

Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group Meeting

**McCormick Foundation and CAEL
April 23, 2012**

Meeting Summary

Introduction and Opening Remarks

The fourth meeting of the Veterans Higher Education Affinity Group was held on April 23, 2012 at Loyola University Chicago's Water Tower campus. There were 31 attendees, including representatives from 22 colleges and programs serving the Chicago area. A full list of attendees is provided at the end of this summary.

After welcoming the group, Becky Klein-Collins summarized the results of the survey on possible meeting topics that was sent to the group in March. She noted that the two subjects that generated the most interest were mental health issues and education benefits. In response, Cynthia Rathunde was invited to give a presentation on education benefits at the April 23rd meeting. There has also been some interest in making training on benefits available to people who are not members of the affinity group, which could be done through a separate meeting or a webinar. For the next affinity group meeting, CAEL will invite a speaker to discuss student veterans and mental health issues with the group. One possibility would be to invite the Department of Defense's Center for Deployment Psychology to present a workshop similar to one it gave at Roosevelt University a year ago.

Update on Policy Issues

Rodrigo Garcia and Joan Ryan from the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) shared updates on policy issues and three new initiatives under consideration by the IDVA.

Garcia reviewed the first-payer issue discussed at the February affinity group meeting and explained that a waiver that applies to veteran students who are less than 100% eligible for GI Bill benefits would prevent those veterans from having to pay out-of-pocket for educational expenses. Kendrea Atkins shared the story of a student at Daley College who has 50% eligibility for GI Bill benefits and whose experiences illustrate the problem. Under the current system, the Illinois Veterans Grant (IVG) is used first and the GI Bill second; because the student has 50% eligibility, the GI bill only covers half of the balance, leaving the student with out-of-pocket costs. However, if the State of Illinois became the last payer, the GI bill would cover 50% and the IVG could cover the full remaining balance; the student would not be left with out-of-pocket costs.

Garcia urged members of the group to advocate for a waiver by writing a letter from the group to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). The letter should urge ISAC to institute new regulatory language that establishes the state as the last payer. Once that new language is in place, the state can request a waiver of the "last payer" rule for the GI Bill education benefits. CAEL will work on a draft letter for schools to sign. The letter from the group to ISAC should be done before Memorial Day weekend.

Scott Stratton raised another issue related to state and federal benefits payments. Since the federal and state Tuition Assistance (TA) programs have been merged into one website, certifying officials have had some difficulty in distinguishing between federal and state TA claims. State TA benefits can be used along with GI Bill benefits, but federal TA benefits cannot; since the websites merged, some state TA claims have been denied because they appear to be federal TA claims.

The first proposed initiative on which Garcia asked for the group's feedback was the creation of a consortium of veteran-friendly schools. This would be modeled on an employment consortium that will be launched in the next few weeks that aims to promote the hiring, recruitment, and retention of veterans by certifying veteran-friendly employers. Institutions that want to become members of the consortium would have to take certain steps, related to the Governor's Award for Excellence in Education, to receive veteran-friendly certification. This process would be a pledge system, not an official certification system, so there would be no cost to schools. Feedback from the group on this initiative was generally positive; members mentioned the following questions and suggestions:

- Would "veteran-helpful" be a more useful and accurate designation than "veteran-friendly?"
- Could the MOU guidelines used by the Department of Defense for schools be used?
- How would the state promote the initiative?
 - Through TAP classes?
- How would this listing be differentiated from other lists of "veteran-friendly" institutions such as the G.I. Jobs listing?

The second possibility on which Garcia requested input was a change in the eligibility guidelines for the Illinois Veterans Grant to include those who have received general discharges under honorable conditions; currently only those with honorable discharges are eligible. Under this proposal, roughly 8,000-10,000 more veterans would become eligible for benefits. The characterization of the discharge would be taken into account, with a focus on extending benefits to those discharged under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or for medical reasons.

Finally, the IDVA wanted to gauge interest in a proposal to provide training to veterans coordinators at private institutions that is comparable to the training provided to their counterparts at public colleges and universities. Members of the group who are employed at private institutions said they believed this would be beneficial.

Chris Chalko shared some information about the Military and Veterans Educational Reform Act of 2012 (SB 2179) proposed by Sen. Jim Webb. Chalko provided two handouts intended to make everyone aware of the provisions of the bill. Amy Sherman said that the agenda for the next affinity group meeting would include time for further discussion of the issue.

Update on College Leadership Outreach

Amy Sherman shared the progress that the working group has made in refining plans for an event for college and university leaders:

- Possible dates include September 19, 20, 21, 27, 28 or October 1 or 2. These dates should avoid the beginning of the fall semester, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur.

- The University Club is a possible venue.
- Items on the agenda would include a celebrity speaker and a panel on promising practices.
 - Rodrigo Garcia suggested that Col. Sutherland would be a good speaker.
- We need to develop a call to action for the meeting that will motivate leaders to take further steps to resolve the issues discussed at the event.
- The event is intended to draw in those at the provost level and above.
 - After some discussion, the group decided that we could be open to discussion with individual institutions about bringing in whomever has decision-making power.

The update concluded with a discussion of the most effective ways to ensure that college leaders will attend the event. Rodrigo Garcia offered to do whatever he could to bring people together, including reaching out to invitees personally. Another possibility is to bring in speakers from organizations with national reputations, such as the Military Family Research Institute, SVA, ACE, and Lumina. Anna LauBach suggested the formation of a host committee, which could include the McCormick Foundation and the state; invitations to the event might be especially persuasive if they included names of all of the agencies on the host committee.

Veterans Education Benefits Mini-Training

Cynthia Rathunde from Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) presented an overview of veterans education benefits in response to requests from the group for training on some of the issues they encounter most frequently.

An issue for those who work with veteran students is that there is a conflict between students' need for advising and the restrictions imposed by the VA on telling students about benefits to which they may be entitled. Yet it is really important for advisors to understand and consider both the full range of benefits available to students and students' specific educational goals. For example, if a student is completing an undergraduate degree at a public institution and hopes to go on to graduate school at a private school, it would be advisable for that student to use state benefits first, and then wait to use GI Bill benefits to cover the cost of the expensive graduate school, rather than using GI Bill benefits on comparatively inexpensive undergraduate tuition costs.

Rathunde's presentation covered several key points about combining benefits:

- The VA is the last payer, so any available aid (other than Title IV benefits) must be applied to students' accounts before VA benefits begin.
 - One exception to this rule is aid that will cover costs other than tuition and fees. So if, for example, a student has a scholarship that will cover the cost of living expenses, that scholarship may be applied after VA benefits.
- If a student receives a scholarship after VA benefits have been applied to the student's account, it creates an overpayment situation. In that case, school officials must go back to the VA and inform them that they have now overpaid.

The presentation also discussed how to handle benefits for non-standard academic terms.

Adam Navarro-Lowery from Truman College raised a question about students who are doing just enough academically to collect benefits (including a living stipend), but may not really be making progress toward degrees. How can these students be encouraged to do more? Rathunde said that this is a question that probably extends beyond benefits to transition issues. One possibility would be to put students who fall into this category in touch with the Soldiers Project (www.thesoldiersproject.org), which is a network of medical professionals available to provide counseling on issues that include transition difficulties. Navarro-Lowery added that access to on-campus wellness and disability centers would also be helpful.

Richard Kennedy from American InterContinental University asked for suggestions on resources for questions about veterans benefits. Members of the group provided the following suggestions:

- Bruce Gardner is the VA's Education Liaison Representative (ELR) for Illinois and should be available to respond to questions. He can be reached at (314) 552-9508 or bruce.gardner@va.gov.
- Cynthia Rathunde is now serving as the state representative for Illinois on the monthly VA conference call. She intends to develop a listserv to disseminate information about the latest benefits developments.
- Another helpful listserv is run by the National Association of Veteran's Program Administrators (NAVPA); the organization also offers an annual conference and trainings. The website is www.navpa.org.
- Scott Stratton said that he has found Rob Young, who works with the IDVA, to be a good resource for questions. His email address is robert.w.young@il.gov.
- The VA website also offers a benefits calculator designed to help veterans determine how best to take advantage of multiple benefits on the website for its Educational and Vocational Counseling (Chapter 36) program. The website is www.gibill.va.gov/support/counseling-services.

Open Mic Time

Becky Klein-Collins began by asking the group if more training was needed on benefits.

- Richard Kennedy suggested that it might be helpful to develop a glossary of benefits terminology.

James Flagg said that Robert Morris University is trying to develop a counseling program and asked how other institutions have structured similar programs.

- Several members of the group noted that it's important to keep in mind that many veterans avoid talking to counselors who are not veterans themselves.
 - One option is to refer students to their VA counselors.
- NIU also has a very good counseling program that it might be helpful to look at.
- Doctors from Hines and Jesse Brown VA Hospitals can come to campus to present to faculty on how to spot PTSD.

Haydee Nunez from DePaul asked how other institutions have handled data collection in order to track veteran students and help them access their benefits.

- Institutions can ask veterans to self-identify on admissions applications.

- Because those who have not served in combat may not self-identify as veterans, it may be more effective to ask applicants whether they have ever served in the military.
- Another possibility is to ask if they are military-connected.
- Veterans are also required to self-identify on FAFSA applications.
- Encouraging veterans to connect with Illinois JobLink can be helpful.
- Members of the group also suggested several strategies for identifying veterans who may already be on campus:
 - Hold information sessions that will attract veterans. These do not necessarily have to be on GI Bill benefits; they might also offer information on subjects such as transferring credits or VA home loans.
 - On-campus social or community-building events can be low-cost and effective ways of bringing in veterans.
 - Kendrea Atkins ran a plant contest at Daley College to bring in veterans.
 - Adam Navarro-Lowery organizes potluck events.
 - Scott Stratton suggested organizing a chapter of SALUTE, the national veterans honors society.
 - Setting up a chapter doesn't cost anything.
- Offering a free honor stole to wear at commencement can also help identify veterans who are graduating.

Dates to Remember

- There will be an Illinois ACME meeting in Springfield on May 31.
- The City of Chicago is holding an event in honor of veterans on July 28.
- The next affinity group meeting will be held on July 12 from 1 to 4 pm. This will be the event focusing on mental health issues and student veterans.

Next Steps

- CAEL will prepare a letter from the affinity group to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC).
- If you would like to attend the Illinois ACME meeting on May 31, let Richard Kennedy know and he will provide details.
- CAEL will follow-up in the fall on a possible presentation on benefits for a wider audience; please be prepared to give feedback.
- Determine the location of the July 12 meeting.

Meeting Attendance

Name	Institution
Richard Kennedy	American InterContinental University
Linda Owens	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
Scott Stratton	DeVry University
Keith White	Governors State University
Rodrigo Garcia	IDVA
Joan Levy	IDVA
Cheryl Hlavac	Joliet Junior College
Janelle Wade	Loyola University
Janet Deatherage	Loyola University
Edward Roberts	Loyola University
Jeremy Joslin	Loyola University
Lynn Graves	Loyola University
General McArthur	Morraine Valley Community College
John Dill	National Louis University
Cynthia Rathunde	Northeastern Illinois University
Julia Jenkins	Northwestern University
James Flagg	Robert Morris
Debra Barkowski	St. Xavier University
Annette Wright	UIC
Rita Vazquez	University of Chicago
Christopher G Chalko	Veterans Upward Bound
Amy Sherman	CAEL
Becky Klein-Collins	CAEL
Charlotte Cahill	CAEL
Anna LauBach	McCormick Foundation