

Community Discussion Series

Supporting Veterans Through Cross-Campus Collaboration



diversityabroad



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Presenters



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Session Overview

- Overview of GI Bill Benefits
- Collaborative Approach to Support Veteran Students at Univ of Alabama
- Key Best Practices
- Resources & Areas of Advocacy
- Discussion
- What's next



The Beginning of the Collaboration

Five years ago...

- UA student veteran interested in study abroad program
- UA dependent interested in study abroad program
- More students trickled in with interest in the following months

Student questions that arose:

- Where can I study and use my GI Bill benefits?
- Will the benefits apply toward study abroad at all?
- If they apply, how do they apply and when do I receive the funds to cover the costs?
- What process do I go through to apply the funds?

Policy - What are the GI Bill Benefits?

Clarifying federal vs. state GI Bill benefits is key!

- Each state has GI funding
- We are referring to the federal GI funding
- Some students won't know the difference

Federal GI Bill / VA benefits include many chapters

- We most commonly see Chapter 33, which is also known as "Post 9/11" due to its passage following 9/11 in the United States
- Another chapter we see occasionally is Chapter 35
- Keep in mind not only who these chapters apply to but also how the funds are distributed (school vs. student)

Applying the Policy at UA

- Policy interpretation varies drastically from region to region
- Framework at UA defined by federal legislation and correspondence between study abroad, veteran's office on campus, and multiple federal VA offices
- Processes and workflow set forth based on types of programs offered and application of benefits
- Rather than have a "cookie cutter" version of what can and can't be done, each institution needs to understand the rules for VA compliance and then see where your program fits within that framework due to the creative opportunities that exist in Education Abroad

Program Types

Primary types of programs at UA and application of benefits

- Programs led by UA faculty in the short term, awarded UA credit & paid for at UA campus
- Reciprocal exchange programs, awarded UA credit & paid for at UA campus
- Third party provider programs, awarded transfer credit & paid

Things to consider when determining benefits applicability:

- What chapter of benefits does the student have?
- Where is the credit coming from?
- What will funds be used for and how are they routed?

Challenges in Application of Benefits

- The “language” varies from VA offices to study abroad offices (terminology differs!)
 - Terminology is not the same in the VA/study abroad worlds
- Funds are not available until the student is certified
 - Results in reimbursement of funds to student after program begins
- VA framework does not match international education framework/field
 - Encompasses all foreign study as similar/same
 - Application of benefits for third parties/multiple entities is challenging

As a result--much clarification is need from the VA.



What's Happening Now

- Attention is starting to grow to address this issue.
- The University of Alabama submitted a letter to The Veteran Affairs Advisory Committee about this issue during an open comment period that is legislatively authorized.
- We are seeking to partner with other organizations to produce a unified voice to address this on a larger and more expansive scale that takes into account all the various considerations that need to be examined and to open up currently closed opportunities to the Veteran & Military population due to legislative constraints. .
- Institutions are being encouraged to develop relationships with your VA School Certifying Officials in collaboration with the SAAs and ELRs to ensure that your practices are in compliance.
- The State Department in the past two years has recently stood up a Study Abroad office to encourage abroad opportunities while VA still limits opportunities, making the federal government take contradictory stances in different agencies.

Key Best Practices (#1- #6)

- #1 – Identifying the target student population; data coding
- #2 – Subject-matter experts on the VA & Study Abroad side who understand the process (have a liaison knowledgeable in each office)
- #3 – Identify who the school-certifying official is this is especially important when there isn't a VA office on campus; this person certifies use of the benefits
- #4 - Identify key documents and what processes take place in each office (ex. courses a student will take abroad, requirement from VA is that courses must contribute to degree attainment)
- #5 – Implementing a system of checks and balances so that each office is not operating independently. For example, when the VA certifying official approves use of funds, this data should also be reflected in the study abroad data management system.
- #6 – Clearly articulate the costs involved to the students and who's responsible for all costs involved

Key Best Practices (#7- #12)

#7 - Forming community where veterans/dependents can share stories with each other to help navigate the process

#8 - Include other campus offices in this process so that they know what's going on. For example, if an academic advisor is talking to a student about courses and study abroad, they should be directed to connect with both the VA and the Study Abroad Office

#9 – Share documents and communications between VA and Study Abroad office to ensure that there is no contradictory information being disseminated

#10 - Process on VA side must be completed 2 weeks prior to departure. For example, if a study abroad experience crosses over a given month while overseas, a housing allowance can be impacted

#11 - Sometimes certification process can happen after a student goes abroad, and reimbursement may be an option. This is not the preferable approach but is something to consider; this process can occur retroactively

#12 – Keeping everybody informed, letting student accounts services and other relevant offices know about the status of this process

Resources & Areas for Advocacy

Links to resources


- General VA website: <https://www.va.gov>
- To search for VA Approved Programs Abroad:
<http://inquiry.vba.va.gov/weamspub/buildSearchCountryCriteria.do>
- VA Regional Offices:
<https://www.vets.gov/education/apply-for-education-benefits/regional-office/>

How can you get more involved?

- Continuing the community of professional allies
- Legislative changes are required to improve opportunities for veterans using G.I. Bill benefits
- Uniting with a common voice so that the same message is being provided to bring change within the bureaucracy of the VA



Questions & Discussion

- 1) What kinds of things are you doing on your campus to support veteran students?
 - 2) What are challenges that you and your colleagues are facing with regards to supporting Veterans and their families in education abroad?
 - 3) What kinds of resources would be helpful for the field to develop to support Veterans and their families in education abroad?
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What's Next...

Updates & Continued Discussion

Diversity Abroad Conference - March 20-22, 2017, Minneapolis, MN

Full Recording of Veterans Community Discussion

- Added to D&I Resource Center for Members

PowerPoint Presentation & Resource Sheet

- Sent to All Participants



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