

University of Maine system to offer full in-state tuition to all eligible veterans' dependents

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The University of Maine System has announced a resolution to offer reduced tuition for out-of-state dependents of military veterans who attend Maine public schools, in accordance with new federal requirements for all public universities and colleges.

Under the proposed resolution — which was unanimously approved on Jan. 7 by the academic and student affairs committee of the system's Board of Trustees — the system would offer in-state tuition to all veterans' dependents who qualify for GI Bill benefits, according to Gregory Johnson, vice chair of the board.

The resolution comes in accordance with the Veterans' Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014, which requires public colleges to provide in-state tuition to veterans and eligible dependents. If schools do not comply, they risk losing their GI Bill education payments.

Many colleges and universities across the United States already work to reduce tuition for veterans and their dependents through the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs' Yellow Ribbon Program, which covers costs for those receiving full benefit rates from the VA, according to Tony Llerena, the VETS Coordinator for the University of Maine. The university grants \$8,500 in aid per student to be matched by the Dept. of Veterans Affairs for a total of \$17,000. At the very minimum, all public postsecondary institutions in the U.S. will have to adopt such procedures by July 1, 2015.

The process is confusing, Llerena said, and the system's proposed plan would eliminate the need for such complicated steps.

"Implementing this policy across all seven campuses [...] goes sort of above and beyond what the law requires," Llerena said.

The resolution mandates all dependents must enroll at a university in the state before their GI Bill benefits expire. However, when the benefits do expire, dependents will still receive the in-state tuition rate until they complete their degrees.

According to system officials, there are more than 900 veterans enrolled in the University of Maine system, and 30 dependents using their post-9/11 GI Bill benefits who are currently paying out-of-state tuition. With the passing of this new resolution, those dependents could see serious drops in their bills come next fall.

Out-of-state student tuition at UMaine for the 2014-2015 academic year is \$40,982. That figure is nearly double the \$23,102 in-state student rate, and the same trend is seen at the other six schools in the university system.

“I know one of the biggest reasons veterans don’t attend public universities in a different state than their home state is because of that high tuition rate,” Marcus White, a history student at UMaine who served in Afghanistan, said.

“This is a very big, positive step toward the school in general trying to become more veteran-friendly and the school in general trying to encourage out-of-state veterans to come in,” White said.

Drawing out-of-state students has been an area of concern for the system as it seeks to expand its enrollment. By offering veterans and their dependents a friendlier, more positive university experience, the system hopes this initiative will draw more out-of-state students to the Maine’s public universities.

“That wasn’t the prime motivator,” Johnson, a veteran himself, reassured. “But I certainly hope we can leverage it in positive, constructive ways,” he said.

According to Johnson, the system has a moral responsibility to encourage veterans and their dependents to seek higher education.

“Public education I think has a huge responsibility to make sure that we do everything in our power to make postsecondary education accessible to all our veterans,” Johnson said.

“We need to do everything we can to help them find us and be interested in us, offer some programs. They’re a unique kind of student and we need to support them for them to be successful,” he said.

This is not the first action the system has taken in recent years to improve the quality of education and life for veterans and others receiving GI Bill benefits across its campuses. The system last spring started charging in-state tuition for any veteran honorably discharged from service. Previously, only active-duty service members received reduced tuition rates.

The system has also announced it will not hold classes in observance of Veterans’ Day starting this year, something which had angered many students in recent years.

Johnson said this is the right move for the system and for the state.

“Hopefully this might help us a little bit in attracting out-of-state students, as well as in-state [students],” Johnson said. “But at the end of the day, the real reason we’re doing it is because it’s the right thing to do to serve our veterans.”

The resolution will go to a full Board vote on Monday, Jan. 26.