

DOD Tuition Assistance Policy Unchanged for Now

But benefit to be considered when evaluating future compensation

From the American Forces Press Service

Although no changes to the tuition assistance policy will be made in the near term, defense officials stated the tuition assistance program will be considered as part of the holistic review of the military compensation package.

Current policy provides eligible service members up to \$4,500 in tuition assistance. The Defense Department will pay up to \$250 per semester hour for both undergraduate and graduate studies.

“The department, in consultation with the military service departments, is doing a thorough review of all the benefits included in the military compensation package,” said Jo Ann Rooney, principal deputy undersecretary of defense, personnel and readiness.

“Our goal is that any announcements about changes to existing policies affecting service members’ benefits and compensation will be made after the comprehensive review,” she said.

All military services are providing input to the DOD review, officials said. If any changes are made to the tuition assistance policy, they will be instituted in a deliberate, thoughtful manner maintain the integrity of a joint uniform policy for all service members.

Tuition assistance is a popular benefit for military members, particularly in light of the rising costs of post-secondary education courses. However, due to current fiscal constraints, the services consider these costs unsustainable, officials said. Even if adjustments are made to the program, they emphasized that the department will continue to support its members’ higher education goals.

“Opportunities for personal and professional growth have long been a part of military life, and the Department of Defense is committed to helping service members pursue civilian education while in uniform,” said Robert L. Gordon III, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy.

Among educational offerings at military installations is access to education counselors who provide face-to-face guidance to service members and their families, officials said.

In addition, the Voluntary Education Program portal addresses a full range of educational issues from tuition assistance and financial aid to information on more than 1,800 colleges and universities. The portal may be found at <http://apps.mhf.dod.mil/voled>.

DOD’s off-duty, voluntary education programs represent one of the world’s largest continuing education programs, officials said. About 300,000 service members enroll in post-secondary courses each year, leading to associate, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees.

Colleges and universities deliver classroom instruction through an extensive network to hundreds of military installations around the world.

New Policy

Earlier this year, DoD officials announced a new policy that will go into effect Jan. 1. The new DoD-wide policy will replace the separate services’ tuition assistance agreements, said officials.

Under the new agreement, institutions must agree to one tuition rate for all service members, said Carolyn Baker, chief of voluntary education for DOD’s military community family and policy office.

The new policy will require that schools be accredited by an agency recognized by the Department of Education, abide by DOD and military service regulatory guidance on voluntary education, and adhere to the principles and criteria established by the Servicemembers’ Opportunity Colleges, she said.

Key issues addressed in those principles include reasonable transfer of credit to avoid course work duplication and excessive loss of previously earned credit; required academic residency limited to no more than 25 percent of degree requirements, or 30 percent for undergraduate degrees offered 100 percent online; credit for military training and experience; and credit for at least one nationally recognized testing program, such as the College-Level Examination Program.



Amanda Hayman, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University adjunct instructor, reviews the course syllabus with students on the second floor of the training building at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. A week after announcing an 80 percent cut to tuition assistance, in October, the Marine Corps reinstated the benefit to FY 2011 levels. Many Marines protested the sudden cut to the benefits, and many were relieved at the about-face. Photo by Lance Cpl. Timothy Norris

Schools also must agree to provide timely course enrollment, withdrawal and cancellation information and grades, as well as an evaluated education plan outlining the courses needed for a degree, Baker said.

The new policy also requires all schools accepting tuition assistance dollars to participate in a periodic third-party review. DOD is committed to providing programs and services that support, sustain and improve quality of life for service members, Baker said, and the review process will address accountability and quality of education they receive using tuition assistance.

The policy states that any school without a signed memorandum after Jan. 1 will not be able to enroll students using tuition assistance funds, she said.

A list of schools that have signed the agreement will be posted to the Voluntary Education Program website, so military students receiving tuition assistance can see if prospective schools have signed the memorandum, Baker said. ●