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Veterans' advocates urge Congress to protect GI Bill benefits as colleges move classes online

By **Danielle Douglas-Gabriel**

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Colleges and universities are scrambling to ensure students can complete their courses as the coronavirus pandemic forces schools to abandon face-to-face instruction. But moving all classes online could run afoul of Department of Veterans Affairs regulations and have a devastating impact on those who rely on GI Bill education benefits.

VA places a premium on face-to-face training. Veterans taking classes on campus receive higher monthly payments than those taking courses online. Online students typically receive only half the housing allowance of their peers.

Academic programs must be approved by VA for online instruction. If a program that already had that stamp of approval converts to online-only classes, GI Bill payments will remain the same for the rest of the semester. Payments for the next term, however, would be reduced if the program remains virtual.

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The situation could become especially dire for veterans in academic programs that never received approval for online instruction. In those cases, veterans would lose all of their education benefits once classes begin online.

The Senate passed legislation this week granting VA the authority to ease the restrictions, but companion bills in the House are stalled. If Congress fails to take action soon, the federal agency will move ahead with reducing aid to student veterans.

“We don’t want veterans on the street,” said Tanya Ang, vice president of Veterans Education Success, an advocacy group. “They should know that the benefits they worked so hard for will be protected in times of crises like we’re facing now.”

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So far, the federal agency is holding off on taking action.

Still, the uncertainty has sent student veterans into a panic. Many left anxious messages on a VA Facebook page after the agency warned of the impending cuts last week. Campus veterans groups have reported a surge in emails and calls from students seeking more information, worried they would have to leave school if their benefits are cut.

“It’s just a huge mess,” said Julie Howell, the veteran program coordinator at the University of California at Santa Cruz. “No one saw this coming. Everyone is just waiting. At least saying they’re working to resolve this would taper the fear.”

Howell, an Army veteran, worries about the stress on veterans already dealing with anxiety from their time in the service. She is also concerned that any reduction in housing allowances could push students into homelessness. California has notoriously expensive rental markets and the difference in housing payments for students taking classes on-campus versus online is stark, Howell said.

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According to VA, student veterans taking all face-to-face classes at the University of California at Santa Cruz are eligible for more than \$2,600 a month in housing benefits, but only \$894.50 if classes are exclusively online.

“We have such a gnarly landlord-renters battle in this town because it’s a college community,” Howell said. “If these kids can’t pay their rent, their landlords will evict them.”

On Monday, the Senate passed legislation introduced by Sens. Jerry Moran (R-Kan.) and Jon Tester (D-Mont.) that allows veterans to retain their current benefits. The measure gives VA authority to distribute GI Bill stipends without interruption during national emergencies.

Two bills in the House would provide an emergency fix, one introduced by Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.) and the other by Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.). Neither measure has been scheduled for a vote, but aides in the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, which Takano chairs, say they expect his bill to move forward soon.

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Danielle Douglas-Gabriel covers the economics of education, writing about the financial lives of students, from when they take out student debt through their experiences in the job market. Before that, she wrote about the banking industry. Follow 

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