

STATEMENT OF TERRY W. HARTLE
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BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS DEFENSE SUBCOMMITTEE
UNITED STATES SENATE

ON
VOLUNTARY MILITARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Testifying on behalf of: the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the American Council on Education (ACE), the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU).

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president at the American Council on Education (ACE), representing 2,000 public and private, two-year and four-year colleges and research universities. I am testifying today on behalf of ACE, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU).

The Department of Defense's (DoD) Military Tuition Assistance (TA) program provides important educational assistance to active duty service members. In FY2012, the TA program provided benefits of \$568.2 million to more than 286,000 service members. These education benefits were used at more than 3,100 institutions—nearly 1,900 of which are public or non-profit institutions. While the total number of students using the TA program is relatively small compared to the Post-9/11 GI bill (approximately 600,000) or the Pell program (approximately 9 million), it is important to remember that not all service members are eligible for GI bill benefits, or may not be eligible at the 100% benefit level, and many service members do not qualify for Pell grants. TA plays an important role in helping provide access to higher education for all the men and women in our armed forces.

This March, the Army, Air Force and Marines announced that, due to the sequester, they would suspend the TA program. We were very appreciative of the efforts by Congress and DoD to minimize the impact of the sequester on this program, which was able to resume in April. Secretary Hagel has been a strong supporter of maintaining the current benefit levels—generally, \$250 a credit hour with a \$4,500 per year maximum—even in the face of other funding challenges at DoD. Unfortunately, we understand that DoD employees responsible for administering this program will face furloughs this summer.

In my testimony today, I'd like to make four points about the TA program.

First, the postsecondary education needs of service members are often quite distinct from the needs of student veterans and other non-traditional and traditional student populations. For example, many active duty service members will place a premium on flexibility in scheduling courses, or on taking courses via distance learning, especially if they are on a tour or stationed overseas. While some service members join the military precisely because of the great educational benefits, others may join the military precisely because they didn't have success in high school or didn't think college was for them. TA provides these service members with an opportunity to test the water, to try a college level course and gain confidence and progress at their own pace towards earning a degree. TA can also support them in their military careers—such as using the benefit to increase their technical training in their field, study foreign languages important to our national security, or to gain civilian education needed to advance their careers in the service.

Second, for most service members, progress toward their educational goals is not always direct or straightforward. Service members often enroll in multiple institutions and experience frequent interruptions in their education due to deployment or other military obligations. A colleague at ACE told me that she first used TA to enroll at UMUC while stationed in Germany, but had to withdraw after she was called up to serve in Iraq. She then enrolled in Austin Peay State University (TN) while stationed at

Fort Campbell on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, but withdrew again when she was redeployed. While in Iraq, she enrolled in Penn State's World Campus—its online program—and was able to complete two courses thanks to the flexibility of their staff. Finally, after returning stateside and becoming a reservist, she used a combination of TA and Montgomery GI bill benefits to complete her BA at Penn State's campus in State College, Pennsylvania. Another colleague at ACE told me that her husband used TA to attend 5 different schools and his BA was “22 years in the making.”

The unique needs of service members and the complex path they take in pursuit of their education goals, as demonstrated by these examples, greatly complicates efforts to develop outcome measures to evaluate students and institutions. Usual standards, like retention, graduation and time to degree may not work very well. Make no mistake: outcome measures are critical. But these measures need to be carefully thought out and well-designed to work for the service member population. There are no “off the shelf” solutions.

Third, we need to ensure that TA program participation requirements remain manageable for institutions. TA is not a simple program to administer on campus and it is becoming more complex.

We have seen a proliferation of Service-specific requirements in recent years. Each of the Services has their own processing systems: the Army has the GoArmyEd portal; the Air Force has AIPortal; and the Marines, Coast Guard and Navy use the Navy processing portal. Each of the Services sets its own service member eligibility requirements. For example, the Navy does not provide TA benefits to service members on their first military assignment, and requires sailors to request TA within two weeks of the course start date. Each of the Services has different sets of institutional participation requirements. For example, the Army sets different requirements for its Letter of Instruction (LOI) and non-LOI institutions. One of the country's largest public research institutions was recently told by the Army that because they had 150 TA participants, they will now need to comply with more detailed and extensive LOI requirements. The Service-specific differences do not make sense and add a level of complexity to the program that is unnecessary and can discourage institutional participation. We urge DoD to move toward one common and uniform set of program requirements and a single processing portal.

Fourth, we need to ensure appropriate oversight and protections for TA funds. We strongly support proper oversight of the TA program and efforts to ensure that the program is providing value to service members and taxpayers. We know that Congress and DoD are anxious to take action against unscrupulous actors in this area and we fully support these efforts.

The Memorandum of Understanding and the Principles of Excellence take important steps in this direction, even though some requirements could benefit from further clarification. While these efforts have undoubtedly improved the oversight of the program, they have also made it more complex, requiring institutions to invest greater resources in order to participate. For schools with large military populations, economies of scale help this investment make sense. But for schools with relatively few TA participants, the administrative and compliance burden often looms large. Last year, the University of Illinois, which enrolls approximately 70,000 students, had only 25 students receiving TA, compared with

700 Post-9/11 GI bill recipients and nearly 18,000 Pell recipients. We need to find oversight mechanisms that will find and root out the bad actors, while being mindful of the burdens on institutions that serve relatively few TA recipients. We think there are a number of steps the Committee and DoD could consider in this regard and we would be happy to work with you to develop meaningful and appropriate measures.

In conclusion, the TA program supports the unique postsecondary education needs of our service members. At the same time, TA program requirements need to reflect a balance between providing necessary protections for service members and taxpayers and ensuring that a wide array of institutions continue to participate in the program. The service member population and their education needs are as diverse as the nearly 4,700 degree-granting institutions that make up our system of higher education. We encourage DoD to continue its outreach to institutions about TA program participation requirements, including those that serve a relatively small number of TA beneficiaries. We need to ensure that service members have access to a wide array of quality institutions and can choose to use their benefits at the institution that best meets their individual needs.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on this important program. I would be happy to answer any questions.