



## **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VETERANS' PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS**

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### **Veterans' Education Programs**

### **Issues and Legislative Agenda**

**2017**

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# The National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators

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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**

VA Work-Study students have been delayed in both being paid for work that they have already provided as well as not being able to get new work-study contracts approved. Many student veterans have come to rely on the VA Work-Study program as a way to help offset college expenses while they attend school. Currently, many students who have participated in this program have experienced long waiting periods to receive payment for work already completed. Additionally, schools have reported long delays in VA work-study contract renewals and approvals that must be in place prior to a veteran being allowed to work. This not only affects the student veteran, but also the worksites that rely on the services these students perform.

NAVPA asks that the VA centralize and fully staff the VA Work-Study program to avoid delays in payments and approvals.

### **PRIORITY ISSUE #2**

H.R. 6416 Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016 has outlined many new provisions, which the VA must implement. One of these is creating a new reporting requirement for education institutions regarding the academic progress for students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. While this is an important issue, NAVPA is concerned that with the reduction of VA reporting fees any new requirements will place an even greater burden on schools and could potentially create a negative impact in forcing schools to choose between meeting these new reporting criteria or sending employees for training to better understand these complicated benefits.

NAVPA asks that education institutions be allowed to provide input regarding the new reporting criteria and delivery method prior to those issues being determined by the VA.

### **PRIORITY ISSUE #3**

For the last few years, the VA Reporting Fee that is paid to institutions has been reduced to help fund other Veterans Administration programs. The role of the School Certifying Official (SCO) is constantly changing and evolving to meet new regulations and policies as they are implemented. In order for Certifying Officials to stay current on these changes or obtain basic certifying training, schools send their SCO's to various VA sponsored conferences throughout the country. Funds received from VA Reporting Fees are often used to help defray the cost to send their SCO's to these training opportunities.

NAVPA requests that the reporting fee be returned to the full rate and that Congressional leaders help to protect it against being used as an offset for other programs in the future.

## **VA Student Work-Study Allowance Program**

**Issue:** NAVPA strongly supports the VA Work-Study program, and our membership is grateful that a five-year extension was approved as part of H.R. 6416. Work-study allows student veterans to earn a wage by supporting their peers on campus and in the community while attending school. The overarching goal of the initiative is being achieved, but one area of the program that continues to need significant improvement is the processing of contracts and timecards.

**Discussion:** Students may submit an application to participate in work-study 30 days prior to their first day of class. The 30-day period is meant to allow the VA Regional Processing Office (RPO) time to process the application and return the contract to the student. Unfortunately, most students do not receive contracts before the first day of class. In fact, many do not receive paperwork for months. Timecards are also processed at the RPO and students should be paid in approximately 14 days. Payments are rarely received within two to three weeks, with most taking more than a month. Oftentimes, veterans work several pay periods, in some cases an entire semester, before receiving their paychecks.

**Recommendation:** Centralize the processing of contracts and timecards, using one Regional Processing Office to serve as the primary location for all work-study matters. A centralized structure will increase efficiency, improve customer service, ensure effective oversight, and eliminate delinquent payments. We also ask Congress to consider legislation that would allow for the submission of VA Work-Study applications in an overlapping period. This would ensure consistent employment and pay for participating students and a reliable source of employees for VA approved work-study sites.

## **Report on Student Progress**

**Issue:** The signing of H.R.6416 - Jeff Miller and Richard Blumenthal Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016, has placed new requirements on school officials to report on the academic progress of all students utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

**Discussion:** The law has not outlined any of these “new requirements” and many schools are concerned about the additional burden that this will place on administrators who work at their Institution supporting military-affiliated students. The Veterans Administration is currently working to identify which academic data points will be required and the delivery method for providing that information to the VA.

As school administrators, NAVPA is in a position to provide feedback on any information requests from the VA and assist the VA in understanding what additional burden these new requirements will place on education institutions.

**Recommendation:** NAVPA would like to offer the Secretary its support in establishing policies and procedures for reporting the academic progress of students entitled to educational assistance. With 350 member-institutions representing more than 430,000 student veterans across 47 states, NAVPA is positioned to provide the Secretary the most comprehensive recommendation for establishing reporting procedures.

## **VA Reporting Fees**

**Issue:** The VA reporting fee that schools receive for certifying VA educational benefits has been reduced the past several years to fund other VA projects. H.R. 6416 reduced the reporting fee for the next 10 years, placing an enormous burden on institutions that use this money to fund training opportunities.

SEC. 412. Modification of reductions in reporting fee multipliers for payments by Secretary of Veterans Affairs to educational institutions.

(b) During the period beginning on September 26, 2017, and ending on September 25, 2026, the second sentence of such section shall be applied—

- (1) by substituting “\$7” for “\$12”; and
- (2) by substituting “\$12” for “\$15”.

**Discussion:** GAO-16-42 found that the VA made \$416 million in Post-9/11 GI Bill overpayments in 2014, or 4 percent of the over \$10 billion in benefits paid during that period. Overpayments increased by nearly 20 percent from fiscal year 2013 to 2014.

The VA relies on School Certifying Officials (SCO) to serve as a bridge between student veterans and the Regional Processing Office (RPO). The VA provides a very limited amount of training in the form of a handbook and an online course, leaving Institutions searching for ways to teach their SCOs. This comes at a time when there are more demands on SCO's to provide accurate and timely implementation of a myriad of VA regulations and responsibilities surrounding the GI Bill. While the VA sends representatives to conferences and workshops to provide training, schools rely on reporting fees to fund their SCO's attendance. With one in four beneficiaries and 6,000 schools incurring overpayments totaling \$416 million in 2014, it is imperative that schools receive funding for proper training to help the VA limit this sizable debt.

**Recommendation:** The VA reporting fee be returned to its full amount and protected from being used as an offset to fund other programs.



## **90/10 Rule**

The Department of Education (DOE) released a report on December 21, 2016, addressing the 90/10 rule, as it relates to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD) funding for military education.

The Rule requires proprietary institutions participating in Federal student aid programs have no more than 90 percent of revenue come from Title IV Federal student loans and grants. However, because of a statutory loophole, the 90/10 rule does not count GI Bill education benefits administered by the VA and DOD Tuition Assistance program as federal funding.

**Position:** NAVPA supports the closing of the 90/10 loophole and backs lawmaker's efforts to restore the 85/15 rule, saving taxpayers \$12.6 billion in misappropriated funds. We look forward to continuing our work with Legislators to ensure the redistribution of federal aid is used in a manner that ensures support services and programs are established and maintained to promote successful outcomes for veteran and military students. NAVPA also asks that a portion of the misappropriated funds be used to return reporting fees to their full amount.

## **Continuity of Care During Transition**

Despite the commitments of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD), a system to share electronic health records does not exist. The DOD and the VA have developed certain measures to bridge the gap between the two systems, but it is not clear how the Departments will accomplish the goal of fully sharing electronic health records to ensure continuity of care

The consequence of the failure to exchange information is that too many veterans are falling through the cracks when transitioning from the DOD to the VA. Two million veterans have become eligible for VA Healthcare since 2002, but only 60% have enrolled. While efforts are being made to reach more service members through the Transition Assistance Program, there are still nearly a million veterans not enrolled, largely due to the lack of information and knowledge of the healthcare system.

The three most frequent diagnoses of Veterans are musculoskeletal ailments, mental health disorders and “Symptoms, Signs and Ill-Defined Conditions.” These three medical issues are the primary cause of veterans’ loss of employment and increased college dropout rates while utilizing their GI Bill benefits.

**Position:** NAVPA would like to see automatic enrollment for all service members leaving active duty in VA health care with the ability to opt out. Provide all service members, except those opting out, their VA identification cards prior to separation. Implement the DOD plan to develop an automated system to transfer military treatment records to the VA electronically.

## **H.R. 245: Veterans' Education Equity Act**

To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the calculation of the amount of the monthly housing stipend payable under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs based on the location of the campus where classes are attended.

**Position:** NAVPA supports H.R. 245 and agrees that students receiving Post-9/11 Educational Assistance should be paid the monthly housing stipend based on the location where classes are attended. While some veterans will have their stipend increased by the change, others will see a decline in their monthly allowance. When applicable, housing stipends for government employees are calculated based on the cost of living for the physical location of assignment. NAVPA concedes that the physical location of classes attended should be considered in the same manner as a location of assignment.

## **H.R. 512: WINGMAN Act**

A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to permit veterans to grant access to their records in the databases of the Veterans Benefits Administration to certain designated congressional employees, and for other purposes.

### (a) In general

(1) The Secretary shall provide to each veteran who submits a claim for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary an opportunity to permit a covered congressional employee employed in the office of the Member of Congress representing the district where the veteran resides to have access to all of the records of the veteran in the databases of the Veterans Benefits Administration.

(2) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, upon receipt of the permission from the veteran under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall provide read-only access to such records to such a covered congressional employee in a manner that does not allow such employee to modify the data contained in such records or in any part of a database of the Veterans Benefits Administration.

(3) A Member of Congress may designate not more than two employees of the Member as covered congressional employees.

**Position:** NAVPA supports H.R. 512, as it will allow Congressional staff to access veterans' records to support inquiries about claims. Veterans often spend countless hours trying to navigate the claims process, which has proven to have a negative impact on academic and job performance. Those seeking assistance from their Legislative Representatives face additional challenges because they have to secure copies of their records to provide to staff. Enacting H.R. 512 will eliminate this obstacle by providing the staff member immediate access to the same documents VA staff members are reviewing.

## **Veterans Upward Bound (VUB)**

**Issue:** The vast majority of veterans have not been exposed to Math, English and other academic programs for a number of years. Veterans Upward Bound (VUB) is one of eight existing Federal TRIO programs that provide support services to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. VUB has been an integral part of launching a number of veterans' academic careers, but the low number of VUB sites across the country has limited the amount of veterans that can access VUB's services.

**Discussion:** Veterans Upward Bound is designed to motivate and assist veterans in the development of academic and other requisite skills necessary for acceptance and success in a program of postsecondary education. The program provides assessment and enhancement of basic skills through counseling, mentoring, tutoring and academic instruction in the core subject areas. The primary goal of the program is to increase the rate at which participants enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs. In 2003, grants were awarded to 45 Institutions of Higher Learning across the country to establish VUB locations providing support services to veterans to help them achieve their academic goals. Although there has been a significant increase in the number of veterans interested in postsecondary education, there are only 49 VUB sites in the country, limiting the amount of participants to roughly 6,000 per year. Annual funding for the program has remained at approximately \$13.5 million since 2007.

**Statement of Support:** Veterans Upward Bound provides assessment and enhancement of basic skills through counseling, mentoring, tutoring and academic instruction in the core subject areas. We fully support academic assistance programs like VUB that lead to an increase in the number of veterans that enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs. NAVPA would like to offer the Department of Education and Department of Veterans Affairs its support by participating in discussions about the sustainment and growth of programs like Veterans Upward Bound and others that seek to provide a pathway to a postsecondary education.

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