



Student Veteran Handbook

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Welcome to Southwest Mississippi Community College

As a veteran, you are entitled to certain benefits and eligible to participate in certain programs to help further your college education. This Veterans Handbook will help you better understand the policies and procedures that affect your veteran's educational benefits. Its purpose is to clarify rules and policies, answer some of your immediate questions and refer you to those individuals who can best answer other questions you may have. Remember, however, that this convenient reference only supplements information in the SMCC college catalog and information at the GI Bill website <https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/>. You are encouraged to read the catalog for complete information on all college policies.

SMCC Veterans Affairs School Certifying Official * Office hours: 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

SMCC's School Certifying Official (SCO) is part of the Office of Financial Aid, not the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It is located in the Britte E. Hughey Administration on the Southwest Mississippi Community Campus, located in Summit, Mississippi. The SCO can be reached by phone at 601-276-4804 or by email at tcain@smcc.edu. The Office of Financial Aid is the main point of contact for students receiving educational assistance from the VA. It is professionally staffed to assist with students with VA educational benefit inquiries. The SMCC SCO monitors the academic progress of all student receiving educational benefits from the VA. All students receiving benefits from the VA must notify the SMCC SCO during registration, as well as when a change occurs in their class schedule.

Southwest Mississippi Community College provides services to veterans, active duty military, reservists, and eligible dependents enrolled in the institution. Some of these services include:

- Providing information and guidance for veteran students and dependents about entitlements, filing claims to the VA, and certifying enrollments at the institution.
- Advising veterans concerning VA requirements for maintaining satisfactory academic progress.
- Reviewing selected courses for consistency with VA regulations and direct relation to the requirements specified for a diploma, certificate, degree.
- Providing assistance in resolving problems that may arise in the student's relations with the institution and the VA.

College Services

SMCC provides a variety of services to all students, including veterans. These include counseling, financial aid, job placement assistance, testing, free tutoring, etc. The Director of Disability Support Services is located in the Vice President for Student Affairs Office located in Kenna Hall. This individual works specifically with students who have disabilities and provides a variety of services to eligible students.

Department of Veterans Affairs

Veteran's educational assistance programs are the responsibility of the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA issues regulations, makes eligibility determinations and defray beneficiary payments. The toll free number to the VA regional Processing Office in Muskogee, OK is 1-888-GI-Bill-1 (1-888-422-

4551). This number will connect the caller to the VA Education Information Line where counselors should be able to provide additional information concerning benefits eligibility, payment status, etc. However, this manual contains useful information about VA Educational Assistance Programs, application procedures, and specific guidelines for SMCC students receiving VA educational benefits.

The following information should serve as an overview of the available programs and benefits, but if you should have any questions, please contact the SMCC SCO at 601-276-3707 or tlc@smcc.edu.

How to Get Started

Admissions

Fill out the SMCC admission application and submit the completed application to the Registrar's Office. Forms may be picked up from the Registrar's Office, downloaded from our website or by completing the online application at www.smcc.edu by selecting Admissions and Apply for Admission.

Have all previous training records or information, including transcripts from any college, university, high school, or GED results, sent to the SMCC Registrar's Office at 1156 College Drive, Summit, MS 39666.

Counseling

Contact an academic or career technical counselor or advisor for assistance in choosing a Program of Study. All students receiving VA educational benefits must have an Official Program of Study on file and be enrolled in a State Approving Agency approved program leading to a certificate or degree.

SMCC School Certifying Official

Contact the SMCC SCO to obtain information for the electronic applications and advisement concerning your particular type of educational benefits. Return the completed VA applications to the SCO for processing. Prospective students are encouraged to make their initial inquiries about VA applications to the SMCC SCO at 601-276-3707 or tlc@smcc.edu if they are unable to inquire in person in the Office of Financial Aid.

Registration

Sign up for classes. VA students will only receive payment for courses that apply to their degree as listed on their Program of Study.

All veterans and eligible dependents are urged to consult the SMCC SCO early in the initial admissions process.

To maintain eligibility for VA education benefits, students must adhere to the policies and procedures contained in the SMCC Student Veteran Handbook and the VA rules and regulations. A copy of the SMCC Student Veteran Handbook can be downloaded from www.smcc.edu by selecting Financial Aid and Veteran's Assistance.

Veterans Basic Eligibility Requirements

Veterans Benefits

Veterans Benefits are a form of financial aid awarded to eligible persons based on military service. Currently, seven programs authorize payment of educational benefits to eligible persons. Please go to <https://benefits.va.gov/gibill/> for specific eligibility for each chapter of the GI BILL.

- Chapter 33: Post 9/11 GI Bill
- Chapter 33: Post 9/11 GI Bill/Transfer of Entitlement for Dependents
- Chapter 30 & 34/30: Montgomery GI Bill
- Chapter 31: VA Vocational Rehabilitation Program
- Chapter 1606: Selected Reserve Educational Assistance
- Chapter 1607: REAP
- Chapter 35: Dependents & Survivors Educational Assistance
Payment cannot be made to dependents or survivors without the veteran's file number and a VA assigned suffix code.

Full-time **Active Duty** students are encouraged to use Tuition Assistance instead of their Chapter 30 benefits because if veterans benefits are used a student will be paid **only tuition/fees** for the enrollment period and forfeit the equivalent term length in benefit entitlement. Active duty students should consult their Education Services Office about the Tuition Assistance Program.

Application Procedures & Documents

VA educational benefit applications should be submitted through the Veterans Online Applications, (VONAPP), at the GI Bill website. An application for admission must be submitted to the Admissions/Registrar's Office.

Previously Received DVA Educational Benefits

Students who have received DVA educational benefits (except Chapter 31 and 35 recipients) at another institution or who are returning to NWFSC after a break of more than one calendar year need only complete the VA Form 22-1995 (Change of Program or Place of Training). If the veteran's entitlement includes increased benefits for dependents, additional paperwork may be required. Chapter 35 recipients must complete VA Form 22-5495. Applicants for Chapter 31 benefits should contact the DVA Vocational Rehabilitation Office in your area and must re-apply using VA Form 22-1900 unless currently enrolled or transferring directly from another school.

First Time Applicant for Benefits

Chapters 30, 33, 30, 1606, 1607(REAP): Apply using VA Form 22-1990. Applicants on active duty must have section II completed by their Educational Services Officer. Reservists (Chapter 1606) must submit a DD Form 2384 – Notice of Basic Eligibility (NOBE). All others should submit copies of their DD Form(s) 214 covering the entire period of service. Although not required, it may speed the application process if a county clerk or an authorized DVA representative (located in your area) certifies the DD Form 214. For Chapter 30, VA Form 21-686c must be completed if dependents are claimed. Copies of birth and

marriage certificates must accompany the VA Form 21-686c. Additional forms may be required for dependent parents and/or dependent children over the age of 18 who are still attending school. Chapter 33 transfer of entitlement dependents will apply using a VA Form 22-1990E.

Chapter 31: Applicants for Chapter 31 benefits should contact the DVA Vocational Rehabilitation Office in in your area or apply directly to the DVA with a VA Form 28-1900. The VA Form 28-1900 is also available at the County Veterans Services Office. The DVA screens applicants and, if determined eligible, assigns a DVA Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist to the individual. Additional forms may be required to verify the number and status of dependents. The college must receive VA Form 281905, signed by the student's DVA Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, before the last day to pay fees or before books and supplies are purchased.

Chapter 35: Apply using a VA Form 22-5490. Dependent children must also submit a copy of their birth certificate.

Requirements for In-State Tuition

Veterans

Veterans qualify for residency if the veteran was discharged with a character of service of "honorable". The waiving of out-of-state tuition requires the veteran to provide a DD-214 stating their character of service.

Dependents of Veterans

Dependents of veterans qualify for in-state-tuition if they can provide proof of the transfer of Chapter 33 benefits or proof of Chapter 35 benefits by submitting a certificate of eligibility.

Certificate of Eligibility

After the Veterans Administration Regional Processing Office (RPO) has received the application for benefits and the necessary supporting documentation, the claim will be processed and a file (claim) number will be established (usually the veteran's social security number; eligible dependents will use their sponsor's file number). Eligible applicants will receive two Certificates of Eligibility. These certificates will indicate the claim number; type of benefit, number of months of eligibility remaining and the date the eligibility expires. Students should submit one copy to the SMCC Veterans Affairs Office and keep the second copy for personal records.

Certification Process

After the appropriate VA application and supporting documents are returned to the SMCC Veterans Affairs Office. A file is established in the SMCC VA Office that contains copies of all documents. All VA students must submit an SMCC VA Enrollment Certification Request each term indicating the courses and hours to be certified. It is the responsibility of the student to insure that he or she has requested certification for each term attended. It only takes a few minutes to fill out the form.

No Certification Request = No Certification = No Money!

After a student registers and completes an SMCC VA Enrollment Certification Request, a VA Form 22-1999 Enrollment Certification is transmitted electronically to the RPO with a copy is placed in the student's VA file. The student will receive an automatic email from the VA once system indicating a VA certification has been done. It can take at least six weeks for the RPO to process enrollment claims. Once entitlement is established the RPO will send the veteran or dependent an Award Letter. This letter outlines the amount of money to be received and the entitlement that was reported by the college. Payments are direct-deposited monthly to the account on record with the DVA. Chapter 30, 1606 and 1607 students must complete a Monthly Verification to the RPO. The VA uses a post-payment system and payment will not be made until the Monthly Verification is received and processed by the RPO.

Chapter 30, 1606 and 1607 VA Monthly Verifications Procedures

Chapter 30, 1606 and 1607 beneficiaries have two methods available for submitting their VA Monthly Verifications. Monthly verifications cannot be accepted prior to the last day of the month and please submit only once each month.

1. Use W.A.V.E. (Web Automated Verification of Enrollment) to verify enrollment electronically to access W.A.V.E. go to www.gibill.va.gov.

2. Use Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system on the phone. Dial 1-877-823-2378 and follow the instructions.

The IVR is to be used only for "No Change" verifications

Chapter 33 and Chapter 35 DO NOT do monthly verifications at this time.

Veteran Deferments

All students receiving VA educational benefits are eligible to defer their tuition up to 60 days, once per academic year, if they are in good financial standing. VA deferments are offered as a convenience and tuition must be paid by the deferment deadline whether or not checks are received from the DVA.

Program of Study

All VA students must have an approved Program of Study. It is the student's responsibility to ensure the SMCC VA Office has an official Program of Study on file. The Program of Study lists all the courses required to complete the specific academic degree at the college. The Program of Study must be on file in the Veterans Affairs Office before the end of the first term. Considerable care should be taken in the development of this plan, as the DVA will consider only courses listed on the Program in making determination of the student's status. Courses not listed are not considered when calculating the student's eligibility for benefits. At the time of registration, make sure courses selected meet the requirements toward your specific degree.

Students pursuing an AA Degree with a University Parallel Program of Study (with a specific area of emphasis), needed for admission to upper division programs in Mississippi's public universities, will be certified for only those courses listed on their Official Program of Study.

Veterans are encouraged to make necessary program changes before the start of the term. Academic advisors may not be able to write new Programs of Study during the busy registration period. However, they will make adjustments to a current Program.

Program conflict occurs when the veteran's program of study at SMCC is different than that reported to the DVA on the application for benefits. To resolve the conflict, change the program of study with an NWFSC advisor or change the program with the VA by submitting a VA Form 22-1995 or 22-5495 (Chapter 35). Both programs must agree in order to be certified.

Academic Standards of Progress

The VA requires that students in receipt of VA benefits maintain satisfactory progress in their chosen program of study. The academic standards of progress for students are listed in the College Catalog. Familiarize yourself with these standards. Veteran students are ineligible for VA benefits beyond two consecutive terms on Academic Warning/Academic Probation. Veteran students will be removed from VA benefits following the second term of their Academic Warning/Academic Probation. If a veteran or dependent is placed on Academic Suspension/Dismissal, DVA benefits will be terminated immediately. Students may be re-certified for veterans' benefits ONLY after attaining the minimum required cumulative grade point average and submitting a VA Form 22-1995 or 22-5495 (Chapter 35).

Prior Credit

DVA regulations require that all-previous education (prior college, CLEP, DANTES, ACT/PEP credits) as well as military training and experience be evaluated by SMCC and, where applicable, be applied to shorten the program of education being pursued. It is the veteran's responsibility to ensure that acceptable records are sent to the SMCC Admissions Office for evaluation no later than the first term of enrollment. Prior credits received after certification can create an overpayment if the courses apply to the current program of study.

Remedial & Deficiency Courses

Remedial and deficiency courses are intended to assist individuals in overcoming weaknesses in particular areas of study such as English composition, mathematics and reading. These courses are approved for VA payment only when the need for training is established by placement testing.

NOTE for Chapter 33 Students

Chapter 33 students must take remedial/deficiency courses as in-residence courses. Remedial/Deficiency taken as Hybrid, TextMixed Media Distance Learning, and Web based On-Line Distance Learning courses are NOT APPROVED for certification. Per SB1720 active duty members cannot use VA benefits for remedial classes.

Non-Applicable, Audited & Repeat Courses (Not required by degree program)

No benefits will be paid for courses that do not meet school requirements for graduation! The following list reflects types of courses that will not be certified for payment; however, this list is not all-inclusive:

- Courses that have been previously completed with a grade of “D” or higher, unless the student’s program requires a higher grade. This includes courses transferred from other colleges.
- Courses taken to fulfill requirements at another institution unless a transient authorization is received.
- Courses taken as an audit status or non-credit basis, or courses in which the permanent grade is “non-punitive,” e.g. “W”.

A degree requirement course in which an unsatisfactory grade is earned can be repeated and will be allowed for payment until successfully completed.

Only during the last term before graduation may a student register for non-applicable courses in order to have enough hours to be full-time. This can be done only once per program and those non-applicable courses may not have been previously successfully completed. For example, if a student needs only 6 hours to graduate in the current term, but wishes to receive full-time benefits, he or she can register for 6 additional hours of courses that do not have to apply to the intended degree program. This policy does not apply to students pursuing a certificate program or using Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The student’s case manager must approve any additional courses. Additionally, non-applicable courses may be approved for VA benefits only if they are taken to remove a deficiency in the student’s grade point average, and this deficiency is preventing the student from graduating.

Dual Degrees

Students are not allowed to receive VA payment for more than one program of study at a particular time. Benefit payments will not be authorized for courses taken to fulfill requirements outside your enrolled program of study.

Course Load

For the purposes of paying educational benefits, the DVA, not the college, determines what constitutes full, three-quarter, half, and less than half-time training for Chapter 30, 31, 35, 1606 and 1607 students or a rate of pursuit of 51% or greater for Chapter 33 students.

Determination of training time for College Credit courses for standard length Session 1 Fall and Spring classes is based on Credit Hours of enrollment as follows:

- Full Time = 12+ credit hours
- 3/4 Time = 9-11 credit hours
- 1/2 Time = 6-8 credit hours
- Less than 1/2 Time = 5 or less credit hours

(payment is for tuition and fees only)

Accelerated Sessions

Non-standard terms are those with beginning or ending dates other than the regular term dates (Session 2, 3, 24, 37, etc.) and benefits are based on “equivalent” credit hours. Veterans who enroll in nonstandard term courses such as Mini-Terms and the Summer Terms should be aware that the DVA determines benefits on a term basis, not by adding the total credit hours for the term. For example, a

three term hour course during an eight week Fall or Spring Mini-Term is the equivalent of “half-time” for VA payment and “three quarter-time” during a six-week Summer Mini-Term.

Attendance Policies

Attendance is required for students pursuing a clock hour program and receiving DVA benefits. It is the student’s responsibility to inform the instructor of an absence prior to or as soon as possible after the absence. It is also the student’s responsibility to notify the instructor and the Veterans Affairs Office if he/she is unable to attend class. Students receiving benefits are identified on the instructor’s roster and are reported to the SMCC VA Office.

Changes In Status

All students receiving DVA educational benefits are required by law to keep the Veterans Affairs Office notified of the following:

- Change in Program of Study
- Withdrawal from a course
- Enrollment in courses not counted toward degree requirements
- Change of address
- Course substitutions
- Concurrent enrollment at SMCC and another institution

A separate change of address must be filed with the DVA and the College. Notify the DVA by using the W.A.V.E. at www.gibill.va.gov if you are currently receiving VA education benefits, or by calling (888) 442-4551. In addition, notify both the SMCC VA Office and the Registrar’s Office of any address change.

Withdrawals/Non-punitive Grades

The law prohibits payment of DVA educational benefits for a course from which the student withdraws or completes and receives a grade that is not used in computing the grade point average (a non-punitive grade, i.e. “W”). Withdrawals must be reported to the NWFSC Veterans Affairs Office. Payment may be allowed if the student submits evidence of mitigating circumstances that is acceptable by the DVA.

Mitigating Circumstances

Mitigating circumstances are unanticipated and unavoidable documented events that interfere with the pursuit of a course and result in the student’s receipt of a non-punitive grade. Mitigating circumstances may be claimed by submitting documented evidence when a student withdraws or otherwise incurs an overpayment. Claims may be submitted on a VA Form 21-4138 with an explanation of the circumstances. The DVA considers mitigating circumstances to exist without explanation by the veteran in the first instance of withdrawal from a course or courses totaling not more than six (6) term hours. The decision to accept mitigating circumstances is made by the DVA.

The following are some general categories of mitigating circumstances:

- Serious illness of the veteran or dependent.
- Serious illness or death in the eligible veteran’s or dependent’s immediate family.

- Immediate family or financial obligations that require a change in terms, hours or place of employment which precludes pursuit of course.
- Discontinuance of a course by a school.
- Unanticipated active duty military service, including active duty for training.
- Unanticipated difficulties with child care arrangements.

Examples of unacceptable mitigating circumstances include, but are not limited to, withdrawal to avoid a failing grade, disliking an instructor, too many courses attempted, or a call to active duty that was anticipated before the term began.

VA Educational Overpayments

Occasionally, VA students may be overpaid. Overpayments may result from students receiving grades (I, W, X etc.) that are not used in computing requirements for graduation. Another major cause may be due to the student's failure to report course changes immediately to the SMCC VA Office or when an instructor reports poor attendance by a VA student. To avoid overpayment of benefits, students MUST report any changes in credit hours (drop/add), withdrawal, or termination to the SMCC VA Office. All overpayments must be repaid to the DVA. Interest and administrative fees may be assessed and added to the original amount of the debt until it is cleared. Failure to repay an overpayment will result in adverse credit rating. Debt collection may be turned over to the IRS or a collection agency.

Financial Aid

The major categories of financial assistance include grants, scholarships and student employment. Many of these benefits can be used in conjunction with DVA educational benefits. All veterans are encouraged to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (PELL GRANT) as soon as the required tax information is available and well in advance of registration. See the college catalog for priority deadlines to avoid lengthy delays in receiving financial aid.

Transient & Concurrent Enrollment

Transient or concurrent enrollment exists when a student's approved program includes training at more than one institution. This usually occurs when a student is enrolled in prerequisite courses for transfer back to their primary institution. To be considered for transient or concurrent enrollment, a student must first be enrolled at SMCC as a "Transient-non-degree seeking" student and enrolled in an approved program at their primary institution. To begin certification at SMCC a "Transient Student Letter," listing the courses needed at SMCC that will be accepted towards the veteran's degree program at their primary institution, must be on file in the SMCC Veterans Affairs Office. Since cross-enrollment requires both institutions to certify the student, a delay will usually occur before paperwork is processed and benefits paid.

Compliance with 38 USC §3679 (E)

In accordance with Title 38 US Code 3679(e), SMCC adopts the following additional provisions for any students using U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Post-9/11 G.I. Bill® (Ch. 33) or Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (Ch. 31) benefits, while payment to the institution is pending from VA.

SMCC will not:

- Prevent the student's enrollment;
- Assess a late penalty fee to the student;
- Require the student to secure alternative or additional funding;
- Deny the student access to any resources (access to classes, libraries, or other institutional facilities) available to other students who have satisfied their tuition and fee bills to the institution.

However, to qualify for this provision, such students will be required to:

- Produce the VA Certificate of Eligibility (COE) by the first day of class;
- Provide a written request to be certified;
- Provide additional information needed to properly certify the enrollment as described in other institutional policies

GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).