

114TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 604

To reauthorize and improve a grant program to assist institutions of higher education in establishing, maintaining, improving, and operating Veteran Student Centers.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 26, 2015

Mr. TESTER (for himself and Mr. NELSON) introduced the following bill;
which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To reauthorize and improve a grant program to assist institutions of higher education in establishing, maintaining, improving, and operating Veteran Student Centers.

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 finds the following:

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

1 (2) Veterans face unique challenges in
2 transitioning from the battlefield to the classroom
3 and eventually to the workforce, often including: age
4 differences, family obligations, significant time away
5 from academic life, and service-related disabilities.

6 (3) The National Endowment for the Human-
7 ities' Warrior-Scholar Project found that "veterans
8 transitioning to college likely have not used academic
9 skills since high school and have difficulty adjusting
10 to a fundamentally different social and cultural envi-
11 ronment, [leading] to veterans dropping out of col-
12 lege before earning their degree".

13 (4) The National Education Association found
14 that veteran students can feel lonely and vulnerable
15 on campus and that "connecting student veterans
16 can effectively ease this isolation" by bringing to-
17 gether new veteran students with those who have al-
18 ready successfully navigated the first few semesters
19 of college.

20 (5) The unemployment rate for post-9/11 vet-
21 erans far outpaces both the overall non-veteran un-
22 employment rate and the unemployment rate for
23 non-veterans entering the workforce for the first
24 time.

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

6 (7) Veteran Student Centers are recognized as
7 an institutional best practice by Student Veterans of
8 America.

9 (8) The American Council on Education, which
10 represents more than 1,700 institutions of higher
11 education across the country, has called having a
12 dedicated space for veterans on campus “a prom-
13 ising way for colleges and universities to better serve
14 veterans on campus” and a “critical” component of
15 many colleges’ efforts to serve their veteran stu-
16 dents.

17 (9) The Department of Education included as
18 one of its 8 Keys to Veterans’ Success that colleges
19 and universities should “coordinate and centralize
20 campus efforts for all veterans, together with the
21 creation of a designated space for them”.

22 (10) Budget constraints often make it difficult
23 or impossible for institutions of higher education to
24 dedicate space to veteran offices, lounges, or student
25 centers.

(12) According to the Department of Education, federally funded Veteran Student Centers and staff have generated improved recruitment, retention, and graduation rates, have helped veteran students feel better connected across campus, and have directly contributed to student veterans' successful academic outcomes.

17 SEC. 3. GRANT PROGRAM TO ESTABLISH, MAINTAIN, AND
18 IMPROVE VETERAN STUDENT CENTERS.

19 Part T of title VIII of the Higher Education Act of
20 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1161t) is amended to read as follows:

21 **“PART T—GRANTS FOR VETERAN STUDENT**
22 **CENTERS**

23 "SEC. 873. GRANTS FOR VETERAN STUDENT CENTERS.

24 “(a) GRANTS AUTHORIZED.—Subject to the avail-
25 ability of appropriations under subsection (i), the Sec-

1 retary shall award grants to institutions of higher edu-
2 cation or consortia of institutions of higher education to
3 assist in the establishment, maintenance, improvement,
4 and operation of Veteran Student Centers. The Secretary
5 shall award not more than 30 grants under this sub-
6 section.

7 “(b) ELIGIBILITY.—

8 “(1) APPLICATION.—An institution or consor-
9 tium seeking a grant under subsection (a) shall sub-
10 mit to the Secretary an application at such time, in
11 such manner, and containing such information as
12 the Secretary may require.

13 “(2) CRITERIA.—The Secretary may award a
14 grant under subsection (a) to an institution or a
15 consortium if the institution or consortium meets
16 each of the following criteria:

17 “(A) The institution or consortium enrolls
18 in undergraduate or graduate courses—

19 “(i) a significant number of veteran
20 students, members of the Armed Forces
21 serving on active duty, and members of a
22 reserve component of the Armed Forces; or

23 “(ii) a significant percentage of vet-
24 eran students, as measured by comparing
25 the overall enrollment of the institution or

1 consortium to the number, for the most re-
2 cent academic year for which data are
3 available, of veteran students, members of
4 the Armed Forces serving on active duty,
5 and members of a reserve component of
6 the Armed Forces who are enrolled in un-
7 dergraduate or graduate courses at the in-
8 stitution or consortium.

9 “(B) The institution or consortium pre-
10 sents a sustainability plan to demonstrate that
11 its Veteran Student Center will be maintained
12 and will continue to operate after the grant pe-
13 riod of the grant received under subsection (a)
14 has ended.

15 “(3) ADDITIONAL CRITERIA.—In awarding
16 grants under subsection (a), the Secretary—

17 “(A) shall consider institutions or con-
18 sortia representing a broad spectrum of sectors
19 and sizes, including institutions or consortia
20 from urban, suburban, and rural regions of the
21 United States; and

22 “(B) may provide consideration to institu-
23 tions or consortia that meet 1 or more of the
24 following criteria:

1 “(i) The institution or consortium is
2 located in a region or community that has
3 a significant population of veterans.

4 “(ii) The institution or consortium
5 carries out programs or activities that as-
6 sist veterans in the local community and
7 the spouses of veteran students.

8 “(iii) The institution or consortium
9 partners in its veteran-specific program-
10 ming with nonprofit veteran service organi-
11 zations, local workforce development orga-
12 nizations, or institutions of higher edu-
13 cation.

14 “(iv) The institution or consortium
15 commits to hiring a staff at the Veteran
16 Student Center that includes veterans (in-
17 cluding veteran student volunteers and vet-
18 eran students participating in a Federal
19 work-study program under part C of title
20 IV, a work-study program administered by
21 the Secretary of Veteran Affairs, or a
22 State work-study program).

23 “(v) The institution or consortium is
24 willing to consider providing veteran stu-
25 dents with academic credit for comparable

1 subject-area training received while serving
 2 in the Armed Forces and commits to dedi-
 3 cating resources to helping its student vet-
 4 erans navigate their way through the
 5 transfer credit process.

6 “(vi) The institution or consortium
 7 commits to using a portion of the grant re-
 8 ceived under this section to develop an
 9 early warning veteran student retention
 10 program carried out by the Veteran Stu-
 11 dent Center.

12 “(vii) The institution or consortium
 13 commits to providing mental health coun-
 14 seling to its veteran students and their
 15 spouses.

16 “(c) USE OF FUNDS.—

17 “(1) IN GENERAL.—An institution or consor-
 18 tium that is awarded a grant under subsection (a)
 19 shall use such grant to establish, maintain, improve,
 20 or operate a Veteran Student Center.

21 “(2) OTHER ALLOWABLE USES.—An institution
 22 or consortium receiving a grant under subsection (a)
 23 may use a portion of such funds to carry out sup-
 24 portive instruction services for student veterans, in-
 25 cluding—

1 “(A) assistance with special admissions
2 and transfer of credit from previous postsec-
3 ondary education or experience; and

4 “(B) any other support services the insti-
5 tution or consortium determines to be necessary
6 to ensure the success of veterans on campus in
7 achieving education and career goals.

8 “(d) AMOUNTS AWARDED.—

9 “(1) DURATION.—Each grant awarded under
10 subsection (a) shall be for a 4-year period.

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

18 “(e) REPORT.—From the amounts appropriated to
19 carry out this section, and not later than 3 years after
20 the date on which the first grant is awarded under sub-
21 section (a), the Secretary shall submit to Congress a re-
22 port on the grant program established under subsection
23 (a), including—

24 “(1) the number of grants awarded;

1 “(2) the institutions of higher education and
2 consortia that have received grants;

3 “(3) with respect to each such institution of
4 higher education and consortium—

5 “(A) the amounts awarded;

6 “(B) how such institution or consortium
7 used such amounts;

8 “(C) a description of the students to whom
9 services were offered as a result of the award;
10 and

11 “(D) data enumerating whether the use of
12 the amounts awarded helped veteran students
13 at the institution or consortium toward comple-
14 tion of a degree, certificate, or credential;

15 “(4) best practices for veteran student success,
16 identified by reviewing data provided by institutions
17 and consortia that received a grant under this sec-
18 tion; and

19 “(5) a determination by the Secretary with re-
20 spect to whether the grant program under this sec-
21 tion should be extended or expanded.

22 “(f) TERMINATION.—The authority of the Secretary
23 to carry out the grant program established under sub-
24 section (a) shall terminate on the date that is 4 years after

1 the date on which the first grant is awarded under sub-
 2 section (a).

3 “(g) DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION BEST PRACTICES
 4 WEBSITE.—Subject to the availability of appropriations
 5 under subsection (i) and not later than 3 years after the
 6 date on which the first grant is awarded under subsection
 7 (a), the Secretary shall develop and implement a website
 8 for veteran student services at institutions of higher edu-
 9 cation, which details best practices for serving veteran stu-
 10 dents at institutions of higher education.

11 “(h) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

12 “(1) INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION.—
 13 The term ‘institution of higher education’ has the
 14 meaning given the term in section 101.

15 “(2) VETERAN STUDENT CENTER.—The term
 16 ‘Veteran Student Center’ means a dedicated space
 17 on a campus of an institution of higher education
 18 that provides students who are veterans or members
 19 of the Armed Forces with the following:

20 “(A) A lounge or meeting space for such
 21 veteran students, their spouses or partners, and
 22 veterans in the community.

23 “(B) A centralized office for veteran serv-
 24 ices that—

1 “(i) is a single point of contact to co-
2 ordinate comprehensive support services
3 for veteran students;

4 “(ii) is staffed by trained employees
5 and volunteers, which includes veterans
6 and at least 1 full-time employee or volun-
7 teer who is trained as a veterans’ benefits
8 counselor;

9 “(iii) provides veteran students with
10 assistance relating to—

11 “(I) transitioning from the mili-
12 tary to student life;

13 “(II) transitioning from the mili-
14 tary to the civilian workforce;

15 “(III) networking with other vet-
16 eran students and veterans in the
17 community;

18 “(IV) understanding and obtain-
19 ing benefits provided by the institu-
20 tion of higher education, Federal Gov-
21 ernment, and State for which such
22 students may be eligible;

23 “(V) understanding how to suc-
24 ceed in the institution of higher edu-
25 cation, including by understanding

1 academic policies, the course selection
 2 process, and institutional policies and
 3 practices related to the transfer of
 4 academic credits; and

5 “(VI) understanding their dis-
 6 ability-related rights and protections
 7 under the Americans with Disabilities
 8 Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12101 et seq.)
 9 and section 504 of the Rehabilitation
 10 Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794); and

11 “(iv) provides comprehensive academic
 12 and tutoring services for veteran students,
 13 including peer-to-peer tutoring and aca-
 14 demic mentorship.

15 “(i) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There
 16 are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this part
 17 such sums as may be necessary for fiscal year 2016 and
 18 each of the 3 succeeding fiscal years.”.

19 **SEC. 4. CONTINUATION OF AWARDS.**

20 An institution of higher education that received a
 21 grant under section 873 of the Higher Education Act of
 22 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1161t) before the date of enactment of
 23 this Act, as such section 873 (20 U.S.C. 1161t) was in
 24 effect on the day before the date of enactment of this Act,

- 1 shall continue to receive funds in accordance with the
- 2 terms and conditions of such grant.

