



# NAVPA

*NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VETERANS' PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS*

## TESTIMONY

ON

**H.R. 1291 the**  
**21st Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act**

Good morning Mr. Chairman, members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Sub-Committee on Benefits. I am David Guzman, President of the National Association of Veterans Program Administrators (NAVPA). I appreciate this opportunity to address you here this morning on this very important piece of veterans' legislation.

If I may, I would like to quote Wilson Compton, who was president of Washington State College from 1945 to 1951 who said in his May 1950 commencement address:

"You came with, - and most of you as part of - that mighty tide of War Veterans returning to the Schools and Colleges of America seeking opportunity, - or perhaps to be more exact, - the road to opportunity in a world at peace." (The GI Bill made this possible.)

NAVPA fully supports enhancements to the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) that would bring the benefit closer to the actual cost of attending college. The current amount of benefit received by a veteran student has not kept pace with the actual cost of attendance according to The College Board. This necessitates a veteran student's need to apply for financial assistance in the form of Federal Financial Aid (FFA). However, veteran students are placed at a disadvantage when compared with non-veteran students as they are penalized for having the benefit. Not only is their earned benefit considered a resource, which reduces the eligibility for other financial assistance, the initial amount they contribute is not considered in the FFA formula. The veteran students end up paying twice for the privilege of this benefit; first when they buy into the program while in their first year of service and again when the amount is discounted as a resource in the student Federal Financial Aid means computation. Also, veteran students do not receive their VA benefit allowance up-front, that is, at the same time financial aid is released and tuition payment is due at their college or university. They receive their MGIB benefit on an irregular monthly basis but only after they have self-verified their enrollment and

usually 45 to 65 days after the first of the month in which they qualify for this benefit.

As reported by the College Board, the escalating cost of attending a four-year institution of higher learning has outpaced inflation at almost double the rate. While many college enrollments are increasing, veteran enrollments are static due largely to the diminished value of the Montgomery GI Bill because of the financial aid offset and the lack of adequate funding as a stand-alone benefit. The average cost of tuition alone at a four-year public institution has grown to \$3,510 a year, a 4.5% increase this academic year. Last year's increase was 4.7% and this August we anticipate another hefty increase of around 4.5%. Again, these costs are tuition alone and do not include the ever increasing costs of books and supplies, mandatory fees or subsistence. When the cost of books, supplies, room and board, transportation and other traditional costs are factored in, the cost of attending a four-year public commuter college rises to \$9,229. These figures are for this 2000-2001 academic year. This cost increases slightly more for the non-traditional student, the veteran who is encumbered with additional responsibilities and needs. The average veteran student is an adult 24 years old who served in the US military service for three to four years. Over half of the veteran students are married and have one to two children. These veterans have acquired possessions that must be moved or stored; they have a family and child and day care needs, child clothing and subsistence needs above those of the traditional 18-year-old student. A traditional student may only live in the college area for a 9-month academic year and share rent with a roommate or two. They can go home for the summer and save 3 months rent too. Most non-traditional, veteran, students stay in the area until they graduate, they cannot move home for the summer to save 3 months of rent. We have estimated that the cost of attendance for a veteran student exceeds traditional costs by \$2,000 and more per year at a 4-year commuter school. Many veterans simply cannot afford to even go to college. Some responses to the 1998 Goodrich study that asks veterans why they are not using their GI Bill includes: "I cannot afford to quit my job to meet qualifications to use this program - it is not sufficient for me." and "I cannot afford to go to school and support my family. The MGIB funds are not sufficient." There are serious financial barriers for those veterans who would like to attend college but simply cannot afford to do so because of these escalating costs, method of payment and the FFA treatment of their benefit. House Bill 1291 would help compensate for some of the financial burden of attending college

although, in our opinion, a return to a full, WW II-like GI Bill would be the appropriate thanks from a grateful nation.

The NAVPA membership is comprised of veteran certifying officials from colleges and universities across this nation. We have daily contact with those veteran students who access their Montgomery GI Bill; we are the business end of the Montgomery GI Bill. And, I can report that the veteran student is disappointed and dissatisfied that their earned benefit dissolves when they apply for college and actually begin to use this program. We, as a nation, need to do what is right by these veterans and properly thank them for their service to our country. These are the individuals who endured long family separations, unusual living conditions and 24/7 alert status, ready to take up arms in defense of this great nation on a moments notice. On June 13, 1944 Congress passed the law that changed America; that educated and trained 8 million veterans, because they heeded their presidents challenge and because it was their moral duty to do so. H.R. 1291, the 21st Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act, would certainly help, and is a great first step in providing the veteran a grateful nation's thanks and appreciation for a job well done; it is our duty to again open the roads to opportunities in a nation at peace. But we should not stop there, we see a need to not only enhance the Montgomery GI Bill but to also enhance the delivery of services within the Department of Veterans Affairs and to bring the technology of service to a higher level. The VA education programs are being administered with antiquated laws, rules and regulations that are inconsistent among and between the states and regions that govern the programs and they are inconsistent with 21st Century Education. We feel that it is time to act on the findings of the Transition Commission, to even rewrite the GI Bill anew and include 21st Century concepts of life-long learning and methods of educational delivery such as payment for courses leading to certification, pay for independent study courses in non-college degree programs that help a veteran advance in the world-of-work, and expand the veterans work-study program to allow students to work in academic departments and other areas where they can gain valuable experience for their after-college life. We also need to recognize the guard and reserve members in a renewed light and provide an expanded program for them as rewards for their expanded service to this nation. And finally, we need to allow veterans

to use their GI Bill when and how it benefits them without regard to a delimiting date of 10 years.

This concludes my testimony. I am ready to answer any questions you or the members of this sub-committee may have at this time. Thank you.

~ End ~

Goodrich, Chris, *The Montgomery G.I. Bill: Opportunity Wasted or Opportunity Waiting?*

*A national survey to learn why eligible veterans are not using their MGIB. March 1998.*

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MGIB Entitlement should be indexed to the average cost of a college education to include tuition, fees, books, supplies and a stipend sufficient enough to negate the requirement for veterans to access Federal Financial Aid. The index should be adjusted on an annual basis based on the College Board's assessment of the cost of education.

Enrollment in the MGIB should be an entitlement for service to this great nation and the \$1,200 pay reduction eliminated. The educated veteran will pay this country back a thousand fold as a working productive citizen.

Accelerated payment up to one standard term or program should be paid to the veteran student upon application and certification of enrollment by the institution providing the education and or training.

The VA should be funded on a one-time basis to develop a 24/7 web portal for veteran's to access their VA file that would allow them to track the progress of a claim. Firewall protections should be build into this system and nightly downloads to protect against intrusions/hacking to the VA mainframe can easily be included. This would enhance the service to the end user and eliminate the thousands of weekly phone inquiries to the VARPOs that disrupt services and delay claims processing. Hundreds of private corporations, many larger than the VA, now have web portals for enhanced customer service. Web portals are not new and most airlines, banks and international parcel tracking services, to illustrate some examples, have embraced this concept.

NAVPA advocates for an expanded educational opportunity for veterans that embrace all modes of delivers from classroom, to televised, electronic, correspondence, accelerated, independent study and other methods of instructional conveyance that have evolved in this electronic era. We need to bring the GI Bill into the 21st Century.