

STATEMENT BY
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READINESS AND FORCE MANAGEMENT
REGARDING
VOLUNTARY MILITARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

BEFORE THE
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE

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Chairman Durbin, ranking member Cochran and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the management of the Department of Defense's (DoD) Voluntary Education Tuition Assistance (TA) Program and the steps we take to protect this taxpayer-funded benefit which greatly facilitates our Service members receiving a quality education.

The Department's Voluntary Education Program provides lifelong learning opportunities for Service members, contributing to enhanced readiness of our forces. Education helps our Service members be better Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines; through education and experience we get better leaders, who will sustain our Force Readiness and continue to make valuable contributions in support of our nation. Our programs are designed to meet the unique needs of the military off-duty student and, therefore, attract a large percentage of the eligible military population where approximately one-third of our Service members enroll in post-secondary courses leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees or other credentials each year. Colleges and universities, through an extensive network, deliver classroom instruction at hundreds of military installations around the world and on-line, to an ever increasing percentage of our Service member students. Additionally, service members can also earn college credits for learning that takes place outside the traditional classroom through College Level Examination Program (CLEP) testing and assessment of their military training.

Military students have unique needs: they attend school during off-duty hours, in a part-time capacity, and average three courses per year. As expected of military service,

the military mission, deployments, and transfers often take precedence over their education so they may have breaks of months or even years between courses.

Completion of their degrees or other credentials normally takes much longer than for the traditional student; in some cases up to ten years or more. DoD provides Service members with assistance in meeting these challenges through its Voluntary Education programs and services, ensuring that opportunities for learning continue to exist for Service members throughout their military careers and preparing them for lifelong learning after they leave the military.

The Military Tuition Assistance (TA) Program

A key portion of the Department's Voluntary Education Program is TA, which supports Service members by helping to defray the rising cost of tuition. Military TA often is the determining factor in whether or not a Service member can afford to take a class. DoD is cognizant of this fact and has set a system in place for the management and oversight of the TA program. As part of this system, DoD has established uniform TA funding for voluntary off-duty college courses and degree or other credentialing programs. Under the current uniform TA policy, which commenced in fiscal year (FY) 2003, all Service member participants may receive up to \$250 per semester hour with a \$4,500 maximum per FY. Due to high participation in the TA program and rising costs per credit hour, the Services have experienced difficulty funding FY13 requests for TA, which cost \$568.2 million DoD-wide in FY 2012. This funding difficulty was further exacerbated by the continuing resolution and sequestration, and resulted in three of the

four Services temporarily suspending new TA enrollments. However, with the passing of the Department of Defense, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013, the Services are able to fully fund TA through FY 2013.

Concern has been expressed that a significant portion of TA expenditures go to approximately 25 percent of approved schools that are for-profit; currently for-profit schools were among the first to emphasize on-line education, a model that best fits the needs of our highly mobile Service members. In fact, 76 percent of courses taken through the TA program in FY 2012 were conducted on-line. DoD has developed a multifaceted management system requiring oversight from multiple stakeholders, to include the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Services, installation commanders, education officers, and the installation education center staff, to ensure both a positive experience for our Service members and that our education dollars are well spent whether at public, private non-profit, or private for-profit schools.

Oversight of Military TA – DoD Facilitating Service Member Success

Participation in DoD-supported Voluntary Education requires Service members to visit an education center, either in person or on-line through their Service education portal. There are approximately 200 DoD education sites worldwide, to include contingency areas in Afghanistan. At these centers, professional education counselors present Service members with an extensive menu of options, provide details about

specific programs, recommend tailored courses of study that meet Service members' goals, and provide information on education financing to include information on the TA program, grants, loans and other available funding options. Prior to using military TA, Service members must establish an education goal and education plan. Service members, via their Service's education portal, request TA for a course(s) outlined in their approved education plan, and an education counselor reviews the Service members' education record and education plan prior to granting approval.

In addition to the counseling support they receive, our Service members are also incentivized by having a financial stake in their success. In this regard, even with the financial support DoD provides, nearly all Service members, and especially those taking graduate level courses, incur out-of-pocket expenses. Also, Service members failing to complete or receiving an 'F' in a course must reimburse DoD for the TA received for the course, and Service members' failing to maintain a 2.0 undergraduate or 3.0 graduate grade point average (GPA), must pay for all courses until they raise their GPA sufficiently.

Oversight of Military TA – Ensuring Quality Education Programs

Ensuring the quality of education provided to our Service members is essential to the Department, and underpinning this effort is DoD's requirement that all post-secondary institutions participating in the TA program, whether they are physically located on our installations or elsewhere, must be accredited by an accrediting body

recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Additionally, on March 1, 2013, DoD implemented a policy requiring an institution to have a signed DoD memorandum of understanding (MOU) in order to be eligible to participate in the DoD TA program. Currently, over 3,100 institutions with more than 4,150 sub-campuses, have signed the DoD MOU. The current MOU and its revision, which is in coordination as part of Change 2 to Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1322.25, will require all participating institutions to adhere to the Principles of Excellence as enumerated in Presidential Executive Order 13607:

- Provides students with an Education Plan;
- Informs students of the availability and eligibility of Federal financial aid before arranging private student loans;
- Ensures new course or program offerings are approved by the institution's accrediting agency before student enrollment;
- Allows Service members to be readmitted to a program if they are temporarily unable to attend class or have to suspend their studies due to military requirements;
- Provides a refund policy for military students consistent with the refund policy for students using Department of Education Federal student aid (Title IV); and
- Designates a point of contact for academic and financial advising.

DoD Oversight of Military TA - Preventing Predatory Practices

DoD is strengthening its control on installation access to our Service members. All Military Services have recently provided updated guidance to their bases and recent changes to DoD policy provides guidance that limits institutions' access to military installations, only to provide education, guidance, and training opportunities, and to participate in education fairs. However, marketing firms or companies that own and operate higher-learning institutions will not have access. Institutions requesting access to military bases in order to provide education guidance to their students must meet the following requirements and gain access only through the base education officer via a written proposal:

- Have a signed MOU with DoD;
- Be chartered or licensed by the State government in which the services will be rendered;
- Be State-approved for the use of veteran's education benefits;
- Participate in Title IV programs (eligible and participating under Department of Education rules, students are eligible for federal support) ;
- Be accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education; and
- Have an on-base student population of at least 20 military students.

As directed in Presidential Executive Order 13607, DoD is also part of an inter-agency team that includes the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education and, in

collaboration with the Department of Justice and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, are finalizing the development and implementation of a centralized complaint system to register, track, and to respond to concerns raised by students receiving Federal military and veterans educational benefits. This complaint system and related processes are intended to provide each agency with a standardized approach to capturing a complaint. All complaints and their resolution will be contained within a centralized repository, the Consumer Sentinel Network, thereby making the information accessible both to the components at the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Education, all of whom review schools for compliance and program eligibility, as well as the law enforcement agencies that would prosecute any illegal practices. The inter-agency team is also engaged in establishing Service member and Veteran Outcome Measures directed by Presidential Executive Order 13607 that will assist in assuring continued quality at both the program and institution level. Measures will attempt to determine performance through metrics such as retention rate, persistence rates, and time-to-degree (or credential) completion.

DoD Oversight of Military TA - Improving Management

In addition to setting the above standards, DoD continues to evaluate the education programs that utilize TA dollars to help ensure our Service members are receiving the highest caliber education programs. The DoD Third Party Education Assessment program assesses the quality of off-duty postsecondary educational programs and

services used by Service members and to assist in their improvement. These assessments help ensure the education programs provided to Service members funded by TA are of the same high quality and meet the same academic criteria as those experienced by traditional students. In the past, DoD only reviewed schools operating on bases. Per the DoD MOU, all schools now agree to participate in the review. The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense reviews all findings and recommendations and tracks the progress of corrective actions taken by the Services.

DoD's contract with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) establishes the Service members' Opportunity College (SOC) which includes 1,900 post-secondary institutions SOC members. SOC advocates for and communicates the needs of the military community to the higher education community. SOC also ensures institutions are responsive to the special needs of Service members, assists the higher education community to understand the requirements of the military, and serves as the DoD liaison with institutions to resolve concerns and share program information to strengthen school relationships with DoD.

Conclusion

Service members greatly rely on these programs. In FY 2012, 286,665 Service members enrolled in 874,094 postsecondary courses, and 50,497 of them earned degrees or other credentials. Our programs assist Service members in gaining the knowledge they need for their chosen education and military career paths; ensuring they acquire the skills

necessary to operate in a dynamic national security environment; and in returning to civilian life, that they are prepared to be successful in their chosen careers, leading contributors to their communities, and productive citizens in the 21st century. DoD is committed to effectively delivering voluntary education programs that meet the changing needs of the military.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. On behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, I thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for your steadfast support.