

115TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3272

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a grant program to provide Veteran Student Centers at institutions of higher education to assist veterans in the pursuit of higher education, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 17, 2017

Ms. FRANKEL of Florida (for herself, Mr. TAKANO, Mr. BILIRAKIS, and Mr. RUTHERFORD) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a grant program to provide Veteran Student Centers at institutions of higher education to assist veterans in the pursuit of higher education, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Veteran Education
5 Empowerment Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress makes the following findings:

1 (1) More than 1,000,000 veterans attended in-
2 stitutions of higher education in 2014.

3 (2) Veterans face unique challenges in
4 transitioning from the battlefield to the classroom
5 and eventually to the workforce, often including age
6 differences, family obligations, significant time away
7 from academic life, and service-connected disabili-
8 ties.

9 (3) The National Education Association found
10 that veteran students can feel lonely and vulnerable
11 on campus and that “connecting student veterans
12 can effectively ease this isolation” by bringing to-
13 gether new veteran students with those who have al-
14 ready successfully navigated the first few semesters
15 of college.

16 (4) The unemployment rate for post-9/11 vet-
17 erans far outpaces both the overall non-veteran un-
18 employment rate and the unemployment rate for
19 non-veterans entering the workforce for the first
20 time.

21 (5) According to Mission United—a United
22 Way program that helps veterans re-acclimate to ci-
23 vilian life—it is often “essential” for veteran stu-
24 dents to be mentored by “another veteran who un-
25 derstands their mindset and experience”.

1 (6) Veteran Student Centers are recognized as
2 an institutional best practice by Student Veterans of
3 America.

4 (7) The American Council on Education, which
5 represents more than 1,700 institutions of higher
6 education across the country, has called having a
7 dedicated space for veterans on campus “a prom-
8 ising way for colleges and universities to better serve
9 veterans on campus” and a “critical” component of
10 the efforts of many institutions of higher education
11 to serve veteran students.

12 (8) The Department of Education included as
13 one of its 8 Keys to Veterans’ Success that colleges
14 and universities should “coordinate and centralize
15 campus efforts for all veterans, together with the
16 creation of a designated space for them”.

17 (9) Budget constraints often make it difficult or
18 impossible for institutions of higher education to
19 dedicate space for offices, lounges, or student cen-
20 ters for veteran students.

21 (10) According to the Department of Edu-
22 cation, federally funded Veteran Student Centers
23 and staff have generated improved recruitment, re-
24 tention, and graduation rates, have helped veteran
25 students feel better connected across campus, and

1 have directly contributed to student veterans' suc-
2 cessful academic outcomes.

3 **SEC. 3. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS GRANT PRO-**
4 **GRAM FOR VETERAN STUDENT CENTERS AT**
5 **INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.**

6 (a) GRANTS AUTHORIZED.—Subject to the avail-
7 ability of appropriations for such purpose, the Secretary
8 of Veterans Affairs shall make grants to institutions of
9 higher education or consortia of institutions of higher edu-
10 cation for the establishment, maintenance, improvement,
11 and operation of Veteran Student Centers.

12 (b) ELIGIBILITY.—To be eligible to receive a grant
13 under this section, an institution of higher education or
14 consortium of such institutions shall—

15 (1) enroll in undergraduate or graduate
16 courses—

17 (A) a significant number of veteran stu-
18 dents, members of the Armed Forces serving on
19 active duty, and members of a reserve compo-
20 nent of the Armed Forces; or

21 (B) a significant percentage of veteran stu-
22 dents;

23 (2) present to the Secretary a sustainability
24 plan to demonstrate that its Veteran Student Center
25 will be maintained and will continue to operate after

1 the institution or consortium no longer receives
2 grant funds; and

3 (3) submit to the Secretary an application at
4 such time, in such manner, and containing such in-
5 formation as the Secretary may require.

6 (c) ADDITIONAL CRITERIA.—In awarding grants
7 under subsection (a), the Secretary—

8 (1) shall take into consideration representing a
9 broad spectrum of sectors and sizes, including insti-
10 tutions or consortia from urban, suburban, and rural
11 regions of the United States; and

12 (2) may provide a preference for institutions or
13 consortia that—

14 (A) are located in a region or community
15 that has a significant population of veterans;

16 (B) carry out programs or activities that
17 assist veterans in the local community and the
18 spouses of veteran students;

19 (C) with respect to veteran-specific pro-
20 gramming partner with nonprofit veteran serv-
21 ice organizations, local workforce development
22 organizations, or institutions of higher edu-
23 cation;

24 (D) commit to hiring a staff at the Vet-
25 eran Student Center that includes veterans (in-

1 including veteran student volunteers and veteran
2 students participating in a work-study program
3 of the Department of Veteran Affairs or an-
4 other Federal agency or a State work-study
5 program);

6 (E) commit to using a portion of the grant
7 received under this section to develop an early-
8 warning veteran student retention program car-
9 ried out by the Veteran Student Center; and

10 (F) commit to providing mental health
11 counseling to its veteran students and their
12 spouses.

13 (d) SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE OF VETERAN STU-
14 DENTS.—For purposes of this section, in calculating
15 whether a course has a significant percentage of veteran
16 students, the Secretary shall compare the overall enroll-
17 ment of the institution or consortium to the number, for
18 the most recent academic year for which data are avail-
19 able, of veteran students, members of the Armed Forces
20 serving on active duty, and members of a reserve compo-
21 nent of the Armed Forces who are enrolled in under-
22 graduate or graduate courses at the institution or consor-
23 tium.

24 (e) USE OF FUNDS.—An institution or consortium
25 that is awarded a grant under subsection (a)—

1 (1) shall use such grant to establish, maintain,
2 improve, or operate a Veteran Student Center; and

3 (2) may use a portion of such funds to carry
4 out supportive instruction services for student vet-
5 erans, including—

6 (A) assistance with special admissions and
7 transfer of credit from previous postsecondary
8 education or experience; and

9 (B) any other support services the institu-
10 tion or consortium determines to be necessary
11 to ensure the success of veterans on campus in
12 achieving education and career goals.

13 (f) AMOUNTS AWARDED.—

14 (1) DURATION.—Each grant awarded under
15 subsection (a) shall be for a four-year period.

16 (2) TOTAL AMOUNT OF GRANT AND SCHED-
17 ULE.—Each grant awarded under subsection (a)
18 may not exceed a total of \$500,000. The Secretary
19 shall disburse to an institution or consortium the
20 amounts awarded under the grant in such amounts
21 and at such times during the grant period as the
22 Secretary determines appropriate.

23 (g) REPORT.—Not later than 3 years after the date
24 on which the first grant is awarded under subsection (a),
25 the Secretary shall submit to the Committees on Veterans'

1 Affairs of the Senate and House of Representatives a re-
2 port on the grant program established under subsection

3 (a). Such report shall include—

4 (1) the number of grants awarded;

5 (2) the institutions of higher education and con-
6 sortia that have received grants;

7 (3) with respect to each such institution of
8 higher education and consortium—

9 (A) the amounts awarded;

10 (B) how such institution or consortium
11 used such amounts;

12 (C) a description of the students to whom
13 services were offered as a result of the award;
14 and

15 (D) data enumerating whether the use of
16 the amounts awarded helped veteran students
17 at the institution or consortium toward comple-
18 tion of a degree, certificate, or credential;

19 (4) best practices for veteran student success,
20 identified by reviewing data provided by institutions
21 and consortia that received a grant under this sec-
22 tion; and

23 (5) a determination by the Secretary with re-
24 spect to whether the grant program under this sec-
25 tion should be extended or expanded.

1 (h) TERMINATION.—The authority of the Secretary
2 to carry out the grant program established under sub-
3 section (a) shall terminate on the date that is four years
4 after the date on which the first grant is awarded under
5 subsection (a).

6 (i) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is
7 authorized to be appropriated for fiscal year 2018 and
8 each of the four subsequent fiscal years such sums as may
9 be necessary to carry out this Act.

10 (j) DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS BEST
11 PRACTICES WEBSITE.—Not later than 3 years after the
12 date on which the first grant is awarded under subsection
13 (a), the Secretary shall develop and implement a website
14 for veteran student services at institutions of higher edu-
15 cation that includes details on best practices for serving
16 veteran students at institutions of higher education.

17 (k) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

18 (1) The term “institution of higher education”
19 has the meaning given the term in section 101 of the
20 Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001).

21 (2) The term “Veteran Student Center” means
22 a dedicated space on a campus of an institution of
23 higher education that provides students who are vet-
24 erans or members of the Armed Forces with the fol-
25 lowing:

1 (A) A lounge or meeting space for such
2 veteran students, their spouses or partners, and
3 veterans in the community.

4 (B) A centralized office for veteran serv-
5 ices that—

6 (i) is a single point of contact to co-
7 ordinate comprehensive support services
8 for veteran students;

9 (ii) is staffed by trained employees
10 and volunteers, which includes veterans
11 and at least one full-time employee or vol-
12 unteer who is trained as a veterans' bene-
13 fits counselor;

14 (iii) provides veteran students with as-
15 sistance relating to—

16 (I) transitioning from the Armed
17 Forces to student life;

18 (II) transitioning from the
19 Armed Forces to the civilian work-
20 force;

21 (III) networking with other vet-
22 eran students and veterans in the
23 community;

24 (IV) understanding and obtaining
25 benefits provided by the institution of

1 higher education, Federal Govern-
2 ment, and State for which such stu-
3 dents may be eligible;

4 (V) understanding how to suc-
5 ceed in the institution of higher edu-
6 cation, including by understanding
7 academic policies, the course selection
8 process, and institutional policies and
9 practices related to the transfer of
10 academic credits; and

11 (VI) understanding their dis-
12 ability-related rights and protections
13 under the Americans with Disabilities
14 Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12101 et seq.)
15 and section 504 of the Rehabilitation
16 Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794); and

17 (iv) provides comprehensive academic
18 and tutoring services for veteran students,
19 including peer-to-peer tutoring and aca-
20 demic mentorship.

○