

Testimony

presented by

**Constantine W. Curris
President
American Association of
State Colleges and Universities**

to the

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Benefits Hearing**

regarding

**H.R. 1291
“21st Century Montgomery GI Bill
Enhancement Act”**

submitted by

**American Association of State Colleges and
Universities**

**June 7, 2001
Washington D.C.**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, good morning. I am Deno Curris, President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, based here in Washington, D.C. The Association is comprised of more than 425 public four-year colleges and universities and university systems throughout the United States and its territories. On behalf of our member institutions, I am grateful for your invitation and pleased to be with you.

I come before you today as an advocate for public higher education, having served as a public university president for more than 25 years; as the father of a captain in the U.S. Army; and, perhaps most importantly, as a citizen vitally interested in preserving and protecting two institutions charged with the nation's health and welfare—its higher education system and its military.

Specifically, I am here to lend my voice to the growing call to modernize the educational benefit offered by the Montgomery GI Bill. The current benefit is not keeping pace with higher education costs, and thereby compromises educational opportunity for our men and women in uniform. As such, I am advocating for legislation that meets two criteria:

Adequacy—Whatever measure is approved by this committee and ultimately, by the Congress, should have as its minimum standard the average price of a public four-year education for a commuter student, as determined by a nationally accepted benchmark. I believe that this standard is a modest one, and represents the least we can do for those who serve our nation in uniform.

Adaptability—Any measure adopted by the Congress must also keep pace with the contemporary realities of paying for college. We are here today because the Montgomery GI Bill benefit is not keeping up with the average price of a public college education. We need to fix that shortcoming. We recommend an automatic annual adjustment to the benefit, based upon a nationally accepted benchmark.

In issuing this call, I speak on behalf of institutions that enroll nearly three-and-a-half million students and award more than one-third of all the baccalaureate degrees conferred in the United States. The colleges and universities represented by our association vary widely in focus and curriculum, but share a deep commitment to access and opportunity. These institutions have

a proud heritage of opening their doors to historically underrepresented and underserved populations. They have maintained solid partnerships with the armed services since the first GI Bill more than a half-century ago. In fact, it was the original GI Bill that helped to transform many of our member institutions into what they are today.

At the national level, the Association values its relationship with the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges. SOC, a consortium of more than 1,500 colleges and universities that has been housed at AASCU since its inception in 1972, provides an invaluable service for the men and women who serve this nation in uniform. By working with colleges and universities to seamlessly transfer college credit for active duty servicemembers, SOC helps students who are serving their country to complete a cohesive educational program in a timely fashion. Since 1972, SOC has aided thousands of servicemembers in their higher education pursuits, demonstrating the importance of strong ties between higher education and the nation's armed forces.

The action of the Congress in passing the 1944 Servicemembers Readjustment Act stands as a watershed in the nation's economic and social development. Management expert Peter Drucker points to the implementation of the GI Bill as the starting point for the emergence of a "knowledge economy" in this country. Even by today's standards, the educational impact of the GI Bill is staggering—450,000 engineers, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 22,000 dentists, and more than 1,000,000 additional workers. The economic impact has been similarly awe-inspiring, as it has been estimated that every dollar invested in the GI Bill brought between \$5.00 and \$12.50—a rate of return that is virtually unrivaled in the public sector.

While we can view the GI Bill in macroeconomic terms, I like to view it as the embodiment of what President Abraham Lincoln once described as the "Right to Rise." The fulfilled promise of the GI bill was to give veterans the opportunity to rise, to —as a recent recruiting slogan said—"Be all you can be."

This Memorial Day President Bush signed a measure from Congress that provides for the erection of a visible testament to the heroism of the men and women who fought—and died—in World War II. In that space on the Mall, we will belatedly but gratefully acknowledge the sacrifices made to safeguard the freedom we enjoy today.

The Mall will hold a physical memorial to that generation, but the living memorial is found in every town across America, as the veterans and their children and grandchildren enjoy good and prosperous lives because of what you the Congress made possible through the GI Bill.

But the GI Bill in 2001 is far different from the GI Bill a half-century ago. The true GI Bill covered tuition and living costs for our returning servicemen and women. This GI Bill of the 21st century does half that. It is half a promise kept. We can do better and we should.

As such, I ask you to increase the educational benefit of the Montgomery GI Bill, to ensure that it provides for the servicemembers of the 21st Century the same opportunity that it did for the heroes of the 20th Century. In particular, I am advocating for an educational benefit that keeps up with higher education costs. Our new bill must be both “adequate” and “adaptable.”

The facts are simple—the current Montgomery GI Bill benefit covers just 63 percent of the average cost of a baccalaureate degree for a commuter student at a state college or university and no additional expenses. The reason? Increases in benefits have not kept pace with increases in costs. As a former university president, I can assure you that my colleagues are very concerned about rising costs and are actively seeking out ways to contain them; however, the reality is that higher education, as a human resource-intensive enterprise, is a significant public investment. If the GI Bill’s educational benefit is to be real, it should bear a closer resemblance to the reality of higher education costs.

Several bills are to be considered by this committee in the 107th Session of Congress. Each has its own merits to improve servicemembers’ and veterans’ benefits. One measure before you, HR 1280, and its companion measure in the Senate, S 131—the Veterans’ Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2001—is especially helpful for Montgomery GI Bill recipients. It would restore the comprehensive educational benefit by guaranteeing that servicemembers will not lose the purchasing power of their educational investment. In addition, the amount of the benefit will be determined annually by the Secretary using a nationally accepted benchmark that calculates the monthly benefit on the average cost of a four-year public education for a commuter student. The measure that you are now considering, H.R. 1291, is good legislation, but it would be greatly strengthened if it contained language that set this benchmark in place. We stand ready to support this approach and will work with you to consider it in the final bill.

Throughout its history, our nation has been blessed to have leaders step forward to do the right thing at the right time, like those individuals that pushed relentlessly for the adoption of the Servicemembers Readjustment Act of 1944. We place our faith in you the Congress to be among those who do the right thing at the right time and make real in the 21st century our commitment to our veterans.

We thank you for your leadership and support for improving servicemembers’ and veterans’ benefits.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF CONSTANTINE W. CURRIS



Dr. Constantine W. Curris assumed the presidency of the American Association of Colleges and Universities in October 1999. He is the fourth chief executive for AASCU -- a national association of over 400 public colleges and universities.

Curris, a Kentucky native, has served as President at three universities; Murray (KY) State University for 10 years, the University of Northern Iowa for 12 years, and Clemson University for over 4 years until his selection as AASCU president. The Murray State Student Center and the Northern Iowa Business Building bear Curris' name.

Curris has pledged to be a strong advocate for public higher education and its students, and to assist AASCU chancellors and presidents strengthen their institutions in order to meet public needs and expectations in the 21st century. Curris has been associated with AASCU since 1973 as a member of several Association committees, its Board of Directors and in 1995 as Chairman of the Board.

Other professional experiences for Curris include appointments to the 1998 Commission on the Future of the South, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, the Education Commission of the States, the Iowa Board of Economic Development, the South Carolina Research Authority, and the chairmanships of American Humanics and the Iowa Task Force on Teacher Education and Certification.

Curris, who goes by the nickname "Deno," received his baccalaureate and doctorate degrees from the University of Kentucky, and his master's from the University of Illinois. He is married to Jo Hern Curris, a tax attorney. They are parents of two adult children: Robert Alexander and Elena Diane.

AASCU Federal Grant or Contract Disclosure Statement

June 7, 2001

<u>Federal Contract or Grant</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Amount</u>
<u>Federal Fiscal Year 2000</u>		
Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Dept of the Navy		
	N00140-97-C-0181	\$2,813,559
	<u>Total for FY 2000</u>	<u>\$2,813,559</u>
<u>Federal Fiscal Year 2001</u>		
Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Dept of the Navy		
	N00140-97-C-0181	\$3,026,061
National Science Foundation	DUE-0089912	\$151,426
	<u>Total for FY 2001</u>	<u>\$3,177,487</u>