

Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group Meeting

McCormick Foundation and CAEL

February 10, 2012

Meeting Summary

Introduction and Opening Remarks

The third meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group was held on February 10, 2012 at DePaul University's Loop Campus. There were 26 attendees, including representatives from 23 colleges and programs serving the Chicago area. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

Illinois Waiver for First Payer Issue

After introductions and a recap of the October meeting, Cynthia Rathunde from Northeastern Illinois University shared information with the group about a possible Illinois waiver regarding the first payer issue for veterans' education benefits. The Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 intended to fix some of the problems with the original 2009 bill, but since it had to be a cost neutral bill, an additional change was added stipulating that federal GI bill education benefits would be "last payer." This means that state benefits and scholarships are counted first. Due to this change, more veterans have to pay for their education bills out-of-pocket. For example, someone with 50% benefits eligibility used to be able to use the federal benefits to pay first for half of the total tuition bill, and then scholarships or state benefits (such as the Illinois Veterans Grant) could cover the remainder. Under the new law, the state benefits and scholarships come first, and then the federal benefits cover half of the remainder, so there is always a balance that the student is responsible for.

Rodrigo Garcia and Joan Ryan from Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA) discussed the state's planned action:

- The Post-9/11 GI Bill was intended to lessen burden on veterans as well as the economy. However, this change in education benefits has put a burden on state schools as well as veterans
- IDVA is working with Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) to change regulations regarding education benefits rather than changing legislation. Once this is done, IDVA will go to the federal VA to request waiver

Garcia also noted that the Student Veterans of America is going to advocate before Congress for a change to the first payer rule, as well as additional changes such as a reinstatement of original rules on break pay and to allow wounded warriors to be able to access their GI educational benefits while they are still recovering during active service.

The group discussed ways in which it could aid these efforts:

- Collect and share stories of individual veterans that are affected by the first payer rule

- Write an op-ed about this issue from the perspective of the student veteran as well as from the institutions that need to help them navigate the complexities of the changes
- Develop a letter of support template to share with college presidents in anticipation of future advocacy needs; Garcia agreed to provide written details of what the state and SVA will be requesting.

Garcia also provided a brief explanation of Illinois JobLink, a web database of available job openings and jobseekers. The state is encouraging all veterans looking for jobs to sign up and indicate that they are veterans, since there are many instances when employers are specifically looking to hire veterans. Garcia provided brochures as well as the URL for signing up (<https://illinoisjoblink.illinois.gov/ada/>), and he asked the group to encourage its student veterans to sign up.

Finally, Garcia shared that Illinois is a pilot site for a licensure and credentialing project that will be linking military skills to credentials.

Garcia and Ryan shared some upcoming dates:

- March 28 Job Fair at the Chicago Hilton
- Late March training for veterans services coordinators
- April 13 meeting of the Illinois ACME in Springfield

Outreach to College Leadership

Amy Sherman led a discussion about the idea of the group planning an event to educate college presidents on the needs and contributions of student veterans. The group agreed that September might be the best month for such an event. Ideas for the agenda include:

- Present what McCormick grantees have been learning about veterans in Illinois
- Have someone of influence speak at the event
- Discuss best practices from a university that does great things for veterans on campus and have them talk about it
- Look into displaying the Purple Heart Traveling Wall

Richard Kennedy, Keith White, Adam Navarro-Lowery, and Haydee Nunez offered to serve on the planning group.

Faculty/Staff Training- Understanding Student Veterans

Richard Kennedy from American Intercontinental University shared a PowerPoint presentation that he uses to educate his faculty and staff on student veterans. Highlights include:

- What are military students looking for?
 - Someone to help them with the transition into college- to explain to them what they do not know

- Help them understand their benefits and to get the most out of them
- To have their teachers be aware of the fact that they are military or veteran students
- Two potential complications of Veteran Status
 - People who are veterans and think they are not
 - People who have already used their benefits but who think they qualify for the new GI Bill
- Key Concerns Military students want assistance with:
 - Their transition into college
 - Financing their education
 - Getting reacquainted with the educational environment

Open Mic Time: Questions for the Group

The meeting provided a designated time for the attendees to ask questions of the rest of the group regarding issues that they are dealing with, questions about how to solve problems, or just requests for new ideas and strategies.

Question: What strategies do you have for social opportunities or other ways to bring veterans together?

To help identify more veterans and to bring them into the veterans office, one member offers Refuel Packs with a card and de-stress tips during final/exam weeks. Veterans find out about this Pack by word-of-mouth or emails from the veteran representative at their institution. Ideas such as the Refuel Pack do not take up much time nor do they cost much, so it is an easy way to identify their veterans and get them to come to the office.

Another way one of our Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group members acknowledges veterans is through a Birthday Club, which is a plastic bag of candy along with a packet of information for veterans on their birthday.

Other Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group members shared that they coordinate veteran-specific events throughout the year. The key is to offer a variety of events so that they attract new veterans each time. Veterans enjoy connecting with each other at these events; it is the new VFW. One institution hosts a Christmas Party at the VFW. Another institution offers a physical training club or sports teams for veterans.

Overall, strategies for getting vets interested include using food and planning different events for various types of veterans.

Additionally, educational institutions have been working on ways to honor veterans in the educational setting. For instance, Salute is an honors society for veterans. Another example is a special graduation stole for veterans at graduation with a private ceremony for veterans and their family before graduation with the rest of the student body.

Question: Would any other colleges be interested in a sports tournament for student vets?

Question: Might we consider having field trips to each other's campuses to see your facilities and what you do?

Next Steps for This Group

- Rodrigo will provide information from his upcoming meetings so that CAEL can develop a template Letter of Support that each institution can use
- If appropriate, develop an Op-Ed/Editorial on veterans benefits (First Payer)
 - CAEL will reach out to each institution to gather stories
- Each education institution needs to tell students about the Illinois JobLink website and to join (especially the Plus program)
- Next Meeting: April 23rd, 11-2pm
 - Location of next meeting? Both Loyola University and National Louis University have offered for us to use their space
 - Please email ideas for meeting topics, best practices

Attendees

Richard Kennedy	American Intercontinental University
Marco Masini	Benedictine University
Kendrea Atkins	City Colleges of Chicago – Daley College
Marla Davis	City Colleges of Chicago – Harold Washington College
Adam Navarro-Lowery	City Colleges of Chicago – Truman College
Sharron Williams	City Colleges of Chicago – Olive-Harvey College
Edward Davis	City Colleges of Chicago – Wilbur Wright College
Haydee Nunez	DePaul University
Keith White	Governors State University
Rodrigo Garcia	Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
Joan Ryan	Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
Janet Deatherage	Loyola University
Jeremy Kingery	Moraine Valley Community College
Charnell Thomas	National Louis University
Cynthia Rathunde	Northeastern Illinois University
Julia Jenkins	Northwestern University
Carissa Davis	Prairie State College
James Flagg	Robert Morris University
Asia Mitchell	Roosevelt University
Debra Barkowski	St. Xavier University
Annette Wright	UIC
Christopher Guymon	University of Chicago
Christopher Chalko	Veterans Upward Bound
Becky Klein-Collins	CAEL
Christina Hardman	CAEL
Amy Sherman	CAEL
Anna Laubach	McCormick Foundation