

STATEMENT BY
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MILITARY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY POLICY
REGARDING
PREVENTING ABUSE OF THE MILITARY'S TUITION ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM
BEFORE THE
FEDERAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT, GOVERNMENT INFORMATION,
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Chairman Carper and distinguished members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security, thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the management of the Department of Defense's (DoD) Voluntary Education Tuition Assistance Program and the steps we take to protect this taxpayer-funded benefit.

The Department's Voluntary Education Programs provide lifelong learning opportunities for the off-duty military community, contributing to enhanced unit readiness for our Nation. Education helps prepare our Service members to be better Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines; better thinkers, better analysts, and better leaders who will continue to make valuable contributions to our nation. Our programs meet the unique needs of the military off-duty student and, therefore, continue to attract a large percentage of the military population. Each year approximately one-third of our Service members enroll in post-secondary courses leading to associate, bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. Colleges and universities, through an extensive network, deliver classroom instruction to hundreds of military installations around the world. Service members also earn college credits for learning that has taken place outside the traditional classroom.

There are certain proclivities that make our military off-duty students and their needs unique. They attend school during off-duty hours, usually during the evening. They take courses in a part-time capacity, one or two classes a term. Often the military mission,

deployments, transfers or family obligations take precedence over their education so they have breaks of months or even years between taking courses, and completion of their degrees normally takes a long time. DoD provides assistance with these challenges through its programs and services, ensuring that opportunities for lifelong learning continue to exist for Service members throughout their careers.

The Military Tuition Assistance (TA) Program: DoD supports Service members in the pursuit of their educational goals via the military TA program to help defray the rising cost of tuition. Military TA often makes the difference between whether or not a Service member can afford to take a class. DoD is very cognizant of this fact and has set a requisite system in place for the management and oversight of the TA program. DoD has standardized the TA program across the Services for consistency providing uniform tuition assistance for voluntary off-duty college courses and degree programs. Under the current uniform TA policy which commenced in Fiscal Year 2003, all Service participants may receive up to \$4,500 of assistance per fiscal year and individual course costs have a \$250 per semester hour cap. Under the DoD management system, participation and accountability is required from multiple stakeholders to include the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Services, installation commanders, education officers, and the installation education center staff, all working together to ensure a positive experience for our Service members and that our education dollars are well spent. A Service member's participation in DoD-supported voluntary education programs begins with a visit to an installation education center or on-line through their Service

Education portal. There are approximately 350 DoD education sites worldwide, to include contingency areas like Iraq and Afghanistan. At these centers, education officers and education guidance counselors present Service members with an extensive menu of options, provide details about specific programs, help members design courses of study, and provide information on the tuition assistance program, grants, loans and other available funding options. Counselors also accomplish various administrative tasks to ensure that Service members receive maximum exposure to and benefits from available programs.

Oversight of Military TA - Prevention of Predatory Practices. Managing and protecting the quality of education provided our Service members is essential to the Department. In managing the tuition assistance program, all stakeholders must do their part and be held accountable, and a key stakeholder in this endeavor is the post-secondary institution. Underpinning these protections is DoD's requirement that all post-secondary institutions participating in the TA program, whether they are physically on our installations or not, must be accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. The criteria for being allowed to operate on our installations are even more stringent. Prior to allowing a school to operate on a military installation, an education officer seeks favorable tuition rates, and ensures appropriate student services and instructional support is provided by the schools. The base education staff conducts an education needs assessment to ensure that the colleges and universities providing post secondary instruction on the installations are offering education opportunities which are

appropriate for the population. Institutions granting undergraduate academic credit must also adhere to the Servicemembers Opportunity College (SOC) Consortium Principles and Criteria regarding the transferability of credit and the awarding of credit for military training and experience. In addition to the aforementioned, to operate on an installation, institutions must meet all of the following requirements: (1) Be chartered or licensed by a State government or the Federal Government, and have State approval for the use of veterans' educational benefits for the courses to be offered; (2) Conduct on-installation courses that carry identical credit values, represent the same content and experience, and use the same student evaluation procedures as courses offered through the main administrative and academic campus; (3) Maintain the same admission and graduation standards that exist for the same programs at the main administrative and academic office, and include credits from courses taken off-campus in establishing academic residency to meet degree requirements; (4) Charge tuition and fees that are not more than those charged to nonmilitary students; (5) Have established policies for awarding credit for military training by examinations, experiential learning, and courses completed using modes of delivery other than instructor-delivered, on-site classroom instruction.

Oversight of Military TA - Education Programs. In addition to the requirement that all schools must be accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, DoD evaluates the education programs that utilize TA dollars to ensure our Service members are receiving the highest caliber education. To accomplish this, DoD contracted with the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1991 to conduct a third

party, independent review of our on-installation programs called the Military Installation Voluntary Education Review (MIVER). This review assesses the quality of voluntary education programs at selected military installations each year and assists in the improvement of voluntary education programs through appropriate recommendations to colleges and universities and installation commanders.

To enhance this third-party review process, DoD is negotiating a new contract that will take the review approach one step further by including those programs not on our installations. We will use improved quality criteria to review programs of those institutions receiving TA dollars that provide traditional ‘brick and mortar’ based instruction and those in the rapidly expanding distance learning arena. The new contract will also institute a formal monitoring process requiring all schools, installations and the services to respond in writing to recommendations and actions taken to ensure there is continuous quality improvement in the educational services provided to our Service members. In addition, our new voluntary education policy, which has completed all coordination and is enroute to the Under Secretary for signature, requires all institutions participating in the TA program to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DoD which articulates the commitments and agreements of the educational institutions receiving TA. The policy applies to both traditional classroom and distance learning institutions operating on and off military installations.

DoD’s contract with SOC helps to strengthen its interaction with post-secondary institutions. SOC advocates for and communicates the needs of the military community

to the higher education community. SOC also ensures institutions are responsive to the special needs of Service members, assists the higher education community to understand the requirements of the military, and serves as the DoD liaison with institutions to resolve concerns and share program information to strengthen education relationships with DoD. These measures will assist DoD in ensuring that TA dollars are being applied to programs that are current and relevant.

Government Accountability Office (GAO) Evaluation. Our TA program recently underwent a very detailed examination by the GAO. I am pleased to say that their report on our management of this large and complex program was very favorable. The GAO made five administrative recommendations, all of which we concurred with and are implementing. We are developing a partnership and a series of sharing agreements with the Department of Education which will further enhance our interaction with post-secondary institutions. This partnership will provide DoD information to ensure schools are in compliance with the new Department of Education requirement that all schools have state authorization to offer distance or correspondence learning prior to our determining whether to issue tuition assistance funds. In addition, DoD is developing a sharing agreement to utilize information from the Department of Education's requirements reports from accrediting agencies and school monitoring reviews to assist in better targeting our third-party review process toward schools which have potential problems. This information will also be used to ensure TA funds are not being used to

pay for courses and programs that are not included within the scope of an institution's accreditation.

In addition to this partnership with the Department of Education, DoD is developing a more formal process to track recommendations for improvement from the third –party review which I mentioned previously. Finally, DoD is developing an automated system to document all concerns and complaints with regards to voluntary education, whether by students, DoD personnel, or schools. The system will track the complaint, status and record resolutions and will be operational by the third quarter of this year.

Conclusion. DoD is committed to offering high quality, comprehensive, lifelong learning opportunities for Service members and effectively delivering voluntary education programs that meet the changing needs of the military. Our programs assist Service members in gaining the knowledge they need for their chosen education and military career paths; ensuring they acquire the skills necessary to operate in a dynamic national security environment; and in returning to civilian life, that they are prepared to be successful in their chosen careers, leading contributors to their communities, and productive citizens in the 21st century.