.

⁶¹ <http://www1.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2070> (retrieved 8-2-11)

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

Under the VetSuccess on Campus program, vocational testing, career and academic counseling, and adjustment counseling are provided to work to resolve challenges interfering with completion of education programs and entrance into employment.⁶⁵

The Vet Center Outreach Coordinator provides peer-to-peer counseling and referral services. Both the counselor and coordinator may refer Veterans for more intensive health services, including mental health treatment through VHA Medical Centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, or Vet Centers, as well as provide additional information on VA benefits and services.⁶⁶

a. The Memorandum of Agreement between USF and the VA

USF and the VA entered into a Memorandum Of Agreement (“MOA”) to provide for the successful transition of veterans into the peace time civilian economy (family, workforce and education). “In order to advance, improve, and expand the employment opportunities for disabled and non-disabled veterans, both parties of this memorandum of agreement (MOA) commit themselves to active cooperation and coordination in meeting the goals set forth in this agreement. VA and USF shall work together to maximize services that will lead to the ultimate goal of veterans being successful in their educational programs and eventual transition to suitable employment in the civilian workforce.” The MOA is a comprehensive agreement to provide service delivery with support and resources by both parties to make USF a veteran-friendly campus by enhancing the quality of life for veteran students.⁶⁷

The VA will provide:

- On-campus outreach to veterans
- Knowledge of, and referral to, campus resources
- Transition support services
- Referrals for medical and mental health services
- Adjustment and career counseling services specific to VA benefits and Veteran issues
- Referrals for on-campus academic and career counseling services
- Assistance in applying for other VA benefits
- Job placement assistance and coordination with local Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs)
- Expertise to the University community on the veteran experience.⁶⁸

The University of South Florida will provide:

- Office space for VA personnel to provide services and assistance outlined in this agreement
- Inclusion of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) in student orientation activities, especially those designed for veteran students
- Expertise and training on current services provided by USF, including career counseling, vocational assessment, employment assistance, financial aid, financial services, psychological counseling and psychiatric services, health services, services for students with disabilities, learning assistance, and academic advising
- Inclusion of VRC on the USF administration’s Veterans Support Committee
- On-campus point of contact or liaison for VRC
- Expertise to VA on college student development and the college student experience.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN The University of South Florida and The U.S Department of Veterans Affairs. Received from 8-5-11, Larry Braue, Ed.D., U.S. Army (Ret.), Director, Office of Veterans Services, University of South Florida, lbraue@usf.edu <http://www.veterans.usf.edu>

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

4. Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Proposed Campus Veteran's Representative Program

In 2008 the Florida Department of Veteran Affairs (FDVA) made a proposal to the Florida Legislature to establish the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Campus Veterans' Representative Program ("Campus Veterans' Representative Program"). "The request is for one Accredited Veterans Representative at each of Florida's 28 state and community colleges and 11 state universities. A total of 39 FTE's employed and trained by the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Division of Benefits Assistance for accreditation by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs to access the entire range of benefits returning veterans have earned."⁷⁰ The appropriation request for the program was \$2,108,496. In the FDVA's budget for 2008, all 39 positions were authorized by the Legislature; however, they were not funded.

The goal of the Campus Veterans' Representative Program was to create veteran-friendly campuses throughout the community college and state university system in Florida. "Ideally we should provide "one stop servicing," that is not only addressing educational benefits but providing access to all federal veteran benefits."⁷¹ This would be accomplished because of the scope and authority of the Campus Veterans' Representatives. "In order to file claims and access federal VA databases, the campus veteran's representative would need to be authorized via an established training program similar to the training required by the Veteran's Claims Examiners employed by the FDVA."⁷²

Options and/or Recommendations

Florida has made great strides in improving the lives of military personnel and veterans as they return from combat and matriculate through the educational institutions and transition into civilian life. However, more can be done. The findings of this report suggest several options, either one will be an improvement and address the issue. Some of which can be done through legislation and some otherwise. Each of these options will provide for the successful transition for veterans at Florida's postsecondary institutions and greater opportunities for veteran-friendly campuses.

The first list of options do not require legislative action, they include:

- Create a more robust awareness campaign to let veterans know of their rights and benefits under the current GI Bill programs;
- Adopt a Florida Campus Compact (similar to the Maryland Compact) with the community colleges and universities;
- Request the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to expand the "VetSuccess" program at the University of South Florida to all universities in Florida;

The second list of options requires legislative action, they include:

- Provide \$2,108,496 in funding by the legislature to the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs' proposed Campus Veterans' Representative Program; and
- Create legislation similar to Minnesota to establish a Florida GI Bill Program.

⁷⁰ Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs Campus Veteran's Representative Program, Concept Paper, OPB Strategic Planning Meeting, July 22, 2008, Revised October 9, 2008, Revised February 1, 2011.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*