To reauthorize and improve a grant program to assist institutions of higher education in establishing, maintaining, improving, and operating Veteran Student Centers.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Ms. FRANKEL introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on ______________________

A BILL

To reauthorize and improve a grant program to assist institutions of higher education in establishing, maintaining, improving, and operating Veteran Student Centers.

1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

3 SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

4 This Act may be cited as the “Veteran Education Empowerment Act”.

6 SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

7 Congress finds the following:
(1) Over 1,000,000 veterans attend institutions of higher education each year.

(2) Veterans face unique challenges in transitioning from the battlefield to the classroom and eventually to the workforce, including: age differences, family obligations, significant time away from academic life, and service-related disabilities.

(3) The National Education Association found that veteran students can feel lonely and vulnerable on campus and that “connecting student veterans can effectively ease this isolation” by bringing together new veteran students with those who have already successfully navigated the first few semesters of college.

(4) According to Mission United—a United Way program that helps veterans re-acclimate to civilian life—it is often “essential” for veteran students to be mentored by “another veteran who understands their mindset and experience”.

(5) Veteran Student Centers are recognized as an institutional best practice by Student Veterans of America.

(6) The American Council on Education, which represents more than 1,700 institutions of higher education across the United States, has called hav-
ing a dedicated space for veterans on campus “a
promising way for colleges and universities to better
serve veterans on campus” and a “critical” compo-
nent of many colleges’ efforts to serve their veteran
students.

(7) The Department of Education included as
one of its 8 Keys to Veterans’ Success that colleges
and universities should “coordinate and centralize
campus efforts for all veterans, together with the
creation of a designated space for them”.

(8) Budget constraints often make it difficult or
impossible for institutions of higher education to
dedicate space to veteran offices, lounges, or student
centers.

(9) The 110th Congress authorized the funding
of Veteran Student Centers through the Centers of
Excellence for Veteran Student Success under part
T of title VIII of the Higher Education Act of 1965
(20 U.S.C. 1161t). Congress also chose to appro-
priate funding for this program for fiscal year 2015
under the Consolidated and Further Continuing Ap-

(10) According to the Department of Edu-
cation, federally funded Veteran Student Centers
and staff have generated improved recruitment, re-
tention, and graduation rates, have helped veteran
students feel better connected across campus, and
have directly contributed to veteran students’ suc-
cessful academic outcomes.

SEC. 3. GRANT PROGRAM TO ESTABLISH, MAINTAIN, AND
IMPROVE VETERAN STUDENT CENTERS.

Part T of title VIII of the Higher Education Act of
1965 (20 U.S.C. 1161t) is amended to read as follows:

“PART T—GRANTS FOR VETERAN STUDENT
CENTERS

“SEC. 873. GRANTS FOR VETERAN STUDENT CENTERS.

“(a) GRANTS AUTHORIZED.—Subject to the avail-
ability of appropriations under subsection (h), the Sec-
etary shall award grants to institutions of higher edu-
cation or consortia of institutions of higher education to
assist in the establishment, maintenance, improvement,
and operation of Veteran Student Centers.

“(b) ELIGIBILITY.—

“(1) APPLICATION.—An institution or consor-
tium seeking a grant under subsection (a) shall sub-
mit to the Secretary an application at such time, in
such manner, and containing such information as
the Secretary may require.

“(2) CRITERIA.—The Secretary may award a
grant under subsection (a) to an institution or a
consortium if the institution or consortium meets each of the following criteria:

“(A) The institution or consortium enrolls in undergraduate or graduate courses—

“(i) a significant number of veteran students, members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty, or members of a reserve component of the Armed Forces; or

“(ii) a significant percentage of veteran students, members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty, or members of a reserve component of the Armed Forces,

as measured by comparing, for the most recent academic year for which data are available, the number or percentage of veteran students, members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty, and members of a reserve component of the Armed Forces who are enrolled in undergraduate or graduate courses at the institution or consortium, with the average number or percentage of veteran students, members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty, and members of a reserve component of the Armed Forces who were enrolled in undergraduate or graduate courses
at comparable institutions or consortia of institutions.

“(B) The institution or consortium presents a sustainability plan to demonstrate that the Veteran Student Center will be maintained and will continue to operate after the grant period has ended.

“(3) SELECTION CRITERIA.—In awarding grants under subsection (a), the Secretary shall provide priority consideration to institutions or consortia that meet one or more of the following criteria:

“(A) The institution or consortium is located in a region or community that has a significant population of veterans.

“(B) The institution or consortium carries out programs or activities that assist veterans in the local community, and the spouses or partners and children of veteran students.

“(C) The institution or consortium partners in its veteran-specific programming with nonprofit veteran service organizations, local workforce development organizations, or other institutions of higher education.
“(D) The institution or consortium commits to hiring a staff at the Veteran Student Center that includes veterans (including veteran student volunteers and veteran students participating in a Federal work-study program under part C of title IV, a work-study program administered by the Secretary of Veteran Affairs, or a State work-study program).

“(E) The institution or consortium commits to using a portion of the grant received under this section to develop or maintain a veteran student retention program carried out by the Veteran Student Center.

“(F) The institution or consortium commits to providing mental health counseling to its veteran students (and the spouses or partners and children of such students).

“(c) USE OF FUNDS.—

“(1) IN GENERAL.—An institution or consortium that is awarded a grant under subsection (a) shall use such grant to establish, maintain, improve, or operate a Veteran Student Center.

“(2) OTHER ALLOWABLE USES.—An institution or consortium receiving a grant under subsection (a) may use a portion of such grant to carry out sup-
portive instruction services for veteran students, includ-
(A) assistance with special admissions and transfer of credit from previous postsec-
ondary education or experience; and
(B) any other support services the insti-
tution or consortium determines to be necessary to ensure the success of veteran students in achieving education and career goals.

(d) AMOUNTS AWARDED.—
(1) DURATION.—Each grant awarded under subsection (a) shall be for a 4-year period.
(2) TOTAL AMOUNT OF GRANT AND SCHED-
ULE.—Each grant awarded under subsection (a) may not exceed a total of $500,000. The Secretary shall disburse to an institution or consortium the amount awarded under the grant in such amounts and at such times during the grant period as the Secretary determines appropriate.
(e) REPORT.—From the amounts appropriated to carry out this section, and not later than 3 years after the date on which the first grant is awarded under subsection (a), the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on the grant program established under subsection (a), including—
“(1) the number of grants awarded;
“(2) the institutions of higher education and consortia that have received grants;
“(3) with respect to each such institution of higher education and consortium—
“(A) the amounts awarded;
“(B) how such institution or consortium used such amounts;
“(C) a description of the demographics of veteran students (and spouses or partners and children of such students) to whom services were offered as a result of the award;
“(D) the number of veteran students (and spouses or partners and children of such students) to whom services were offered as a result of the award, and a description of the services that were offered and provided; and
“(E) data enumerating whether the use of the amounts awarded helped veteran students at the institution or consortium toward completion of a degree, certificate, or credential;
“(4) best practices for veteran student success, identified by reviewing data provided by institutions and consortia that received a grant under this section; and
“(5) a determination by the Secretary with respect to whether the grant program under this section should be extended or expanded.

“(f) Department of Education Best Practices Website.—Subject to the availability of appropriations under subsection (h) and not later than 3 years after the date on which the first grant is awarded under subsection (a), the Secretary shall develop and implement a website for Veteran Student Centers at institutions of higher education, which details best practices for serving veteran students at institutions of higher education.

“(g) Definitions.—In this section:

“(1) Institution of Higher Education.—The term ‘institution of higher education’ has the meaning given the term in section 101.

“(2) Veteran Student Center.—The term ‘Veteran Student Center’ means a dedicated space on a campus of an institution of higher education that provides students who are veterans, members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty, or members of a reserve component of the Armed Forces with the following:

“(A) A lounge or meeting space for such veteran students (and the spouses or partners
and children of such students), and veterans in
the community.

“(B) A centralized office for veteran stu-
dent services that—

“(i) is a single point of contact to co-
ordinate comprehensive support services
for veteran students;

“(ii) is staffed by trained employees
and volunteers, which includes veterans
and at least one full-time employee or vol-
unteer who is trained as a veterans’ bene-
fits counselor;

“(iii) provides veteran students with
assistance relating to—

“(I) transitioning from the mili-
tary to student life;

“(II) transitioning from the mili-
tary to the civilian workforce;

“(III) networking with other vet-
eran students and veterans in the
community;

“(IV) understanding and obtain-
ing benefits provided by the institu-
tion of higher education, Federal Gov-
ernment, and State for which such students may be eligible;

“(V) understanding how to succeed in the institution of higher education, including by understanding academic policies, the course selection process, and institutional policies and practices related to the transfer of academic credits; and

“(VI) understanding disability-related rights and protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12101 et seq.) and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794); and

“(iv) provides comprehensive academic and tutoring services for veteran students, including peer-to-peer tutoring and academic mentorship.

“(h) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this part such sums as may be necessary for fiscal year 2020 and each succeeding fiscal year.”.