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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

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PAUL ARCANGELI, STAFF DIRECTOR

November 5, 2010

The Honorable Ike Skelton
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
2120 Rayburn House Office Building

Dear Chairman Skelton:

As you know, the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee recently conducted a brief study that culminated in a September hearing on the Defense Department's oversight of the quality of voluntary college education programs available to service members and the value members receive for tuition assistance funds. While we will not publish a formal report on this effort, we did want to advise you of our findings and recommend to you that further congressional monitoring of the Department's college education program and use of tuition assistance is needed in the coming years.

For decades, DOD has offered service members opportunities to pursue a college education during off-duty hours, primarily by allowing qualified colleges to establish programs on military installations and by providing tuition assistance to members to help them afford the cost. Even with the high operations tempo and deployments, more than 380,000 members used tuition assistance in fiscal year 2010 to take college courses. Over the past decade, however, there has been a dramatic change in the education environment. Colleges are still an important presence on military installations, but distance learning has recently become the predominant method of taking courses for the military because of its flexibility and portability. According to DOD, more than 70 percent of tuition assistance now goes for distance learning courses. A key factor behind the growth in distance learning has been the proliferation of "for-profit" colleges which enroll military students. While most for-profit colleges adhere to the same standards as nonprofit and public schools, a variety of government and public interest organizations have raised concerns that some provide a lower quality of education, use overly aggressive marketing and recruiting practices, and have poor student outcomes. Additionally, at our hearing witnesses questioned the value of degrees earned through distance learning as a credible credential to future employers.

The subcommittee found that DOD and the services have well-established policies and processes in place to oversee college programs located on military installations, but there is little focus on distance learning programs. Although the Department of Education has primary responsibility for federal policy oversight of higher education in the United States, DOD has a responsibility to ensure that tuition assistance is used effectively and service members obtain a quality education as a result. Recently, DOD proposed policy changes to increase its oversight of distance learning and for-profit schools, and plans to implement the changes next year. While the policy changes are needed and appear to be a step in the right direction, it remains to be seen whether they will be effective in ensuring service members receive a quality education from these programs and whether resources will be available for implementation.

This year, the Department of Education also proposed several measures to strengthen regulations affecting for-profit schools nationwide. The proposed policy changes are intended to protect students from overly aggressive recruiting practices and more closely monitor student loan debt and gainful employment of graduates from for-profit schools. In addition, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee held a series of hearings in recent months on for-profit schools and may introduce new legislation to increase regulation of these schools. For example, the subcommittee shares the Senate Committee's concern about for-profit schools' growing dependence on federal aid. Although the schools are restricted by law from obtaining more than 90 percent of their revenue from federal student aid programs (Title IV), the restriction does not apply to other sources of federal student funding such as DOD and VA tuition assistance. Since the intent of the 90 percent restriction is to insure for-profit schools attract at least some students willing to pay tuition with their own money, the exclusion of other federal funds from the calculation provides a distorted picture. The subcommittee believes the Education and Labor Committee should review this matter and consider including all sources of federal funds in the 90 percent restriction.

We recommend that the committee make DOD's voluntary college education program a topic for annual oversight review in order to continue to monitor the Department's ongoing efforts to implement new education policies and processes, and ultimately, to ensure that service members get good value for the resources invested in these programs.



Vic Snyder
Chairman

Sincerely,



Rob Wittman
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Buck McKeon

VS/RW:frs