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July 25, 2017

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate
825A Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester:

On behalf of the higher education associations listed below, representing two- and four-year, public and private, nonprofit colleges and universities, we write to express our support for the “Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017” (S.1598). This comprehensive, bipartisan legislation would strengthen and expand educational benefits for veterans and their families, while ensuring that veterans and family members are able to access those benefits for a longer time. This critical measure recognizes the contributions of our veterans and provides the resources necessary for them to succeed in higher education. It comes at an important time for student veterans, as over five million Post-9/11 service members are expected to transition out of the military by 2020.

We are pleased that the legislation would expand full GI Bill benefits to all Purple Heart recipients, remove the time limit on accessing educational benefits for Post-9/11 recipients, provide increases for reservists, and expand the Yellow Ribbon program to include surviving spouses and children of service members killed in the line of duty. In addition, we support the provision that would restore educational benefits to student veterans forced to discontinue their studies due to a temporary or permanent closure of their institution.

Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates are in high demand by employers and often have a higher starting salary when they join the workforce. However, the time to degree completion can be longer for those students because of additional lab and course requirements. It is fitting that the legislation creates an important new program, the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, which would support a fifth year of study for student veterans pursuing eligible STEM degrees. Currently, one in five student veterans major in a STEM field.

The legislation also creates several new programs that allows student veterans the ability to utilize GI Bill benefits for non-traditional education programs. We think it is important that any new program include protections to ensure that students accessing GI bill benefits are protected from fraud and abuse.

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Thank you for your work to support student veterans. We welcome the opportunity to work with you as the legislation moves forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terry W. Hartle". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Terry W. Hartle
Senior Vice President

TWH/ldw

On behalf of:

American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
Association of American Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities