



West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission
West Virginia Community and Technical College System



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August 31, 2012

The Honorable Jeffrey V. Kessler
Senate President
West Virginia State Senate
Room 227M, Building 1
State Capitol Complex
Charleston, West Virginia 25305

The Honorable Richard Thompson
House Speaker
West Virginia House of Delegates
Room 228M, Building 1
State Capitol Complex
Charleston, West Virginia 25305

Dear Mr. President and Mr. Speaker:

In accordance with West Virginia Code §18B-4-9, the following report is provided regarding progress toward development of services and facilities for student veterans enrolled in West Virginia public colleges and universities. We appreciate the West Virginia Legislature's on-going interest in and support of efforts to improve veterans' access to and success in higher education.

During the past year, staff of the Office of Veterans Education and Training (OVET) Programs of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (Commission) and the West Virginia Council for Community and Technical Education (Council) have actively supported legislative intent to provide "veteran-friendly" services to student veterans throughout the state.

Through the OVET, the Commission and the Council are designated by the Governor as the "state approving agency" for West Virginia under Title 38, United States Code. As such, its primary mission is to approve and monitor education and training programs for federal veterans' benefits and to engage in outreach efforts to increase participation in the GI Bills.

In addition to the federally-requested approval work, OVET has strived to improve the success rate of veteran students at all higher education institutions, both public and private. Specifically, a Veterans Initiatives Task Force has been established to identify and address statewide concerns. The Task Force includes several college and university presidents, chief academic officers, veterans' coordinators, OVET staff, and a veterans' education employee. Through conference calls and face-to-face meetings, the Task Force generates strategies and ideas that focus on increasing the rate of graduation for students in veteran benefit programs.

One early outcome of the Task Force’s work was the 2010 enactment of West Virginia’s “Veteran Friendly” Campus Act, now West Virginia Code §18B-4-9. This landmark legislation is the first such state law in the country, following closely after enactment of West Virginia’s “Yellow Ribbon” legislation, the first state law to require public institutions to participate fully in the Post 9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon program to reduce veterans’ out-of-pocket costs for college attendance. The Task Force assisted the Legislature in drafting this legislation to highlight the special needs of veteran students and to suggest services to help meet those needs.

At the time of passage, the OVET was funded by a federal allocation of some \$190,000. This allowed sufficient staff and time to accomplish the Title 38 work as well as to coordinate other activities not directly related to program approval and oversight. Since then, changes to Title 38 have severely restricted the States’ authority to approve programs for VA benefits and to do oversight. Concurrently, many State Approving Agencies, including OVET, have seen a reduction in the federal allocation. The OVET total allocation is now about \$157,000 and this has resulted in elimination of one professional position. Nevertheless, OVET has continued to do as much work in the area of support services as possible, but it has been limited. The primary mission now, according to VA, is to perform VA compliance surveys, essentially financial audits of the federal VA entitlement program payments at our schools. We do not have the flexibility to review education outcomes and programs under the new contracts, nor will we be reimbursed for school visits other than for compliance surveys. The Commission’s authority to approve education programs at public and non-profit private schools has been given to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

In this climate, we necessarily have had to reduce the amount of direct support to our institutions. Fortunately, we have many campus staff members across the state who do an excellent job for and with veterans. We have been able to provide two workshops this year for these staff members and we respond to numerous telephone and email questions from them. We have not, however, been able to be as proactive as we would like. Even so, we have accomplished much in West Virginia over the past three years and we can rightly claim that West Virginia is one of the most “veteran friendly” states in the country.

Following is a table including items listed in law and our response and progress toward them through August, 2012.

W. VA. CODE §18B-4-9	COMMISSION / COUNCIL ACTIVITIES
(1) <i>Establishing veteran-friendly community and technical college degree programs which recognize and award academic credit toward degrees for various types of technical and vocational military training and experience;</i>	CTCs already have numerous programs that match military experiences. MCTC has created special programs for recruiters, for new enlistees, and for NCOs, in partnership with military branches.
(2) <i>Developing policies for each state institutions of higher education to grant academic credit for Armed Forces experiences;</i>	Individual policies exist at each institution. CTCs are moving toward standardized credit awards. Commission institutions need to address the issue more directly. A statewide Commission rule may be a solution.

(3) <i>Developing programs to <u>facilitate student veterans in sharing their unique knowledge and experience in the military through public school programs and local community organizations;</u></i>	Concord University has done this but other institutions have been slow to implement.
(4) <i>Establishing and sponsoring an <u>organization for student veterans on campus and encouraging other veteran-friendly organizations;</u></i>	50% of schools report they now have veterans' clubs on campus. These generally are the larger institutions.
(5) <i>Appointing and <u>training specific faculty within each degree program or major as liaisons and contacts for student veterans;</u></i>	About 60% of schools reporting indicate they have academic advisors for veterans. Some are faculty, some are staff.
(6) <i>Providing information about the <u>Regents Bachelor of Arts Degree program to student veterans and potential student veterans;</u></i>	All schools have and market the RBA. Two specifically target veterans.
(7) <i>Coordinating existing <u>disability services on campus with veteran disability services available from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, other federal and state agencies, and private resources;</u></i>	VA Vocational Rehabilitation has working relationships with disabled student coordinators on all campuses, as well as with West Virginia Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.
(8) <i>Providing counselors on each campus who are trained to effectively respond to the unique needs of veterans and to provide services or provide referrals to services to fulfill these needs for student veterans;</i>	About one third of institutions have student services counselors assigned to work with veterans. We hold periodic symposia to help address the training needs for these counselors and other staff.
(9) <i>Developing training materials on responding to student veteran needs to be available for continued professional development of counselors to student veterans;</i>	This has not yet been undertaken, but there is a wealth of material readily available from other sources, such as the Center for Deployment Psychology.
(10) <i>Facilitating regular statewide meetings for all personnel at state institutions of higher education who regularly provide specific services to student veterans to discuss and develop best practices, exchange ideas and experiences, and hear presentations by individuals with generally accepted expertise in areas of the various needs of student veterans;</i>	We conduct annual training workshops for campus staff dealing with VA students, as well as holding special workshops for admissions recruiters and counselors as needed and feasible. Our next statewide gathering is planned for October
(11) <i>Establishing a procedure to periodically apprise appropriate state and federal agencies of the status of student veterans in West Virginia;</i>	OVET is in frequent contact with VA and with West Virginia's Department of Veterans Affairs and Workforce WV. We participate in training workshops with all three. We also maintain active communications with the West Virginia National Guard and the Legislature.

<p>(12) <i>Establishing a program to create a collaborative relationship between student veterans and alumni of the institution, and with prospective employers to facilitate and provide employment as well as social opportunities to graduating student veterans; and</i></p>	<p>We encourage institutions to develop these relationships. About half of the institutions have mentoring programs for veterans, several of which involve alumni.</p>
<p>(13) <i>Developing and facilitating communications between state institutions of higher education and various veteran organizations in the state to advance veteran causes that benefit student veterans.</i></p>	<p>Frequent email bulletins, conference calls, and statewide meetings help facilitate communication. There is an active and productive informal network of campus staff members who work directly with veterans.”</p>

In addition to his regular duties, Mr. Skip Gebhart, OVET Administrator, has played a significant national role in working to protect the rights of the states to manage education and training programs for the GI Bill. Federal legislation in 2010 amended Title 38 and virtually stripped the states of approval authority that they had held for 65 years. Mr. Gebhart, as Legislative Director for the National Association of State Approving Agencies for Veterans Education and Training (NASAA), has continued to spend time in Washington, D.C., testifying before Congress and meeting with Members of Congress and staff to educate them about the success of the former approval and review system and to urge that it be restored. He also has presented at several national meetings about veterans’ education programs. The impact of the changes to the states’ roles continues to adversely affect institutions and the veteran students who attend them. While much progress has been made, including introduction of a bill in the United States Senate to repeal the changes, it remains a critical issue.

During the next year, OVET’s activities will continue to focus on assuring that West Virginia is viewed as the most “veteran-friendly” higher education system, one in which each veteran student will have the services, support, and education necessary to graduate and succeed. Please feel free to contact Mr. Gebhart at 304-558-0263 or either of us if we can provide additional information regarding these initiatives.

Sincerely,

Paul L. Hill
Chancellor

James L. Skidmore
Chancellor

cc: The Honorable Robert Plymale
Chair, Senate Education Committee

The Honorable Mary Poling
Chair, House Education Committee