



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VETERANS' PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

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Veterans' Education Programs Issues and Legislative Talking Points 2020

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA) is an organization of institutions and individuals who are involved or interested in the operation of veterans' affairs programs and/or the delivery of services to veterans as Veterans' Education Program Administrators across the country. A Board of Directors elected at our annual conference governs NAVPA. The purpose of NAVPA is to promote professional competency and efficiency through an association of members and others allied with, and involved in, veterans' educational programs and to promote the development, improvement and extension of opportunities to any service member, veteran or dependent of a veteran, for his or her personal growth and development to its fullest potential. This is achieved through assisting with the assessment and attainment of individual needs, communicating and cooperating with communities, schools, agencies and organizations at the local, state, regional and federal levels; developing productive relations with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Education, Department of Defense, and other federal or national Veterans Service Organization or agency serving veterans; participating in efforts to facilitate the education and/or training of educationally or otherwise disadvantaged veterans and to promote cooperative studies, research, evaluation, workshops, seminars, conferences, and other activities as may be desired or required to fulfill the purpose of NAVPA.

MEMBERSHIP

NAVPA has served as the voice of advocacy for veterans in higher education since its founding in 1975. Our research, training, and policy initiatives have developed programs and support services to ensure veterans achieve their academic and professional goals. NAVPA's membership now includes 344 Institutions of Higher Learning across 47 states that represent 431,032 veterans.

TOP LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY ISSUES

PRIORITY ISSUE #1

ROUNDING OUT

Issue: It has been announced by the VA that they are planning to remove the Rounding Out option.

Discussion: Per the SCO Handbook:

Rounding Out

A VA student can round out a schedule with non-required courses to bring his/her course load up to a full-time schedule in his/her last term only. This allows students to continue to receive benefits at the full-time rate in their last term of enrollment, even though fewer credits are required to complete the program. This procedure can be done only once per program. In rounding out a full-time schedule, VA students may use any credit hour unit subject, including a subject that has previously been successfully completed (received a passing grade).

EXAMPLE: A claimant needs to complete 60 credit hours to obtain a B. A. degree. After passing 57 credit hours, the claimant enrolls in four 3-credit-hour courses. VA may pay the Veteran educational assistance for full-time training during this last term.

NOTE: If the student enrolls in additional hours to satisfy full time enrollment per school policy. Not all student veterans need to use this option.

Recommendation: NAVPA is concerned this issue will have a negative impact and place an undue burden on student veterans. Without the option of using their full GI Bill® benefits, the student will have to find alternative funding, such as loans, to cover their housing and living expenses during their final semester. There is also the possibility of the student dropping out of school and not completing their degree requirements due to this financial burden.

NAVPA recommends VA continue to support the veteran by allowing the flexibility to obtain full-time status (as needed).

PRIORITY ISSUE #2

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION FOR VETERANS WITH SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITIES

CHAPTER 31, TITLE 38 U.S. CODE

CHAPTER 31, VOCATIONAL REHAB AND TUNGSTEN

Issue: The Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program is transitioning to a fully electronic authorization and electronic invoicing system. The electronic authorization will replace the use of the VA Form 28-1905. However, since the initial roll out of the transition, there have been several issues with the implementation of the automated processes.

Discussion: Per the SCO Handbook:

A Veteran may be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) benefits if he or she: Has a service-connected disability rating of at least 10%, or a memorandum rating of 20% or more from the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA).

Veterans participating in the VR&E program may receive a subsistence allowance while they pursue an educational or training program in preparation for a future career.

An individual eligible for Chapter 33 who is receiving benefits under Chapter 31 may elect to receive the applicable Chapter 33 Monthly Housing Allowance in lieu of the monthly subsistence allowance.

Many disabled veterans find a pathway to employment by attending a learning institution and preparing for a career change to accommodate the disability.

Prior to January 2020, institutions were required to certify the veteran via VA ONCE, and send an invoice for the veterans cost of attendance to the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) to ensure the veteran was successful in their academic endeavor.

Per the VA: *As part of this transition, each School Certifying Official (SCO) should receive email notifications when there are e-authorizations available with a link to register for an account in Tungsten.*

For all terms beginning on or after January 1, 2020, service providers must use the information contained in the e-Authorizations found on your Tungsten Network account to allow enrollment in training and to accurately certify training hours to VA utilizing VA-ONCE. Service providers must also use Tungsten to submit e-Invoices. VR&E will no longer accept invoices outside of the e-Invoicing system after this date. VR&E is enclosing information to help with this transition, including instructions on registration. VR&E has already started issuing electronic authorizations.

With the current process, Institutions are required to submit all invoices electronically to the VA through the Tungsten network. However, there have been issues with the setup and transition of the newly automated system preventing payment or processing.

Recent issues:

With the implementation of the new automated Tungsten system, the computerized process does not recognize different campus locations with different facility codes under the same tax ID number.

There have been payment issues for the veteran trying to purchase books and supplies for class. It is imperative for students to receive required class items in a timely manner to reduce anxiety and achieve academic success.

SCO training & training resources have been limited or non-existent.

Responses to issues in the field go unanswered or VA is very slow to respond when problems are identified by the institution. Communications are not timely with SCOs receiving information after the fact.

Recommendation: NAVPA is concerned these issues will negatively affect our student veterans (Will these issues cause housing payment delays? Is there a plan to address delays?).

NAVPA recommends a call to action. VA needs to immediately issue more training guidance to the field (both SCOs and Case Managers). VA needs to ensure that PO Authorization number

issues are a top priority and are handled by a staffed helpline instead of unanswered email submissions.

Moving forward, NAVPA supports an open dialogue round table with the VA prior to new technology implementation. These round table discussions will help alleviate any known and unknown issues prior to nationwide execution with the common goal of sustainable workable solutions during transitional periods.

PRIORITY ISSUE #3

H.R.4625 - PROTECT THE GI BILL® ACT

SEC. 3. VERIFICATION OF ENROLLMENT FOR PURPOSES OF RECEIPT OF POST-9/11 EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE BENEFITS

Issue: Section 3 requires all institutions and students using Chapter 33 benefits to submit verification of enrollment to the VA on a monthly basis.

Discussion: Currently, School Certifying Officials (SCO's) are mandated to certify Chapter 33 recipients benefits within 30 days of the beginning of the term and report all changes per enrollment within 30 days of change to include termination of certified enrollments.

Per Section 3:

(1) Verification Of Enrollment. — (1) The Secretary shall require—

“(A) each educational institution to submit to the Secretary verification of each individual who is enrolled in a course or program of education at the educational institution and is receiving educational assistance under this chapter for each month during which the individual is so enrolled and receiving such educational assistance; and

“(B) each individual who is enrolled in a course or program of education and is receiving educational assistance under this chapter to submit to the Secretary verification of such enrollment for each month during which the individual is so enrolled and receiving such educational assistance.

“(2) Verification under this subsection shall be in an electronic form prescribed by the Secretary.

“(3) If an individual fails to submit the verification required under paragraph (1)(B) for two consecutive months, the Secretary may not make a monthly stipend payment to the individual under this section until the individual submits such verification.”.

(b) Effective Date. —The amendment made by subsection (a) shall take effect on August 1, 2020.

Adding the undue burden of monthly reporting on both the student and institution, can be detrimental to the student's academic success. Adding an unnecessary monthly obligation to the student veteran and/or family member, can be an added encumbrance to an already stressed student with a full-plate focused on academic achievement, preventing them from being successful graduates.

SCO's have the ability and responsibility for face-to-face counseling with all GI Bill® recipients. Adding the intricate and ever evolving landscape as to how the Post 9/11 GI Bill® benefits are processed at the VA with the added obligation of reporting monthly enrollments, will create unwarranted hardship on both the student and SCO. These additional reporting requirements restrict SCO's as a resource to our student veterans and family members.

This puts an immense burden on schools and school certifying officials, and takes away time from directly assisting students.

Recommendation: To have an organization like NAVPA, collaborate with Congressional Legislative Staffers, Department of Veterans Affairs, and other relevant vested parties to ensure the implementation of this Bill will be in the best interest of recipients using GI Bill® benefits. Organizations such as NAVPA have the resources and institutional knowledge to help determine what is needed, as well as how to implement effectively.

PRIORITY ISSUE #4
(CARRY OVER ISSUE FROM 2019)

GI BILL® COMPARISON TOOL – COMPLAINT SYSTEM

Issue: Institutions of higher learning receive unvetted/unwarranted complaints against them as part of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) GI Bill® feedback system, which is then posted on the GI Bill® Comparison Tool indefinitely. Schools have no recourse to remove or refute the complaints from their public-facing profile regardless of when the complaint was filed or the nature of the complaint. This results in higher education institutions having a permanent “black mark” on their public record that directly impacts a veteran or other VA education beneficiary’s choice in selecting a reputable school and program of study.

Discussion: The VA GI Bill® feedback system, allows recipients of VA educational benefits to submit complaints against educational institutions or employers they believe have failed to follow the Principles of Excellence (POE) established under Executive Order, 13607, signed April 27, 2012. While complaints are supposed to be reviewed by the VA and addressed by the institution/employer, not all complaints filed have been true violations of EO 13607 yet are still posted on an institutions profile for public viewing with no option of removal or refutation by the institution. The Complaint System was launched January 30, 2014 and complaints filed in 2014 are still on the GI Bill® Comparison Tool even though the initial complaint has been resolved. Complaints posted on the public site are not vetted by the VA, have no delimitating date, and are posted after student issues/concerns have been resolved.

The institutions are required to provide a response to the complainant and to VA with a proposed resolution as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days from the date that the complaint is sent to the school.

Currently, there is no method to notify the institution/employer when the complaint response submitted to the student is considered satisfactory and the issue closed. There is no opportunity for institutions to refute the complaint. Nor are there any delimiting dates for complaints as they are posted on the GI Bill® Comparison Tool forever.

Recommendation: VA partner with NAVPA in addressing the inequities which result from inaccurate and often erroneous information created and displayed by the feedback system in the GI Bill® Comparison Tool with an established end date for the complaint to be removed. A viable and accurate GI Bill® Comparison Tool is essential for veterans and GI Bill® recipients to select the best education institution that meets their individual needs.

PRIORITY ISSUE #5
(CARRY OVER ISSUE FROM 2019)

PUBLIC LAW 115-48; TITLE III—ADMINISTRATION OF EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS
Sec. 306. Extension of authority for Advisory Committee on Education.

Issue: NAVPA recognizes that the Veterans Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE) does not have representation from the practitioner level (SCO or Veteran Administrator) from the higher education community.

Discussion: Section 306 of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act provides the extension of authority for the Advisory Committee on Education. NAVPA recognizes the positive impact of this subsection. However, there is concern among the professional community of school certifying officials that the makeup of the current committee does not have representation from the practitioner level. The only school representation on the current committee is from the executive level of leadership on campuses and is not involved in the day to day operations of their veteran programming, inclusive of the benefits.

Recommendation: NAVPA requests that a seat on the committee be established from the practitioner level or that a subcommittee of campus delegates working directly with student veterans be established to work with the committee.

Areas of Concern

GRADUATION RATES

School Certifying Officials (SCO's) are prevented from reporting a student graduating via VA-ONCE during a term in which the student is not currently using GI Bill® education benefits, even though the student has used their benefits towards the degree. There have been students who exhaust their GI Bill® benefits before graduating or choose to keep some of their benefit for future use such as a graduate or professional degree/certification.

SCO's are not required to report family members who have graduated using GI Bill® transfer of entitlement. Transfer of benefits occurs while the Veteran is Active Duty and can transfer educational benefits to family members. These students' graduation rates are not currently being tracked by the VA.

NAVPA recommends Congressional support of the partnership between NAVPA, the VA, Department of Education, and other vested parties to identify the best method to track graduation and other academic success measures effectively for all military-connected students regardless of if/when they use their GI Bill® for more accurate data collection.

SCO HANDBOOK CLARIFICATION

Table of Contents

The VA has removed all pagination from the Table of Contents.

NAVPA recommends the VA return page numbers back to the Table of Contents for easier access and usage.

Rate of Pursuit (Chapter 33) for Graduate Students

Per the SCO Handbook, VA calculates rate of pursuit (RoP) based on the number of credits the school reports it considers full-time for the period certified. Schools report full-time status for graduate students based on what is listed in the institutions catalog or school Bulletin.

The SCO Handbook gives definitions for Undergraduates during a non-standard term:

- Equivalent Credit Hours (Non-33 Undergraduate)
- Non-Standard Terms - Rate of Pursuit (Chapter 33 Undergraduate or NCD Measured in Credit Hours)

While there is clear definition for Undergrad students, there is no definition of equivalent credit hours for Graduate students using Post 9/11 Chapter 33 benefits or non-33 students.

NAVPA recommends an update to the SCO handbook with clearer definitions of Graduate non-standard terms for Post 9/11 Chapter 33 and for Graduate non-Post 9/11 Chapter 33 beneficiaries.

STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

Per the SCO Handbook:

Under Chapter 33, VA will pay: • Home school's tuition and fees • Books and supplies • Monthly housing allowance based on the home school's address • In order for VA to pay any additional fees specific to the Study Abroad program, the Study Abroad option must be required for graduation.

Faculty-led studies abroad do not seem to be directly impacted as GI Bill® beneficiaries pay their home institution and receive instruction by professors from the same. Exchange programs in which students pay their own school, but attend another for instruction, may be disallowed under current rules and regulations as these programs may be seen as instruction provided by third-party vendors.

NAVPA recommends being included in discussions with legislative officials and VA representatives to examine if this well-recognized approach is counter to the intent of Title 38 and merely a reaction to an over-generalized interpretation of existing law. NAVPA further recommends being part of a "working group" with the VA and other invested partners to identify the best solution in order to avoid negative impacts on the student and their higher education experience