

**PURPOSE.**

Senate Bill 606, passed by the 2016 Maryland General Assembly, establishes the Commission's purpose. It is to ensure the educational success of returning veterans, including their recruitment, successful transition into higher education and eventual graduation. The Commission accomplishes this by facilitating the sharing of best practices, and potential adjustment of policies and procedures, among the institutions of higher education and state agencies regarding academic programs and support services designed for returning veterans. Commissioners, representing institutions of higher education in the state, address the following issues: awareness of veteran reintegration challenges; communication and coordination of available veteran services at the institution, state and federal level – including financial aid and GI Bill support services, mental health services and the use of career and transition services, at the education institution, to facilitate post-educational employment.

**COMMISSIONERS.** For 2018, the Commission consists of the following appointed members and guests.

- Chair: Benz Armstrong | Towson University (TU)
- Vice-Chair: Jeff Lesch | University of Baltimore (UB)
- Secretary: Keith Hauk | University of Maryland University College (UMUC)
- MDVA Secretary Designee: Denise Nooe | Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs
- Appointed Commissioners:
  - Dr John Grabowski | Anne Arundel Community College (AACC) and the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (MACC) (Resigned and did not attend December 2018 meeting)
  - Cathy Camp | Prince Georges Community College (PGCC) and the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (MACC) (Replaced Dr. John Grabowski and attended December 2018 meeting)
  - Christina Duncan | Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)
  - Dr Tonya Mason | Montgomery College (MC)
  - Antonio Silas | University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC)
  - Matthew Fraling III | Coppin State University (CSU)
  - Barbara Ives | College of Southern Maryland (CSM) (Left CSM effective 8/30/18)
  - Danielle Dabrowski | Frostburg State University (FSU)
  - Dr J. Michael Harpe | University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) (Left UMES effective 11/7/18)
  - Matt Power | Maryland independent Colleges & Universities Association (MICU)
  - Elizabeth Atherton | McDaniel College (MDC)
  - Wanda Colon-Canales, represented by Bradley Dennis | Washington Adventist University
  - Dr Artie Travis | Bowie State University
  - Westley Forsythe | Loyola University (resigned following February 28, 2018 meeting)
  - Dan Barnhart | UMBC (resigned following February 28, 2018 meeting)
  - Christian Manning | Stevenson University (resigned following February 28, 2018 meeting)

- Guests:
  - Jason Franklin | Montgomery College
  - Trish Gordon-McCown | Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC)
  - Tracey Jamison | University System of Maryland (USM)
  - Jerry Isaac | Bowie State University

**QUARTERLY MEETING DATES AND LOCATIONS.** In accordance with the legislation establishing its existence, the Commission meets four times per year. Meetings locations rotate between the various institutions represented on the Commission.

1. February 28, 2018 | Community College of Baltimore County | Host: Christina Duncan
2. June 19, 2018 | University Maryland Eastern Shore | Host: Dr J. Michael Harpe
3. September 12, 2018 | Frostburg State University | Host: Danielle Dabrowski
4. October 31, 2018 | McDaniel College | Host: Elizabeth Atherton

#### **MINUTES AND SIGNIFICANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMISSION MEETINGS.**

**February 28, 2018 | CCBC.** Commissioners Westley Forsythe (Loyola University), Dan Barnhart (UMBC) and Christian Manning (Stevenson University) announced their departure from the Commission based on taking new roles within their or other institutions. The Commission conducted annual elections for designated positions of Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary, re-electing Commissioners Armstrong and Hauk as Chair and Secretary, respectively. The MCCSVC unanimously elected Commissioner Lesch as Vice-Chair, replacing Commissioner Barnhart.

- The Commission discussed, at length, Senate Bill 509 that, at the time, was pending before the 2018 Maryland General Assembly.
  - As drafted, the Bill required Community Colleges to employ a veteran's advisor to provide enrollment and advising services to certain students, and to establish a veteran's resource center as a "central hub" for all activities on campus related to veterans.
  - Several Commissioners expressed concerns about the draft legislation, including a lack of resourcing and the seeming "one size fits all" approach to the issues in the Bill relative to veterans, as well as concerns regarding institutional responsibility for who would execute the bill's mandate (e.g., Registrar, Student Services, or School Certifying Official for VA benefits). Community College representatives that maintain multiple campuses also expressed concern about any implicit requirement in the Bill that would cause them to have to maintain a veteran's center at *every* campus within their system, and noted that, of the state's 16 Community Colleges most already meet the Bill's requirements in whole or in part.
  - The Commission also discussed the Bill's scope, and questioned why it only addressed the requirement to Maryland Community Colleges. The University System of Maryland took no position relative to the fact Senate Bill 509 only addresses Community Colleges, and not four-year schools within the System. Representatives in attendance from Maryland Independent Colleges and Universities also stated that any extension of the Bill's requirements to their campuses would have unplanned resourcing implications for their institutions.

- Commissioners then discussed whether the MCCSVC should take a position on Senate Bill 509. Commissioners unanimously agreed that it should, and noted that the next committee hearing on the Bill (with the Committee on Education, Health and Environmental Affairs) was scheduled for March 6, 2018. Given the short time available between the meeting and the hearing, the MCCSVC provided a letter, in lieu of testimony, to the committee; Denise Nooe stated that she would provide the relevant format and addressing for the letter.
- Commissioners also discussed the pending VA implementation of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Act of 2017* (also known as the *Forever GI Bill*®), major provisions of which go into effect on August 1, 2018.

**June 19, 2018 | University of Maryland Eastern Shore.** Commissioner Bradley Dennis (Washington Adventist University) and Dr Artie Travis (Bowie State University) were welcomed as new members joining the MCCSVC.

- Commissioners and guests spent a significant amount of time discussing 2018 Maryland House Bill 1074, which the governor signed into law, and takes effect on October 1, 2018.
  - The law requires a public institution in the state of Maryland to grant priority registration for courses to eligible service members. The law further defines “eligible service members” as “currently serving members of any branch of the Armed Forces, including the National Guard and the Military Reserves,” or “a veteran of any branch of the Armed Forces, including the National Guard and the Military Reserves.”
  - Discussion centered on Commissioners views of how their institutions would adopt new, or change existing, policies to ensure compliance with HB 1074’s requirements. Commissioners also discussed the implications of the MB 1074 relative to Section 303 of the U.S. Congress’ *Harry W. Colmery Act of August 2017* (aka the “*Forever GI Bill*®”). Section 303 of the “*Forever GI Bill*®” requires the VA to include—on its GI Bill® Comparison Tool—information on whether a school has a priority enrollment system in place that allows veterans to enroll in courses earlier than other students attending the school. Several Commissioners indicated that, in conversations with VA representatives, the VA expects schools to reflect priority registration for veterans in their school’s academic year catalog.
  - Commissioners agreed that HB 1074 supports schools in meeting the provisions of Section 303 of the Colmery Act, and provides a benefit to “eligible service members” attending public institutions in Maryland.
- Commissioners discussed tuition rates charged to veterans, at USM institutions governed by USM policy VIII-2.70 (Policy on Student Classification for Admission and Tuition Purposes). Several Commissioners shared issues of tuition rates charged to student veterans, which, while in compliance with the USM policy, served to disadvantage the student veteran by charging a higher, out-of-state rate. Affected schools agreed to collaborate in exploring potential remedies to this issue.
- Commissioners also discussed on-going issues at several schools (University of Baltimore, Frostburg and UMUC) regarding processing issues and problems associated with payments from the VA to beneficiaries using Vocational Rehabilitation & Education entitlements

under Chapter 31 of the GI Bill<sup>®</sup>. Affected schools agreed to collaborate in exploring potential remedies to this issue.

**September 12, 2018 | Frostburg State University.** The Commission Chair invited Delegate Pat Young to attend the session, and offer his thoughts on the Commission and its work.

- Continued discussion on the pending implementation of House Bill 1074, as discussed at the June 19<sup>th</sup> MCCSVC meeting.
  - Commissioners discussed the various steps, and possible implications of them, taken at their institutions (including UB, Towson, CCBC, Montgomery College, AACC, FSU, McDaniel College and UMUC) to implement the direction in HB 1074.
  - The USM representative stated that the upcoming USM registrar's conference on October 25, 2018 would address this issue, and offered to provide feedback, if any, to the Commission on that discussion.
- Commissioners also discussed, at length, VA implementation of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Assistance Act of 2017* (aka the "Forever GI Bill<sup>®</sup>"). Commissioners discussed on-going issues, at their individual institutions, with processing of requests for certification of VA educational benefits both internally as well as with issues on the VA end, many of which various news outlets have well publicized because of the effect on student-veterans of delayed payment of Post-9/11 GI Bill<sup>®</sup> housing allowance and stipends. Several institutions also indicated that they are seeing delayed payments of tuition & fees to their schools from the VA.
- The Commission also discussed New Reporting Requirements, from the VA, concerning the 85/15 Rule.
  - The Code of Federal Regulations (38 CFR 21.4201 states the following regarding the 85/15 rule. The VA shall not approve the enrollment of any VA-eligible person, not already enrolled, in any course for any period during which more than 85 percent of the students enrolled in the course are having all or part of their tuition, fees and other charges paid to or for them by an educational institution or the VA.
  - In conjunction with Colmery Act-based changes, the VA is now requiring institutions to report 85/15 information no-later than 30 days after the beginning of each regular school term. Previously, 85/15 information was report as part of SAA or VA compliance inspections.
  - The first report under these new guidelines is due to no-later than October 3, 2018, and Commissioners present representing institutions of higher learning discussed the challenges and issues they were facing with the new requirement, to include possible compliance issues associated with smaller schools and/or lower enrollment programs.
- The MCCSVC Chair then led a discussion concerning future meetings and guest speakers. The Chairperson offered, for discussion, an idea to invite speakers to the Commission meeting to attend the MCCSVC and brief Commissioners on issues of interest. After discussion about possible topic areas, including possible guest speakers from the Maryland Higher Education Commission's Division of Veterans Affairs or from the National Association of Veteran Program Administrators, the Commission agreed with this as a way ahead to implement in the 2019 calendar year.

**October 31, 2018 | McDaniel College.**

- The Commission engaged in lengthy and significant discussion on VA implementation of the “Forever GI Bill®.” As has been widely reported in national media, the VA has experienced extraordinary difficulty in implementing the provisions of the “Forever GI Bill®,” and this difficulty has led to hardships for affected student veterans across the country. MCCSVC Institutions shared their experience, and difficulty, to date with the problems and issues associated with “Forever GI Bill®” implementation by the VA, and the negative effect those implementation issues are causing their student-veterans.
- Several Commissioners that attended the annual conference of the National Association of Veteran Program Administrators (NAVPA), October 15-19, 2018 highlighted insights and communication from the VA concerning “Forever GI Bill®” implementation. Specifically, the VA projects no go-live date as far as rolling out the “Forever GI Bill®” IT changes to the VA-ONCE certification system, or any updates to other LTS systems, the Ask a Question or the GI Bill® Hotline. All schools discussed what it is they are doing, from a preventive standpoint, as far as Spring 2019 registration is concerned as all schools are beginning to open their registration for the Spring 2019 term. Additionally, in response to discussions, all schools shared specifics regarding what it is they are seeing in terms of payment delay impacts on students. Several schools also discussed the use of VA Hardship, on the part of the student, and labeling a student as a Hardship in order to expedite VA processing of benefits (especially the Post-9/11 GI Bill® monthly housing allowance (MHA) payment). Students are experiencing significant delays both in payments as well as in trying to reach VA assistance through either the website or the GI Bill® Hotline toll-free number.
- Assembled Commissioners then discussed the idea of drafting a letter, from the Commission to the State Secretaries of Education and Veterans Affairs, outlining institutional concerns and issues with “Forever GI Bill®” implementation. The letter would address specific areas – delays of MHA and stipend payments directly to students, delays in payment of tuition and fees to institutions, and the potential requirement for institutions to have to submit amended or adjusted certifications once the VA completes its VA-ONCE IT changes. The Commission’s consensus was that a letter would be advisable, simply to get institutional concerns on record and communicated to state-level leadership. The Commission agreed to complete the letter no later than Wednesday, November 14, 2018; however, following the MCCSVC’s meeting, the U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee held a committee meeting concerning the VA’s Forever GI Bill® implementation issues and delays. Following that meeting, the VA announced significant changes to Forever GI Bill® implementation plans, and delaying full implementation until December 1, 2019. Based on that revised plan and implementation delay, the MCCSVC leadership agreed that the letter would serve no purpose as the VA’s response to Congressional action had ameliorated the MCCSVC’s near-term concerns with Forever GI Bill® implementation.
- Commissioners then discussed continuing issues with serving the educational needs of the Chapter 31 (Vocational Rehabilitation & Education, VR&E) population, specifically VA processing and payment delays. The Frostburg State Commissioner, who attended NAVPA, stated that—as part of the annual conference—the newly appointed national director of the VR&E program briefed the conference, and stated that institutions experiencing VR&E

processing issues should contact him directly. The Commissioner provided the contact information to the MCCSVC membership.

- Commissioners then closed with discussion on revised 85-15 reporting, to VA, mandated as part of the Colmery Act and previously addressed at the September 12, 2019 Commission meeting. Commissioners discussed challenges and lessons-learned with the new 85-15 report—the first submission of which was due October 3, 2018—and shared insights, and best practices, for meeting the requirement.

### **THE COMMISSION’S THANKS AND WAY-AHEAD**

In all cases, for every meeting held by the Commission in calendar year 2018, the MCCSVC expresses thanks to the hosting Universities, their Presidents and their staff for their hospitality and support of the Commission’s work.

For Calendar Year 2019, the MCCSVC establishes the following tentative meeting schedule:

- Meeting #1 (Jan-Mar 2019) hosted by University of Baltimore
- Meeting #2 (Apr-Jun 2019) hosted by Washington Adventist University
- Meeting #3 (Jul-Sep 2019) hosted by Frostburg State University
- Meeting #4 (Oct-Dec 2019) hosted by PGCC

### **RECOMMENDATIONS.**

The Commission reiterates its strong recommendation that all institutions of higher education in the State of Maryland embrace and adopt the “8 Keys to Success: Supporting Veterans, Military and Military Families on Campus” articulated in Presidential Executive Order 13607 dated April 12, 2012. These keys include the following:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

The Commission renews its recommendation that these items be added to the purpose of this Commission:

1. Share upcoming events at local campuses.
2. Check in on—and follow—relevant legislation and trends (at both the state and federal levels) affecting military-affiliated students, (which includes service members, veterans or their dependents using transferred veterans' educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill). As appropriate, based on specific legislation or trends, make recommendations to legislators /governing bodies concerning potential actions.
3. Update members on challenges and other relevant information concerning military-affiliated students.