

# MEETING SUMMARY

*Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group*  
October 3, 2016

## Welcome and Introductions

The twenty-first meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group (VHEAG) was held on October 3, 2016, at the CAEL headquarters in Chicago. There were 22 attendees, including representatives from colleges and universities in the Chicago area, guest presenters, as well as CAEL staff. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

## Veterans First Act

S. 2921

Eric Gardiner, Professional Staff Member, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
(Senator Richard Blumenthal)

David Shearman, Professional Staff Member, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
(Senator Johnny Isakson)

Amy Sherman introduced Eric Gardiner, Professional Staff Member for Senator Richard Blumenthal, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and David Shearman, Professional Staff Member for Senator Johnny Isakson, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, who provided an overview of the Veterans First Act, S. 2921. This bipartisan Senate bill reflects the major initiatives of the Committee during the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress. 45 Senators cosponsored the bill, which was endorsed by 17 veteran, military, and advocacy organizations. It was voted out of committee without opposition, and includes 9 Titles addressing different areas of veterans law, healthcare, and benefits. Title IV, Education is summarized below; the other 8 Titles may be found in the accompanying slide presentation. More information is available at <http://www.veterans.senate.gov/>

### Title IV, Education

- 20 sections related to veterans education and employment
- Expansion or improvement of benefits
  - Authorizes additional benefits for spouses and children and allows surviving spouses more time to use education benefits
  - Allows VA to reinstate benefits to veterans when their school closes
  - Expands Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility to thousands of mobilized Reservists
  - Requires that any educational or training program pursued under Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment must also be approved for the purposes of the Montgomery GI Bill or Post-9/11 GI Bill
  - Authorizes VA to make an alternative election on behalf of an individual if the selection is not in their best interest; also requires that the veteran be notified
  - Improves the approval and oversight of education programs by VA

- Expands student veteran work study opportunities to State Approving Agencies, nursing homes, and cemeteries
- Expands opportunities for reservists to regain lost payments and lost entitlement for the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve education program when an activation interferes with their studies
- Allows individuals who lost eligibility of REAP to credit their previous service towards the Post-9/11 GI Bill
- Requires schools to include student academic progress information in their reports to the VA; also requires VA to include that academic progress information in its report to Congress
- Improved oversight and administration by VA and State approving agencies
  - Centralized reporting from groups of schools
  - VA shares with educational institutions the amount of benefit left for a student
  - Improves the statutory authority of SAAs to review and disapprove programs for failing to meet approval requirements
  - Gives the VA Secretary the ability to review additional SAA approval criteria
  - Requires any program designed to prepare an individual for licensure or certification in a state to meet that state's criteria
  - Requires that VA conduct an annual compliance survey of educational institutions and training establishments
  - Ensures GI Bill transferees that are dependents of active duty service members are guaranteed in-state tuition rate

Other ongoing educational issues in addition to the Veterans First Act were discussed, including the closure of ITT, the withdrawal of recognition of ACICS, and the issue of Ashford University.

There was some concern expressed by members of the group regarding the requirement in the bill for schools to report student academic progress. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Shearman assured everyone that this was for the purposes of data collection only, because members of Congress need a better understanding of who is using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits and what kind of progress they are making toward a satisfactory outcome as a result. Many dependents of veterans are also using the benefits, and Congress wants to track the data to see how effective this benefit is.

One VHEAG member shared that as of 2010, the VA began requiring schools to report graduation rates, but that the antiquated reporting system only allows the certifying official to report a veteran as having graduated if they are still using their benefits. This has resulted in artificially low data because it excludes anyone who graduated after their benefits had run out in a prior term. As a result, school outcomes are being reported unfairly in the G.I. Bill comparison tool based upon flawed data. Will this new reporting requirement have a robust enough system to show accurate data, or will it also penalize schools because it cannot accurately reflect what is really happening?

It was also noted by VHEAG members that SAP (Student Assistance Program) uses different rules than the VA for reporting student progress; there are discrepancies between what the Department of Education requires and what the VA requires at this time.

Amy pointed out the problem of some four year schools accepting large blocks of ACE credit recommendations and entering credits on the transcript that do not apply to the student's program of study. This hurts the student's academic progress because of the excess credits.

It was asked if the role of the school is being expanded in advising the student veteran which benefit to use, or if the VA will still be making that decision. Mr. Gardiner stated that this probably will not change, and that it is helpful for school advisors to assist students in understanding which benefit to use.

Another question was whether this bill will allow spouses of veterans to receive in-state tuition. This bill clarifies that spouses and dependents will be charged only in-state tuition, whether the service member is still on active duty or is within 3 years of separation from active duty.

A member expressed concern about a reduction in reporting fees because it will have a direct negative effect on services to student veterans. Amy encouraged the group to email any further questions about S.2921 to her for follow-up.

## Going Forward

### Suggestions for future VHEAG activities

Amy Sherman asked meeting participants to discuss ideas for creating better connections with employers—deliberate, thoughtful, strategic opportunities for schools to get to know employers from a veterans career pathway perspective. There could be a natural alliance with the Commercial Club of Chicago due to McCormick connections with them, but we need to first analyze how this could best work. What are student veterans studying? Where are they located in relationship to employers? We also need to collaborate in this process with the career services departments at each school.

In the discussion that followed, Kevin Smith agreed that it is imperative to maintain a close relationship with career services. GSU has a new grant called the “Junior Year Experience”, which is an internship; their career services department is very interested in awarding some of these to student veterans. This is an example of good cooperation with career services and a great opportunity for student veterans. Joshua Perschbacher liked the idea of a blueprint that would give student veterans a plan for an internship. One challenge is the fact that the Commercial Club does not include community organizations, etc. Amy wondered if perhaps the Veterans Healthcare Career Pathways Educational Network might be able to assist with this.

Amy took a quick poll:

Really interested: Kevin, Joshua, Cari, and Ramon

Might be interested: Brooke, Colleen, Anitra, Julie, Cynthia and Annette

Might not work: Anita, Denise, Marcus, and Bryan

Action Items:

1. All schools present will submit the following data to CAEL no later than November 30, 2016:
  - a. Number of student veterans
  - b. Their major fields of study
  - c. Their graduation dates



2. CAEL will:
  - a. Send a template of what data and how we would like the data reported no later than Monday, October 10, 2016.
  - b. Distribute a new survey on best practices by schools serving student veterans. This will be distributed immediately after Veterans Day festivities are over, and is due back no later than November 30, along with the data on student veteran enrollment (no. 1 above).
  - c. Set up a conference call for Anita Lumpkin with Kevin Smith and some of the GSU staff who recruit student veterans from 2 year schools. Julie Carballo and Anitra King also expressed an interest in being on in this call.
3. The schools who distribute a “resource kit” to their student veterans agreed to share those with the group. Please send to CAEL no later than October 15, 2016.
4. Kevin Smith will share Governor’s State University’s faculty training package on student veterans with the rest of the group. It is about 90 minutes long.
5. Anitra King, Julie Carballo, Kevin Smith and Anita Lumpkin agreed to help Amy develop an information guide for student veterans and faculty.

Suggestions for future VHEAG topics:

Kevin Smith: SVO engagement, SVO/SVA/SCO updates

Cynthia Rathunde: national data clearing house, legislative policy updates

Anita Lumpkin: How 4-year schools can create pathways for student veterans at 2-year schools

## Open Mic


During the open mic portion of the meeting, participants discussed the following:

- Cynthia Rathunde, Kevin Smith and Roman Ortega will all be attending the NAVPA Conference; please let Cynthia know of any issues you would like brought to NAVPA.
- Amy announced the CAEL Conference November 11-12, 2016. There will be veteran-specific sessions. If you are interested in attending a session, please let Amy know.
- Anita Lumpkin announced a book signing by Phil Clay, author of the book *Redeployment* on October 20 at Loyola University Chicago.

## Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL)

Dr. Holly Passi, Staff Psychologist, Jesse Brown VA Medical Center

Dr. Holly Passi is a clinical psychologist at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. VITAL stands for Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership, and started as a pilot program in 2010 at about 5 campuses, placing a psychologist or a social worker on campus. Veterans are using educational benefits to go back on campus, but they are not always accessing all of the veterans benefits to which they are entitled. The intent was to go to the student veterans on campuses instead of waiting for them to come to a VA facility in order to create a personal connection between student veterans and the VA. It was also to lessen the stigma associated with mental health services and make them more accessible.



VITAL treats common clinical issues such as PTSD, depression, TBI, substance abuse, and sleep disturbances, to name a few, as well as medical issues such as chronic pain, tinnitus, or light sensitivity due to TBI. Dr. Passi shared the many relevant VA specialty services available on campus for student veterans (please see presentation for details), as well as what she is able to assist with directly. She talked about using both a “top-down” (institution-driven) approach combined with a “bottom-up” (student-driven) approach, each of which compliments the other when used in tandem. She talked about the use of Peer Advisors in Veteran Education (PAVE). The best practices involve using the existing infrastructure on campus, utilizing “warm hand-offs” and in general making everything personal with good follow through.

## De-Escalation Strategies for Student Veterans with PTSD

Shannon Kissinger, Policy Associate, Swords to Plowshares

Swords to Plowshares (STP) teaches cultural competency to people who are not military veterans, such as first responders, students, faculty, campus staff, etc. Only 10% of all veterans have actually seen combat; the other 90% are usually unrecognized. Many have served in Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). STP teaches about battle mind – how states of mind are different between combat life and civilian life. They also teach different types of de-escalation techniques to help people interact with veterans who have PTS issues.

One such technique is learning how to be present without speaking, which forces the individual to begin talking about their experiences. A motivational interviewing technique is called OARS: Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, and Summary statements. Another technique that Shannon shared is the so-called Grounding Technique, which can help a veteran pay attention to you if they are non-compliant, preoccupied and agitated. It is important to build rapport, ask factual logical questions, connect to resources, and avoid judgmental statements and questions.

These types of techniques can take many months of continuous practice to master them. These are not the type of tools that faculty would be able to master in a three- or four-hour training workshop. They can be difficult even for trained professional counselors to master. Shannon suggested the model: 1) show it/teach it, 2) demonstrate it, and 3) have faculty (students) do it. He tells schools, “Would you rather invest on the front end or the back end?” because ultimately they will be forced to invest, one way or the other. Cultural competency is important these days for many different cultures; why not include the veteran culture?

During the discussion that followed, Annette Wright pointed the challenge of getting faculty and staff to come to think of the Veteran Services Coordinator as a resource person. Shannon responded that it is vital to build relationships on campus. Holly Passi stressed the importance of integrating veterans awareness into the entire institutional culture. It is effective when the administration takes a “top-down” approach and tells faculty “this is what we do now at XYZ University.” Have everyone in the school include a veterans services statement in all syllabi. Colleen Tomanek shared that at Harper they have a first year veterans seminar taught by a professor who is an Army veteran. Holly reminded everyone that peer mentoring by experienced

student veterans is natural and important. Shannon recommended making connections with local community organizations such as the VFW or American Legion; also, form relationships with schools that are already good at this.

Several members agreed to share their resource “kits” or packets with the rest of the group (see action items).

## In Attendance

Julie	Carballo	North Central College
Eric	Gardiner	Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs (via phone; presenter)
Chip	Gross	CAEL
Sheri	Gross	Rush University
Anitra	King	Elgin Community College
Shannon	Kissinger	Swords to Plowshares (via phone; presenter)
Denise	Ledsinger	Northwestern University
Roman	Ortega	Lewis University (via phone)
Holly	Passi	Jesse Brown VA Medical Center (presenter)
Joshua	Perschbacher	Northeastern Illinois University
Ramon	Prieto	National Louis University
Cynthia	Rathunde	City Colleges of Chicago
Brooke	Roche	Oakton Community College
Georges	Sanon	Prairie State College (via phone)
David	Shearman	Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs (via phone; presenter)
Amy	Sherman	CAEL
Kevin	Smith	Governors State University
Cari	Stevenson	Kankakee Community College
Colleen	Tomanek	Harper College
Bryan	Tuika-Soske	Wilbur Wright College
Marcus	Williams El	
Annette	Wright	University of Illinois—Chicago