
SENATE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Bob Archuleta, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: AB 2203

Hearing Date: 6/22/26

Author: Tangipa

Version: 2/19/26

Urgency: No

Fiscal: Yes

Consultant: Diego Nelson

Subject: Public postsecondary education: priority registration: veterans and dependents of veterans: federal GI Bill

DESCRIPTION

Summary:

Requires the California State University and each community college district, and requests the University of California, beginning with the 2028–29 academic year, to grant priority registration to students who receive the CalVet College Fee Waiver and students who are using any federal GI Bill benefits, if the campus administers a priority enrollment system.

Existing law:

1. Establishes the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges as the three public segments of higher education in California. (Education Code § 66010)
2. Prohibits UC, CSU, and CCC campuses from charging mandatory systemwide tuition or fees to specified military-connected students who qualify for a CalVet-administered fee waiver, including a child of a veteran who has a service-connected disability, was killed in service, or died of a service-connected disability; a dependent or unremarried surviving spouse of a California National Guard member who was killed, died of a disability, or became permanently disabled in the line of duty while in active state service; an undergraduate student who is a Medal of Honor recipient; and an undergraduate student who is the child of a Medal of Honor recipient and is no more than 27 years of age. (Education Code § 66025.3(a); Military and Veterans Code § 890 et seq.)
3. Requires CSU and each community college district, and requests UC, to grant priority registration to a member or former member of the United States Armed Forces who is a California resident and who received an honorable discharge, general discharge, or other than honorable discharge, and to members or former members of the State Guard, for any academic term attended within four academic years after leaving state or federal active duty, to be used within 15 years after leaving active duty. (Education Code § 66025.8)
4. Authorizes or requires priority registration for several other student groups, including foster youth, former foster youth, homeless youth, formerly homeless youth, student parents, students employed as first responders, certain CalWORKs and Tribal TANF recipients, disabled students, and students in extended opportunity programs and services. (Education Code §§ 66025.9, 66025.81, 66025.82, 66025.91, 66025.92)
5. Establishes the California Military Department GI Bill Award Program for active members of the California National Guard, State Guard, or Naval Militia to use toward

obtaining a certificate, degree, or diploma, subject to specified service and program requirements. (Education Code §§ 69999.12, 69999.16)

6. Establishes educational benefits for dependents of veterans who were killed during military service or are totally disabled, and limits duplicative receipt of certain federal or government educational benefits. (Military and Veterans Code §§ 890–899, including §§ 896.1, 896.4)

Federal law:

Provides, under federal law, education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill for eligible veterans, service members, and certain dependents. The Forever GI Bill eliminated the 15-year time limit for veterans discharged from active duty on or after January 1, 2013. (38 U.S.C. Chapter 33, including §§ 3311, 3319, 3321; Public Law 115-48)

This bill:

1. Requires, beginning with the 2028–29 academic year, CSU and each community college district to grant priority registration for enrollment to both of the following students at any campus that administers a priority enrollment system:
 - A student who receives a fee waiver under the CalVet College Fee Waiver provisions; and
 - A student who is using any federal GI Bill benefits.
2. Requests UC to grant the same priority registration at each UC campus that administers a priority enrollment system.

BACKGROUND

California provides several education benefits for veterans, service members, and military-connected students. The CalVet College Fee Waiver waives mandatory systemwide tuition and fees at UC, CSU, and CCC campuses for specified dependents of disabled or deceased veterans, eligible dependents and surviving spouses of certain California National Guard members, Medal of Honor recipients, and eligible children of Medal of Honor recipients. The waiver applies to tuition and mandatory systemwide fees, but does not cover other costs of attendance such as books, parking, housing, meals, or campus-based fees. Eligibility may also be subject to annual application requirements, age limits, income limits, or other plan-specific conditions.

Federal GI Bill benefits provide another major source of educational assistance for eligible service members, veterans, and, in some cases, their family members. The Post-9/11 GI Bill generally provides up to 36 months of education benefits, with benefit levels based on length of service. Depending on eligibility, these benefits may help cover tuition, fees, housing, books, and other education-related costs. Although the Forever GI Bill removed the 15-year use limitation for certain veterans discharged on or after January 1, 2013, some students may still be subject to eligibility windows, age limits, transfer rules, or defined benefit periods.

For students using time-limited or eligibility-based education benefits, access to required coursework can significantly affect academic progress. When a student is unable to enroll in needed classes, they may be delayed in completing a degree, certificate, or transfer pathway. In some cases, students may continue using limited benefits while making little or no progress toward completion.

Priority registration allows certain students to enroll in classes before the general student population. Current law provides priority registration to qualifying veterans for a limited period after leaving active duty. However, priority registration eligibility does not extend uniformly to all students who receive military-connected education benefits, including certain dependents and surviving family members.

COMMENT

According to the Author: “California has a long tradition of supporting the men and women who serve our country, as well as their families. Many veterans and their dependents rely on programs such as the CalVet College Fee Waiver and the federal GI Bill to access higher education. However, when students cannot enroll in required courses due to limited class availability, they may face unnecessary delays that prevent them from graduating on time. AB 2203 ensures that students using these earned educational benefits receive priority registration so they can enroll in the courses they need, complete their degrees efficiently, and fully utilize the benefits made available through their service.”

This bill is intended to help veterans, service members, and military-connected dependents use existing education benefits more effectively by connecting those benefits with course access. While the CalVet College Fee Waiver and federal GI Bill benefits can reduce or cover education costs, they do not guarantee that a student will be able to enroll in the required courses needed to complete a degree, certificate, or transfer pathway on time.

Students who are shut out of impacted or high-demand courses may be forced to delay graduation, remain enrolled longer than expected, or use limited GI Bill entitlement without making meaningful academic progress. This can reduce the practical value of these benefits, particularly for students whose eligibility is tied to a defined period, age limit, or number of months of entitlement.

Current law provides priority registration to certain current and former members of the Armed Forces and State Guard, but that priority is limited by time after leaving active duty. AB 2203 creates a separate priority registration category for students receiving the CalVet College Fee Waiver or using federal GI Bill benefits. This would extend priority registration to additional military-connected students, including certain dependents and surviving family members who may not qualify under the existing veteran priority registration statute.

The bill does not create a new financial aid program or expand the underlying eligibility for the CalVet College Fee Waiver or federal GI Bill benefits. Instead, it seeks to make those existing benefits more usable by helping eligible students enroll in the courses they need before their benefits are exhausted or their eligibility period ends.

Expanding priority registration would add another category of students to an enrollment priority system that already serves multiple populations. The students covered by this bill may also be subject to time-sensitive education benefits tied to military service, disability, death, or other qualifying circumstances. Providing priority registration could help those students access required courses and make timely progress toward completing their education. The bill delays implementation until the 2028–29 academic year, allowing campuses time to update systems,

identify eligible students, and incorporate the new priority category into existing registration processes.

Prior legislation:

SB 892 (Grove, 2026) removes, beginning July 1, 2027, the existing four-academic-year and 15-year limits on priority registration for qualifying veterans and State Guard members at the California Community Colleges and CSU, and requests UC to do the same.

AB 3017 (Brough, 2020) Would have expanded veteran priority registration by allowing qualifying service members and former service members to receive priority registration while eligible for specified federal education benefits, including GI Bill programs. The bill was referred to the Assembly Higher Education Committee but was not set for hearing.

AB 2133 (Blumenfield, 2012) The Combat to College Act of 2012, allowed qualifying former members of the Armed Forces to use their four academic years of priority registration within 15 years of leaving active duty.

POSITIONS

Sponsor: Author.

Support: California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
California State University, Office of the Chancellor
Clovis Veterans Memorial District
County of Kern
County of Placer
Fresno County Veterans Service Officer
Fresno Federal American Legion Auxiliary Unit 509
San Jose-Evergreen Community College District
WestCare California, Inc.

Oppose: None

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