AASCU has been in the forefront of the effort to craft a new GI Bill. Funding for this legislation had become woefully inadequate, and veterans benefits were no longer a priority. The Veterans Advisory Committee on Education, the Congressionally-mandated Committee to advise on the GI Bill, was challenged by members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee to prove that there was strong public concern about the meager benefits available to student veterans.

I was privileged to serve as chair of the Veterans Advisory Committee, as well as the president of Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC). SOC, a consortium of colleges and universities dedicated to the education of servicemembers and veterans, is operated by AASCU for the Department of Defense and the Military Services. Along with AASCU President Constantine Curris, I testified at hearings aimed at reforming the GI Bill over the last decade. AASCU was instrumental in enlisting other strong veteran advocates from national higher education associations and advocacy organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and state approving agencies to form what became known as the Partnership for Veterans Education.

The Partnership proved to be a powerful force. Soon legislators were receiving letters signed by the chief executive officers of over 50 well-known and influential institutions. Virtually all higher education and over 40 veteran advocacy groups weighed in. Legislators were told that the GI Bill had been diminished by time, inflation and generally low public policy priority. The key argument of the Partnership was direct and simple: the GI Bill should, at a bare minimum, pay for a four-year education at a public college or university.
This standard became known as the “Benchmark” against which progress toward a truly effective GI Bill would be measured.

Pressure from the Partnership, with AASCU playing a leading role, had serious impact. In the last few years, the GI Bill for active duty servicemembers more than doubled to its current stipend of over $1,000 a month for nine months of an academic year. While only about 70 percent of the Benchmark, this represented great progress.

Much remained to be done. In addition to the remaining large gap to meet the Benchmark, the GI Bill had become patently unfair to reservists. The nation’s military strategy had radically changed to meet the needs of modern warfare. A “Total Force Military Strategy” emerged that requires huge changes in the way that reserve forces were deployed. Reservists are in “Harm’s Way” as much as regular active duty forces. Incredibly, reserve GI Bill benefits, which were about half (48 percent) of those of active duty servicemembers when the Montgomery GI Bill was established in the ’80s, declined to less than one-third at the turn of the century! Then came the Afghan and Iraq wars.

The Partnership for Veterans Education was reinvigorated by the necessity to modernize the GI Bill to reflect the realities of a new strategy and a radically changed military deployment policy. The Partnership proposed a new “Total Force GI Bill” which would correct the inequities between reserve and regular servicemembers who had served side by side in war zones. The Total Force GI Bill concept would provide educational funds in proportion to actual service in combat. The standard for the Total Force GI Bill was the Benchmark based on the cost of a four-year public college education.

When the public became aware of the scandalous treatment of soldiers injured in the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, attention was at last focused on the nation’s responsibilities to veterans. This attention helped to illuminate the miserable state of the GI Bill.

The Walter Reed Army Medical Center debacle launched widespread and mounting public awareness of the shabby treatment of servicemembers and veterans.

Attitudes on Capitol Hill began to change. National politics intervened. Even war protesters, in an emerging presidential campaign year, were moved to say, “Hate the war, not the warriors!” In this atmosphere, the long, frustrating advocacy of SOC, AASCU and all the other veteran-advocates would bear fruit.

Senator James Webb of Virginia, part of the new Democrat majority and a respected veteran, increased the ante in the midst of the extended presidential primaries. At first, Webb insisted that the funding standard for the GI Bill should be the cost of whatever college the veteran could enter (as it was in the original GI Bill after WWII). This budget-busting proposal got the attention of the entire Congress, as it was no more than the public thought that veterans deserved. Although Webb’s concept had to be adjusted to budget realities, all advocates in the Partnership hailed his effort. Webb now supports GI Bill benefits tied to the most costly four-year public institution in each state, a standard that SOC and AASCU heartily support.

In fact, the provisions of the Webb Bill (S.22) now included in the Supplemental Defense Bill are aimed at reforms that veteran education activists have long advocated. Reservists called to active duty are treated fairly, with benefits proportional to service in Harm’s Way. The delimiting date by which benefits must be used would be extended to 15 years, making the GI Bill more nearly in tune with modern adult and continuing education. A housing allowance and a monthly stipend recognize the fact that veterans are older than traditional students and often have significant family financial responsibilities.

The benefits to AASCU institutions are potentially huge. While there is a provision in the Webb Bill that would help with attendance at colleges that are more expensive than the most costly four-year public institution in a state, most veterans are likely to attend state colleges and universities. Past GI Bills kept this goal just out of reach for most veterans who generally do not have family financial support and are unlikely to obtain well-paid employment while attending college. After WWII, higher education...
benefited enormously from mature, serious student-veterans. Though the scale of veteran influx will be smaller after Iraq and Afghanistan, it will be significant.

Senator John McCain of Arizona, a war hero running for president, has introduced a somewhat less generous plan. Unfortunately, McCain reflects the old concern that the GI Bill might become so attractive that too many men and women would leave military service for academe. He requires longer service for more generous benefits. McCain adds a “sweetener” that would allow transfer of benefits to a dependent. This costly provision might affect future ability to keep benefits up to date. These criticisms notwithstanding, McCain’s Bill, though less generous than the Webb Bill, would arrive at full benefits quite close to the minimum Benchmark discussed earlier.

The Webb Bill appears to have greater support. It is attached to a vital appropriations bill. If either the Webb or the McCain Bill passes, veterans will receive far more viable college opportunity. If a compromise is struck, it will probably approach, at least in the level of financial benefits, what AASCU and other advocates in the Partnership have long proposed.

The outlook is good for getting a much improved GI Bill. However, some caveats are in order:

- There is currently no consensus on the Hill about fixing the jurisdictional conflicts between the DoD and the VA, and between the Armed Forces Committees and the Veteran Affairs Committees. This is the root of confusion between the needs of war fighting and the requirement to fulfill the nation’s responsibilities to veterans.

- The new GI Bill will come with growing pains. The Veterans Administration, no paragon of management in the best of times, will be faced with more complicated benefits to administer. More requirements for colleges to communicate with the VA will surely evolve, as will the need for strengthened veteran services on campus.

- A compromise could place caps on benefits based on the misguided argument that a truly effective GI Bill would cause servicemembers to leave military services in droves. Even if the Webb Bill passes without such caps, it will not be long before attempts to keep benefits up to date will be confronted by unsubstantiated notions from the past. This bears watching, and will probably be a future issue requiring higher education’s attention.

- The way veteran benefits are treated in financial calculations is a matter of principle. The principle is NOT to make every student equal to the vet! The veteran has earned the GI Bill by doing something for his country over and above what other students have done. The veteran should not have regular student aid reduced by GI Bill benefits.

We should remember that the GI Bill is the nation’s recognition and gratitude to the men and women who serve their country—not an inducement to remain or to leave military service.

Editor’s note: As this issue of Public Purpose went to press, the House approved the Webb Bill by a margin of 416-12.

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