

## **Introduction of H.517: Vermont National Guard Tuition Benefit Program Adjustments**

Comments provided by Ken Gragg, Deputy Adjutant General

### **Intent of H.517 is to propose an expansion of the VTNGTBP to include second baccalaureate degrees and advance degrees.**

As the Vermont National Guard Tuition Benefit Program (VTNGTBP) gains traction and continues to mature, the Vermont National Guard (VTNG) is requesting the scope of the program be expanded to include second degrees and master's degrees. VTNGTBP is recognized as a significant recruiting benefit as well as a tool for our current members to grow their knowledge and skills for the betterment of their career and to be a more valuable resource/commodity to our state, communities, and employers.

As the program matures, we are hearing from the recruiting teams that a fair number of applicants already have bachelor's degrees and are looking to change directions. Many have liberal arts degrees and would like to pursue more technical degrees (nursing, business, accounting, education, etc.). The current language does not allow soldiers and airmen that already have a degree to utilize VTNGTBP. Expanding the program to allow members to utilize the program for a degree in a critical career if they have not previously used the program would assist recruiting as another tool to incentivize joining the VTNG. The option would also greatly enhance our current members opportunities to redefine their career goals. As a case in point, we currently have seven (7) soldiers/airmen interested in pursuing nursing degrees, but they already have a degree. So, they are not eligible to utilize VTNGTBP. None of them at this point have moved forward due to cost concerns and only having their Federal Tuition Assistance (\$4500/year) to help defray the cost. This is just one of many opportunities for our citizen soldiers to give back to Vermont with their earned skills.

Expanding VTNGTBP to allow for master's degrees would greatly enhance VTNG's ability to recruit and retain talented soldiers and airmen. The predecessor to the VTNGTBP allowed pursuit of master's degrees. Providing soldiers and airmen the opportunity to pursue an advance degree would directly benefit the members ability to improve their career within the VTNG, the community and their employment. The VTNG grows leaders, and those leaders are valuable resources to local employers as well.

The intent would be to adopt all the same policies and rules, such as, 2 years of service for each academic year, State schools at their resident tuition rate, private schools at the NVU resident rate. In addition, for second bachelor's degrees the first degree could not have been earned using VTNGTBP funds and the degree must fall into the critical careers criteria as defined by the legislator. Additionally, for master's degrees the member could have previously used VTNGTBP for their bachelor's degree but must be employed in Vermont or pursuing employment in Vermont for the service commitment period.

Regarding funding, the baseline program is currently set at \$1.3M and the VTNG is currently executing less than 50% of the budget. There should be sufficient funds to support all aspects of the program for the proposed fiscal year and the ability to closely monitor the execution rate and inform the legislature accordingly.

## **VTNG Member Feedback – Advance Degrees**

“I joined the Vermont Army National Guard in 2000 as a junior in High School. After graduating high school in 2002, and then completing my Initial Entry Training to become a generator repairer, I started at UVM in the spring of 2003. I completed two semesters at UVM before I was deployed to Iraq in 2004, then returned to UVM for the fall semester of 2005. I graduated in 2009 with a BS in business administration with a concentration in operations.

As I have progressed through my career with the VTARNG, I’ve started to look at what might be next. Based on my skills and background, obtaining an MBA is the next logical step. When I made initial inquiries into how and where to obtain an MBA, several choices were available to me and after reviewing many programs, Champlain College seemed to be the best fit.

Champlain’s MBA program is comprehensive two-year program, that has students enroll in about 6 classes per year (standard pace, one class every eight weeks). Champlain College significantly discounts their credit hour cost from \$795 to \$398 per credit hour for active-duty SM so the average class costs about \$1200 or about \$2400 for traditional Soldiers). Federal TA will provide \$250 per credit hour so the average class still costs about \$450 for active-duty Soldiers and \$1650 for traditional. MBA programs require about 12-15 classes depending on the chosen concentration so a total cost for Active Duty is up to \$6,750 and \$24,750 for traditional Soldiers. While the cost for Active-Duty Soldiers is reasonable, it is still a significant investment. Traditional Soldiers face a much steeper barrier to entry that likely keeps many good candidates from pursuing advanced degrees.

Post 9/11 GI bill can be used to complete an MBA program, but after a full undergraduate degree, most people do not have very much left to use. I used 35 of 36 months of my chapter 1607 GI bill. I did receive a few extra months when I converted to the post 9/11 I Bill, but that will only cover me for about 1-2 trimesters.

Over the past decade the Army has moved to encourage and provide higher level education for its Soldiers. It is pushing for enlisted Soldiers to get undergraduate degrees and encourages advanced degrees if possible.

Achieving an MBA will help me better perform in my current roles within the VTNG as well as set me up for success upon my retirement. We all know VT is an expensive place to live. Therefore, many AGR/Soldiers leave the state when they retire. It is hard to make enough money on the civilian side (even with a retirement check). If advanced degrees were more readily available, those Soldier’s may be able to get higher paying jobs after retirement and stay in the state. Additionally, businesses in the state will always appreciate a more educated labor force. I will be 43 when I retire from the VTARNG and my kids will still be in middle school. I do not want to leave the state, but I will also need to be able to provide for them. There are many states that are more affordable to live and have better opportunities for second careers. I believe with an MBA I will be better suited to finding a higher paying job in VT that will allow me to stay in the state with my family through my second career and into my actual retirement.”

SFC Jared LeBlanc

"I currently serve as an aeromedical evacuations pilot for the Vermont Army National Guard. My interest in a master's degree stems from two overlapping desires: the drive to propel my civilian and military career and my drive to serve the local community. As an officer in the Vermont Army National Guard, I have found fulfillment in teaching, mentoring, and leading my fellow soldiers. I believe I could find this same fulfillment by serving simultaneously as a history teacher right here in Vermont. Completing a master's degree in history would grant me the skills and expertise necessary to serve in this capacity. I know many of my fellow officers and soldiers share the same desire to expand their educational horizons. A wider berth of education options would benefit the National Guard and Vermont as a whole."

Daniel R. Phelps  
1LT, MS 67J

"I'd be down to take advantage of this program. Ideally, I'd angle it at something suited to the public service sector. As it applies to the program, one could figure expanding would make recruitment and retention efforts in the guard easier, since it catches that demographic of that has already got their degree (22-plus crowd). Potentially, this could also help the long-term demographic problem in the state; the folks who's ages this program would best be suited are the same folks with young families. After an enlisted person finishes their 4-year active-duty tour it could be compelling to move to green mountain state, join the guard, and become a member of the community."

Geoffrey Lee  
Major, Logistics

"I grew up in Vermont and had been working as a photographer before I went to college. I was going through school at about the time that digital photography took over from film. By the time I graduated I saw the writing on the wall. The company I had worked for downsized due to there being a lack of need for photographers. (People could take as good a photo with their BestBuy Cameras.) I was faced with a choice for my future. Go back to school to get a degree that was relevant in Vermont, leave the state for somewhere there were jobs in the industry, or the path I chose; I joined the Vermont National Guard. My reasoning was I could further myself as a person in the military and it would assist in paying for a second degree. That was when I found out that there was not enough tuition assistance to make it worth it. I did have the chance to transfer to states that would have paid for a second degree, but I didn't. I ended up working ADOS and now have been hired as a MILTECH. I plan to go for a master's degree but will have to do it online to afford it. My ADOS tours don't count towards the Montgomery GI Bill 33. The point of my story is that most of the decisions I was faced with had me leaving the State of Vermont for a career. I am different than most of the people I graduated high school with because I stayed in Vermont. I hope that the State decides to open the VTNGTBP program for higher education because I am one of the people who would benefit."

Axel A. Larson  
CPT, EN