



VETERANS EDUCATION SUCCESS

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON COORDINATING TRANSITION RESOURCES

SUBMITTED TO THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

August 28, 2020

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Veterans Education Success is a non-profit organization with a mission to advance higher education success for veterans, servicemembers, and military families, and to protect the integrity and promise of the GI Bill and other federal education programs.

In addition to research, providing free case work to students having trouble with the GI Bill or impacted by predatory schools, and elevating the voices of students to share with policy makers both their positive and negative experiences in higher education, we are focused on addressing ways to increase the continued academic success of military-connected students in their pursuit of their academic goals.

We thank the Subcommittee for its attention to the important issue of coordinating transition resources. It is especially crucial now, during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing economic disruption, that servicemembers are able to successfully transition into civilian life. We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and how to improve resources related to higher education.

Share and Enhance Existing Resources to Help Transitioning Servicemembers Make Informed Decisions

Servicemembers and veterans are often targeted by predatory institutions for their lucrative education benefits. To help servicemembers make better informed decisions related to the use of their hard-earned GI Bill benefits, vital information, including potential risks of wasting their GI Bill benefits at subpar schools, must be shared. The current transition assistance education track

curriculum contains some information about warning signs servicemembers and veterans should pay attention to when choosing a college or university. One example is the “Know Before You Go” [campaign](#)¹ by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). While this video is shared during VA’s portion of TAP, we believe this resource should be shared sooner and more regularly throughout the military lifecycle to educate servicemembers on what to look for when choosing a school. Similarly, a resource that can be helpful in this area is USAA Educational Foundation’s short, unbranded, educational [video](#)² that addresses these matters and can be easily added to the VA’s website and to the TAP Program. This video explains how veterans can avoid known efforts to defraud students and is an example of a resource that is already available from a reliable source.³

Improvements to the GI Bill Comparison Tool would also provide much needed information for transitioning servicemembers to allow them to make informed decisions related to their education. As we [wrote](#) to VA in June and to this Subcommittee in [March](#), the following are a few improvements to the GI Bill Comparison Tool we believe would enhance its effectiveness:

- Add side-by-side comparisons of schools so students can clearly see the difference in tuition and outcome metrics.
- Allow for searches by geographic area and major or degree sought.
- Provide a “Risk Index”⁴ to enable students to avoid risky schools.
- Improve the caution flags so they are consistently posted and include any negative action by the government, any negative action by the school’s accreditor (loss of accreditation, probation), whether the school has received a large number of student complaints, and whether the school is on Heightened Cash Monitoring Level 2.
- Ensure all student complaints are uploaded and publicly available, whether open or closed. Do not limit complaints to just the most recent 24 months and do not deem complaints “invalid.”
- Give students the option to make public the narrative portion of their complaint. Yelp-style student feedback has been contemplated at Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) since 2014 and would allow students to share their experiences at the school. Providing the resources necessary so VBA could implement this initiative would offer an excellent way for GI Bill beneficiaries, including transitioning servicemembers, to hear directly from their peers about their experiences at the post-secondary institution they are considering attending.
- Automate the ED/VA data-crosswalk as it is labor intensive for VA employees to update it manually.

¹ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1ttkv9oRI4> (last visited August 27, 2020).

² Available at <https://vimeo.com/370920512> (last visited August 27, 2020).

³ Department of Defense Office of Financial Readiness has used other USAA Educational Foundation resources on its site finred.usalearning.gov.

⁴ Letter from Rep. Mark Takano and other Members of Congress to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald (June 19, 2015), available at https://www.blumenthal.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Letter%20to%20Sec%20McDonald_Risk%20Index_Final%20Signed%20Copy.pdf.

The above fixes would go a long way to improve these resources so that transitioning servicemembers can make the better-informed decisions regarding their education. The GI Bill Comparison Tool is an important resource that is already included in transition assistance, so making it reliable and comprehensive is vital to veterans' long-term success.

Further, although VA has stated that the GI Bill Comparison Tool would include complaints older than 24 months on a separate tab or link, VA has not made those older complaints accessible when users search individual schools within the tool. This information is important for GI Bill users to be able to access to see a complete picture of a school.

Expand TAP Resources Related to Educational Benefits

We believe the TAP program should include information about all of VA's educational benefits and programs to better serve transitioning servicemembers. Programs such as apprenticeships and licensure and certification opportunities are available using VA benefits, but the current TAP curriculum does not address them.⁵ Without the proper information about qualifications and requirements related to these programs, veterans may later be confused as to whether they are covered by the GI Bill. They also might not have the necessary information available to them to be able to identify a high-quality program.

Drawing transitioning servicemembers' attention to the proper warnings and risks associated with various programs is necessary so that low-quality or predatory programs are not unintentionally encouraged. Academic advisors leading TAP classes must be impartial and have no connections with specific colleges so that they can provide transitioning servicemembers with neutral and objective information regarding schools and what to look out for.

Additionally, transitioning servicemembers may not be at a place where they are ready to take on an entire four-year degree program but need to earn a specific license or certificate for the next step in their career. Done correctly, this training can not only provide the necessary credentials for their immediate career goals, it can also be used to fulfill degree requirements further down the road should the veteran decide to pursue a four-year degree.

We also encourage further conversation around the Veteran Readiness and Employment program during TAP training. Many veterans we have spoken with are not aware of all of its benefits, including the potential to obtain necessary training for long-term career goals. Many transitioning servicemembers, who qualify, would benefit from one of the five tracks offered in this program as they work to reintegrate into the civilian workforce.

Begin TAP Earlier in the Military Lifecycle and Align it with the Real-Life Experience of Servicemembers

We believe that beginning the TAP program earlier in the military lifecycle will lead to numerous benefits to servicemembers and allow them to retain the information better.

⁵ DoD's TAP curriculum is available here: <https://www.dvidshub.net/publication/1235/dod-tap-curriculum>. As of the date of this statement, the most recent version available is "The DoD Managing Your Education 2019-2020 TAP Curriculum" dated September 26, 2019.

Servicemembers have their first TAP counseling session no less than one year before separation (or two years before retirement), but their specialized career track courses and VA's and the Department of Defense's (DoD) two separate TAP days of classes are closer to their dates of separation. Many servicemembers begin using their benefits such as the GI Bill "Top Up" program or Tuition Assistance much earlier than when these classes are provided. Many of the resources needed to succeed after transitioning to civilian life would be equally helpful before using their Tuition Assistance benefits.

Adjusting the TAP curriculum so that servicemembers are not inundated with information right before leaving would help them better identify colleges and programs that best match what they want to study. Additionally, the TAP program gives an extensive list of resources available to servicemembers, but modifying the manner in which the information is conveyed would go a long way in improving the usefulness of these resources. Aligning this information to more closely reflect veterans experience in the civilian world and shifting the focus from long days of presentations and PowerPoints would help in this regard.

Implement a Way for Stakeholders to Provide Timely Feedback

Many changes have been made to TAP over the past few years and veteran groups such as Veterans Education Success have received useful feedback from participants. Efforts to share this feedback and make recommendations about improving the program, however, have been stifled by the absence of an efficient and timely way to do so.

DoD's Transition to Veterans Program Office Curriculum Program Manager directs stakeholders to provide their feedback and recommendations for improvement to the Department of Labor Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO). ACVETEO only publishes recommendations once a year in their annual report. The annual report is addressed to the Secretary of Labor who then would be required to share salient points with DoD. By the time such feedback and recommendations reach the relevant staff member within DoD who can make improvements, over a year of time will have passed and a great deal of relevant information likely will have been lost along the way. Stakeholders have been told by DoD that because the GI Bill program is managed by VA, VA has input into what is included in the TAP curriculum. Similarly, however, there is no efficient way for stakeholders to make recommendations and ensure they will be considered by the TAP curriculum program managers. This is not an efficient or timely means to address needed improvements.

Veterans, servicemembers and stakeholders should have a more efficient way to keep the TAP program as current, relevant and useful as possible through timely feedback and recommendations.

Conclusion

We thank the Subcommittee for discussing the importance of transition resources during the pandemic. We hope Congress, DoD, and VA will continue to work to improve the TAP program so that servicemembers are able to transition into a successful civilian life. Veterans Education Success sincerely appreciates the opportunity to express our views before the Subcommittee

today. Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, Veterans Education Success has received no federal grants in Fiscal Year 2020 nor in the previous two years.