



Veterans' Affairs Committee

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Testimony

By

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Co-Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony today and for your longstanding support of the University of Connecticut.

S.B. 261, Am Act Concerning Veterans Services at State Colleges and Universities

The University of Connecticut is proud to provide testimony today in support of S.B. 261 to increase on-campus support to military-connected students at state colleges and universities. UConn is a state and national leader in the application of best practices for support of student veterans on campus, including recognition for the past three consecutive years by Military Times, Military Advanced Education, and Military Friendly Schools national rankings. UConn is also home to both Air Force ROTC and Army ROTC programs, providing a positive and supportive environment for the Department of the Army and the Air Force to train our nation's future leaders.

As a national leader in support to military-connected students on campus, UConn already far exceeds the minimum requirements put forth in this legislation in Sections 1(a) and (b). UConn employs four full-time staff members for dedicated support to student veterans plus two student workers and several additional VA work-study students. UConn offers two dedicated social/study lounges, two computer labs with free printing, and two quiet study lounges for use by student veterans attending classes at the main campus in Storrs. At the regional campuses, veterans also enjoy dedicated space for their use commensurate with their numbers. Each regional campus also has a staff member who serves as a point of contact for the veteran students' needs, and most of the regional campuses have VA work-study students. A report of the support UConn provides to military-connected students was provided in January to the legislature in response to Special Act 15-1.

In regards to Section 1(c), last summer UConn hosted a statewide conference for the purposes of sharing best practices in military-connected student support on campus. Over 30 institutions of higher education in the state attended the full one-day conference. The agenda included presentations by the VA, the Connecticut OHE State Approving Agency, and others, as well as open discussion forums to foster a sense of shared purpose, problem-solving, and best practices. Additionally, UConn has also recently hosted the national Center for Deployment Psychology to present their training on how best to service veteran mental health needs on campus. A wide audience also attended this training, including on-campus veteran service providers, clinicians, and other veteran service providers from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. UConn enthusiastically supports the idea of continuing the practice of a statewide annual conference of on-campus veteran service providers, not just among state colleges and universities, but also inclusive of all institutions of higher education in the state of Connecticut.

In regards to section 1(d) of the bill, we respectfully request that the Committee remove the reference to the "Battlefield to Classroom" training program and allow constituent units to have the ability to use instead national best practices which are continuously evolving to serve their student veteran populations. UConn remains on the cutting edge nationally of on-campus support to military-connected students. We are firm in our belief that there is no one best solution or model that should be endorsed as to how to guide institutions of higher learning in providing a welcoming, open, supportive environment for our nations veterans to succeed. Every campus is different in its ability to support the needs of student veterans based on available resources and a host of other factors. Instead of relying on a single model, we strongly recommend that each school evaluate current best practices and academic research, relevant to their own needs and capabilities, for on-campus support to student veterans and other military-connected students, including dependents. The vast majority of military-connected students on campus today are veterans, or dependents of veterans, of Post 9/11 conflicts. The needs of today's military-connected students are far different than the needs of past generations of military-connected students. There exists a wide array of current, relevant, and useful tools and research to help each school best decide how to support the needs of their own military-connected student population. Possible new language that could be considered is below:

(d) The OASIS center at each constituent unit **may evaluate current best practices and academic research regarding on campus support for student veterans and other military-connected students, and may implement programs appropriate for their individual campuses.** [implement, as a component of its programming and services, some or all of the "Battlefield to Classroom" training developed by the Office of Veterans and Military Affairs at Southern Connecticut State University].

S.B 287, An Act Concerning Tuition and Fee Waivers for Veterans and Members of the Connecticut National Guard at Public Institutions of Higher Education

The University of Connecticut supports the goal of S.B. 287 to extend the Connecticut Combat Veterans Tuition Waiver and the Connecticut National Guard Tuition Waiver to those qualified students who attend classes during the summer sessions but is concerned, given the current fiscal challenges, of how this additional cost will be absorbed. Each of the past three years, UConn has certified nearly 350 students for free tuition each year under the current state law. In addition, beginning in the summer of 2014, UConn extended the Connecticut Combat Veterans Tuition Waiver to those qualified students attending courses at UConn during the winter intercession and all summer sessions, exceeding the state law requirement. This resulted in nearly 200 additional waivers given to qualified veterans here at UConn, and the numbers of students applying for the waivers during the winter and summer sessions continue to grow.

In addition, UConn has also provided fee waivers for programs that do not charge traditional tuition, and are thus not currently covered under state law. This has been the case at UConn since a Board of Trustees action in 1994 acknowledged that veterans in fee-based programs should receive the same tuition waiver advantages as those enrolled in traditional programs. Those veterans have been provided a waiver of their fee bills in an amount not to exceed regular in-state tuition rates.

This Bill's extension of the Connecticut Combat Veterans Tuition Waiver and the Connecticut National Guard Tuition Waiver to those qualified students who attend classes during the summer sessions, and to have all such course fees waived for the summer sessions, is the next logical step in the progression of support to veterans that this university already provides.

The University's total tuition waiver costs for veterans and military connected students is projected to be \$3.1 million this year. Since UConn is not reimbursed for these costs and is facing budget cuts of at least \$19.5 million, the University supports the concept of this bill and hopes the General Assembly will work with us to find the resources to make this happen.

Thank you for your consideration of these modifications and your continued support of the University of Connecticut. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.