Over the past several years, notable program and policy shifts have occurred within federal agencies related to educational opportunities and consumer protections for servicemembers and veterans. Institutions serving these students experience increased reporting requirements and program accountability. Given the significant financial investment of educational benefits to our eligible servicemembers, veterans and family members, it is reasonable (and prudent) to escalate oversight and accountability protections. Key drivers of these program shifts include (a) Presidential Executive Order 13607, the federal mandate to implement Principles of Excellence; (b) ongoing federal budget constraints despite increasing enrollments in educational benefit programs; and (c) concerted efforts to reduce the unemployment rates for veterans.

Program Oversight and Accountability

Executive Order 13607, “Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions,” signed in 2012, directed agencies to implement Principles of Excellence for all educational institutions interacting with veterans, servicemembers and their families, and helped ensure beneficiaries had adequate and meaningful cost and quality information to make informed choices about VA education benefits and approved programs. The primary federal agencies with responsibility for providing education programs for military-connected student populations—the U.S. Department of Education, Veterans Affairs (VA) Education Service division, and the Department of Defense Voluntary Education division—have now implemented that Executive Order. Consumer education resources (educational search tools providing college comparison data), consumer alerts, and enhanced compliance monitoring are now enabled to assist military student populations to make informed education and career-related decisions. Veteran-serving institutions provide educational cost and data-driven outcome measures about completion rates and other student success metrics to inform/guide prospective military students. Where “success metrics” and dashboard performance indicators identify potential enrollment or financial issues, targeted risk-based assessments for institutions

IT STRIKES ME ODD THAT MANY AASCU INSTITUTIONS SEEM UNAWARE OF THE potential for engaging greater numbers of military-connected students who come with substantial tuition assistance and major educational benefit packages. The Veterans Administration (VA) Education Services Division alone is responsible for processing and payment of claims in the amount of $12 billion dollars annually for over 1,016,000 eligible veteran and family member students. Perhaps it is not a lack of awareness but rather a disinterest in the “strings attached” that have kept state colleges and universities from expanding initiatives to encourage and draw military students to their campuses.
participating in DoD and VA education benefit programs act to safeguard education funding for military-connected populations.

The Executive Order also called for a robust, centralized complaint process for military-connected students who receive federal aid, military tuition assistance, and/or veterans’ education benefits to help ensure consumer protection. The agencies cited in the Executive Order (Departments of Defense, Education, Justice, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau) track, oversee and provide responses to student complaints. Student complaints using agency-specific online feedback sites are fed into an inter-agency repository with the type and number of complaints displayed in DoD and VA publicly accessible websites.

The DoD Voluntary Education division released its five-year 2015-2020 DoD Voluntary Education (VolEd) Strategic Plan, formulated to direct and shape ongoing educational experiences for servicemembers. It provides resources to assist servicemembers to make informed decisions about their education and career goals. It also addresses economic competitiveness in voluntary education programs and services provided so servicemembers are equipped “with an education that improves their attainment of desired skills, employability, and competitiveness in the 21st century marketplace.” (2015-2020 DoD Voluntary Education Strategic Plan, p. 6). DoD has built enterprise technology solutions with evidence-based monitoring to ensure Principles of Excellence compliance of participating institutions.

**Veteran Unemployment Challenge**

A national issue that impacts both VA and DoD educational programs is the economic competitiveness of the veteran population. A national imperative is to boost the career readiness and employment options for servicemembers transitioning to the civilian workforce. While post-9/11-era veterans earn higher median salaries (11 percent) than their non-veteran counterparts, the veteran unemployment rate has been consistently above the non-veteran rate from 2005 through 2014 (after adjusting for demographics). According to Veterans Affairs’ 2015 Veteran Economic Opportunity Report, “The 18–24 age group is of interest because the highest unemployment rates for Veterans and non-Veterans occur in this age bracket” (p. 59).

Veterans who lack a post-secondary education or training certification have more difficulty finding employment than their civilian counterparts. One of the key strategies for improving economic competitiveness is the Post 9/11 GI Bill®; with more than half of its beneficiaries being veterans under 25 years of age. The VA developed Veterans Economic Community Initiatives (VECI) in 25 communities with large veteran populations. Transitioning servicemembers, veterans and their spouses receive certification training, career readiness planning programs, and professional workplace skills in Community Learning Hubs.

Central to that DoD Voluntary Education Strategic Plan is the vision that “DoD VolEd supports the transition into civilian life by providing servicemembers with an education that improves their attainment of desired skills, employability, and competitiveness in the 21st century marketplace” (2015–2020 DoD Voluntary Education Strategic Plan, p. 6). DoD’s assessment of their operational environment is that postsecondary programs and access to educational benefits are essential for servicemembers; removing existing impediments that prevent servicemembers from pursuing and completing their educational goals is a programmatic priority.

A focus area in the DoD VolEd strategic plan is to guide and direct servicemembers toward informed educational
choices. Servicemembers are strongly encouraged to consider long-term career goals and employment options and engage in educational checkpoints throughout their military experience. Though servicemembers can elect to use their military tuition assistance funds on any post-secondary educational goal they want, guidance resources (consumer information, self-assessment tools, educational counseling services) supported by DoD focus on informed decisions that impact a servicemember’s economic, employment and personal well-being beyond military service. This programmatic shift toward educational planning and greater focus on economic competitiveness can be found in Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Degree Network System and a newly developed Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. The SOC Degree Network System—a coordinated system of degrees that achieve a 40 percent standard of two-way guaranteed transferability in major and major-related courses—focuses on emerging and high-demand career fields such as aviation studies, cyber security, health science foundations and homeland security.

SOC, in partnership with DoD and Military Services, recently developed a new Career and Technical Education (CTE) Resource List that identifies credit-bearing certificate programs in career and technical education fields. The CTE resource list is designed to assist service member students, along with military education counselors and academic advisers, to identify career and technical education pathways to civilian careers with positive growth potential. A key feature of the CTE Resource is that courses in the identified undergraduate certificate programs must integrate fully into the college’s associate or bachelor-level degree program. Servicemembers who complete a stand-alone certificate program can later build on that educational credential without credit acceptance or transfer issues.

Reading the Tea Leaves

Recent accreditation authority revocations and closures of several for-profit institutions signal increased and integrated oversight by multiple federal agencies. With national calls for greater oversight and program accountability to protect financial investments in military/veteran education benefits, we in higher education can anticipate enhanced compliance requirements and data-driven reporting for the military-connected student populations. The implementation of integrated data collection systems enables potential students, the campus community, legislators, and the general public to access and use comparative data about military-connected student enrollments, course and degree completions. The provision of unbiased and data-driven information about career and educational options readily accessible for servicemembers and veterans is a positive outcome. Motivating students to incorporate consumer information into their educational decision-making process may be a more difficult outcome.

Implications for colleges and universities follow:

- Consider partnering with Veteran Affairs and/or DoD in delivery of educational programs that closely align with bright economic outlooks. SOC’s new DNS guaranteed transfer networks in high-demand career fields are potential entry points. Plans for expanding homeland security and applied science and technology networks will help meet the growing employment demands in these areas. New DNS member institutions are being sought to participate in these degree areas offered through traditional classroom delivery, online delivery and hybrid delivery platforms.

- Veterans and active-duty servicemembers are pools of potential students with access to funds that are separate from both out-of-pocket cash and Title IV financial aid. Given current Title IV cost issues associated with the Pell Grant Program and ongoing cuts to state student aid programs, this implication may become more important in long-range institutional strategic planning.

- Veterans and active duty servicemembers are generally more comfortable with distance learning than traditional college-age students. For public institutions delivering or expanding rigorous academic programs online, this student population is well suited for recruitment.

The potential for engaging greater numbers of military-connected students is strong. Institutions need to work strategically on ways to best engage with government agencies to increase access to military-connected student populations. They need to understand and be able to cope successfully with the increased complexities of program oversight and accountability and compliance with Principles of Excellence.

Endnotes

2. 2015-2020 DoD Voluntary Education Strategic Plan, p. 4.
3. 2015-2020 DoD Voluntary Education Strategic Plan, p. 6

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