New York State Senate Public Hearing

Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs
&
Committee on Higher Education

Examining the Programs and Potential for Job Retraining for Returning Veterans in Their Pursuit of Higher Education in the State of New York

Testimony of:

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Stavisky and Chairman Adams and members of the New York State Senate’s Higher Education and Veterans Committees. My name is Linda Frank, and I am the Director of the Office of Veteran and Military Education at SUNY’s Empire State College. I am also the President-elect of the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME), a national organization comprised of hundreds of educational institutions, military agencies and individuals engaged in the delivery of high quality education to our military personnel, our veterans and their families. CCME membership includes, but is not limited to, the Department of Defense’s Voluntary Education Department, the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES), state Advisory Councils for Military Education, Service members Opportunity Colleges (SOC) and the American Council on Education (ACE). CCME’s mission is to promote and provide military education programs and services, advocate for appropriate military education policy, and facilitate communication between the membership and the Department of Defense educational support network.

SUNY Empire State College serves 20,000 students, with approximately ten percent being service members, veterans and military spouses. The college is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and we offer certificates, associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees in numerous programs and various delivery formats. Students can pursue their degree programs through face-to-face, independent and/or group studies working with SUNY faculty mentors at one of our 34 locations around the state. They also have the option of pursuing their degree entirely online, or they can combine these methods, meeting face-to-face with faculty while doing some of the work on-line. The courses are academically rigorous, flexible in terms of scheduling, and accessible to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

The college takes a student-centered approach to learning, allowing students to take ownership of their education through an individualized degree planning process. We apply this same approach to our work with active-duty military personnel and veterans. We engage our veterans in a conversation about their previous formal and informal education, allowing us to evaluate their life experience and award college credit consistent with the guidelines and standards established by the American Council on Education. Working with a faculty mentor, students review and evaluate their prior learning and experience in relation to their academic goals, and design a personalized degree program that matches their interests and experience to their career goals. The process provides the flexibility to maximize transfer credit, including credits for military training and standardized exams, towards a degree program. The mentor-student relationship is an important component of student retention and success, and adds a more personal touch to the academic experience.

We at Empire State College are a trusted education partner in several military education programs including the Navy’s College Distance Learning Partnership program, the Army’s College of the American Soldier program, the GoArmyEd education portal, the Air Force’s Air University-Associate to Baccalaureate Cooperative and the Marine Corps’ Academic Explorer portal. We maintain a strong military
presence in New York, from our office at Ft. Drum, New York, to the Coast Guards’ Station on Staten Island, where our faculty teach group studies.

We also maintain military outreach specialists on several military installations in California, Virginia and Colorado. They are available to meet with education counselors, service members, veterans and their families to answer their questions, provide appropriate support and discuss potential transfer credit, college processes, and education goals.

In partnership with the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs, Empire State College provides office space at its Saratoga Springs, New York location to a VA benefits counselor. This partnership allows both parties to work very closely to address some of the barriers and challenges that veterans face when considering entering the education environment. The VA Benefits Counselor provides specialized services to veterans and their family members in Saratoga County and to all Empire State College student veterans across the state. For many veterans, it is comforting and reassuring to speak with someone who can relate directly to their military experience.

Given this framework, SUNY Empire State College and its Office of Veteran and Military Education are uniquely positioned to serve military personnel, veterans and their families anywhere in New York State. We have taken a lead role in developing processes and advancing policies that encourage and support these brave men and women interested in beginning or completing their degree.

We have found that in order for service members, veterans and their family members to be successful in pursuit of their degree, colleges not only need to address the challenges these students face within the educational environment, but they also need to understand the military culture, and the commitments and stresses that student veterans are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. We must work as a real partner with community agencies and organizations to provide appropriate support services and resources in an effort to address challenges that range from the most basic to the most complex.

Many veterans, especially women, simply fail to self identify on admissions applications, when applying for college. For those veterans that do self identify, making their way through the myriad rules and red tape of the various procedures, forms and personalities simply to access earned benefits, and to use those benefits to enroll in college, are often overwhelming. As a result, many never do access the benefits they have earned from their service. Even more disconcerting, many veterans enroll in colleges that are not accredited, or in colleges that provide little if any support or guidance, thereby using up their benefits and getting little in return. For example, many schools are not aware of, or choose not to recognize, the American Council on Education’s (ACE) recommended credit for military training, forcing the students to spend additional time and use additional state and/or federal funding on credits they would not otherwise need. Even the idea of sitting in a traditional classroom with younger students who cannot relate to their very personal and unique experiences, can be a challenge and a barrier to a decision to matriculate.
Veterans can face a range of personal and social issues as well. Some must deal with medical conditions and injuries suffered in battle. For others, re-acclimating to civilian life, starting a family, re-establishing social connections within the community, and finding a job, are all critical to the transition. The ability to either establish a business or find a job that provides some security and opportunity to advance is often a priority, and our colleges, working with other state agencies and resources can and should help them achieve this goal.

There are other barriers veterans face that we have come to recognize.

- They struggle to understand themselves and their behaviors in a non-military environment.
- They struggle with finances. Today’s veterans are more similar to adult learners rather than traditional college students. They are very often raising a family while attending college and, depending on their funding eligibility and their employment situation, their tuition benefits and housing allowance may not be substantial enough to support a family while attending college.
- In addition to information often being overwhelming, as previously stated, there are multiple steps and multiple forms to complete and submit before receiving the benefits they have already earned.
- The command structure that was so logical and so familiar to them in the military is non-existent or unclear in the civilian world.
- They are suddenly without the support of the “unit” they came to rely so heavily upon while in the military.
- There is sometimes a disconnect between educational institutions and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Policies, processes and services vary from school to school and from state to state.
- Members of the college community and/or the workforce may not understand or be sensitive to military culture, the challenges and the needs.

Recognizing both the great contributions our veterans can and do make to our society, as well as the very real challenges they face, Empire State College has worked to develop an environment that provides a personal touch.

How is SUNY Empire State College addressing some of the barriers?

- Veterans speak to individuals who have been trained specifically to anticipate and answer their questions…and avoid passing them off to a second or third party.
- Our staff has developed an expertise in the many technical aspects of veterans’ benefits. They also understand how our administrative and academic programs work, so they can help guide a veteran through every step in the process.
- Student veterans and potential student veterans have one person they can continually go back to and who they can depend on to get the answers they need quickly and efficiently.
- Most importantly, our staff understands the challenges that veterans bring to the college when considering higher education options.
Last year, Empire State College was awarded an American Council on Education (ACE)/Wal-Mart grant for the “Serving those who Served” initiative. Our project, “Transitions 101” is to create a virtual resource center that provides clear information and resources for service members, veterans and families who are transitioning back from deployments and/or out of the military to their families, communities, work places and educational institutions. This resource center would also simplify the application and enrollment processes for students, providing relevant options based on the student veteran’s needs and preferences.

Also last year, prior to receipt of the ACE/Wal-mart grant, the Office of Veteran and Military education launched a Trauma and Stress Management training module that is available to the general public at http://commons.esc.edu/trauma-and-stress. The purpose of the module is to educate the college community and the general population about the challenges of dealing with post-traumatic stress, acute stress and traumatic brain injury. The openly accessible space allows visitors to browse the site anonymously, post comments and questions, access multiple resources, engage in discussions through the blog feature, and review current articles via Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication (RSS) subscriptions. The site is monitored by an Empire State College employee who has a background in stress management.

Empire State College is interested in continually exploring ways in which agencies and institutions in New York State can improve our understanding of, and services to our service members, veterans and their families. A few ideas to explore include:

- Establishing a policy requiring all schools to allow veterans to enroll without paying tuition and fees out-of-pocket while awaiting federal and state funding
- Creating a veterans’ ombudsman position within SUNY and connect that person with the Small Business Development Centers counselors (SBDC’s) to link education with entrepreneur opportunities.
- Creating and supporting a New York State Advisory Council for Veteran and Military Education.
- Placing VA benefits counselors/advocates on college campuses
- Once a veteran has been identified and is interested in enrolling at a SUNY school, SUNY, or the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) should have the ability to produce, based on each individual’s specific record of service, a comprehensive benefits package that provides the amounts of financial aid that the veteran is eligible to receive from all federal and state programs.
- Providing ongoing information and support for veterans throughout their re-adjustment period, no matter how long it takes.
- Providing extensive and integrated career resources that involve more than just job fairs and links to web sites, but rather concrete connections to the key people who can place them in a job.
- Establishing entrepreneurship opportunities such as a contest sponsored by state/local businesses and schools. Students would have an opportunity to submit a business plan for their business idea and the winner would receive start-up money and access to consultants who are business experts.
Despite many challenges, service members, veterans and their families bring an enormous amount of practical experience, training and discipline to whatever they decide to do. They bring a can-do spirit, they are truly goal oriented, they recognize the importance of teamwork, have a strong work ethic that is driven to complete whatever task is set before them. They have demonstrated the ability to overcome obstacles, work efficiently and effectively to meet deadlines and produce whatever outcome had been established. These men and women are a very special resource for New York, and we must provide the kind of environment that will encourage them to remain here and help rebuild the state’s economy.