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GI Bill makes the grade for Vt. veterans

By JOSH O'GORMAN STAFF writer

Brandon Willitts is not your traditional Marlboro College student. The 26-year-old self-described "Army brat" served in the U.S. Navy from December 2001 until February 2006 and was an intelligence specialist in Afghanistan, where he gathered information to support ground and air forces. He also is one of many veterans who are going to school on the new Post- 9/11 GI Bill.

While many payments have been delayed, the Veterans Administration and colleges are stepping up to make sure veterans like Willitts receive the benefits — and the education — they deserve.

The Post- 9/11 GI Bill, which went into effect Aug. 1, provides financial support for education and housing for anyone who was honorably discharged with at least 90 days of military service — or discharged after 30 days with a service-connected disability — after Sept. 11, 2001.

Payments vary by region, and in Vermont are based loosely on the cost of education at University of Vermont. The VA will pay \$488 per credit hour and \$2,511 in fees per term for veterans to go to school in Vermont, and the program is so popular the VA has a backlog in applications, said Pam Tebo-Piccione, veterans service center manager at the VA in White River Junction.

Between May 1 and Sept. 30, the VA received nearly 290,000 applications for the new benefits, but only about 34,000 of those applications have been processed, Tebo-Piccione said.

"The average process time is about 35 days, which is a little longer than we'd like," she said.

Willitts is one of the quarter-million veterans whose school has not received payment yet, but that hasn't affected his ability to attend classes.

"The Post- 9/11 GI Bill isn't doing as much for me as Marlboro College has," Willitts said of the school, which has accelerated his loan payments. "If I hadn't come to Marlboro, I wouldn't be able to pay my rent."

While Willitts is the only veteran among his roughly 300 classmates, Marlboro College has a rich tradition of educating vets. Veteran Walter Hendricks founded the school on his farm in 1946, and 35 of the first 50 graduates were vets, too. Despite his background, Willitts said he thinks of himself more as a college student than a vet.

"I don't want to be identified as Brandon the veteran. I want to be Brandon the Marlboro College student," he said.

The delay in payments doesn't appear to have affected any student's ability to attend classes. There are about 50 students enrolled at UVM using GI Bill benefits, including the Post- 9/11 G.I. Bill, and delayed payments haven't kept anyone out of class, said Chris Lucier, vice president for enrollment management.

"We strive to be very understanding of the veteran's situation and we have someone in our Student Financial Services office that is specifically knowledgeable of GI Bill and other veterans benefits and works with the veterans," Lucier said. "Bottom line, we don't want bureaucratic problems that are outside the veteran's control to affect their enrollment."

Castleton State College has six students using the new GI Bill, and while the school has only received payments for one of them, the other five still are attending classes, according to Communications Director Ennis Duling.

Bennington College hasn't received payments yet for its two students using the new GI Bill either.

"The money hasn't come in yet, but we're assuming it will come and it's not affecting a student's ability to attend class," said Bennington College Media Relations Associate Brian Davidson.

While schools appear to be understanding and accommodating as they wait for tuition, other payments for housing, food and textbooks have been delayed, as well. In response, on Friday, the VA began cutting checks for as much as \$3,000 for veterans whose payments have been delayed.

"I've never seen the VA be this proactive," Tebo-Piccione said Friday morning.

By noon, 15 vets had come to the Veterans Benefits Administration office to pick up checks, including David VanInwagen of Claremont, N.H. The 34-year old Coast Guard veteran and Army Reservist is enrolled at Granite State College where is pursuing a bachelor's degree in science.

"I checked my account and realized I hadn't been paid yet," VanInwagen said. "My first perspective was worry, but I have to give them credit for stepping up and taking care of this."

Dave Gerns, 45, of Burlington, also made the trip to White River Junction Friday. The 21-year veteran of the Navy is studying computer forensics at Champlain College.

"I came here to get the check and I was in and out in 15 minutes," Gerns said. "I spent more time driving around White River Junction looking for the VA."

Tebo-Piccione said her office would continue to issue checks through the end of the month, and veterans who cannot make the trip to White River Junction can apply online and will receive payment within three to seven business days.

The VA is not the only entity stepping up to help veterans. While the GI Bill pays the equivalent of what it costs to go to UVM, tuitions at the state's private colleges are some of the most expensive in the nation. To fill the gap, the VA has partnered with participating schools for the Yellow Ribbon Program, in which the school puts up a portion of tuition that the VA matches.

"Vermont schools are very veteran-friendly, as evidenced by their participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program," said Jacquelyn Carlomagno, program director for the education and training state approving agency for the Vermont Office of Veterans Affairs. "We have about 80 percent of the schools in the state participating, which has to be one of the highest participation rates in the country."

In addition to certifying the 28 schools in the state with programs approved for GI Bill funds, Carlomagno also reached out to the schools to help establish the Yellow Ribbon Program.

For example, Middlebury College's total comprehensive fee — tuition, room, board — is \$50,780, but their Yellow Ribbon contribution is \$15,135, which is matched by \$15,135 from the VA.

Bennington College puts up \$12,000, an amount that effectively makes the school tuition-free for veterans.

"We specifically picked that number so it covers the full tuition and associated fees," Davidson said.

Marlboro College contributes \$20,000 that also covers the cost of tuition.

Willitts, who is the fourth generation of his family to serve in the military and

grew up in conservative Republican household, is studying American literature and fiction and hopes to enter a creative writing program. He mingles among classmates whose backgrounds are very different from his own, but he believes their differences will benefit everyone.

"Being around people of different perspectives can broaden your own perspective on the world," he said. "When it comes to bringing in people who have seen the world and had different experiences, I think that's the value and benefit of having veterans on a college campus."

For more information about the Post- 9/11 GI Bill, visit gibill.va.gov.

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