

Opening Statement of Tom A. Coburn, M.D.

“The 90/10 Rule: Improving Educational Outcomes for our Military and Veterans”

July 23, 2013

The cost of college has increased dramatically – even outstripping health care costs.

We need to take a hard look at why this is occurring, and ask ourselves what is the appropriate role of the federal government in higher education. With the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, the federal government began its foray into higher education.

Not everyone agreed with this bill passage; some feared it would lead to federal intrusion into the halls of higher learning. For example, Senators Barry Goldwater and Strom Thurmond opposed, writing in dissent: “If adopted, the legislation will mark the inception of aid, supervision and ultimately control of higher education in this country by federal authorities.”

Fast forward to 2013, and prophecy is manifest.

Higher education today is dramatically more expensive despite hundreds of billions of federal dollars being poured into the system – loans, Pell Grants, GI Bill benefits, research dollars, tax benefits and more.

More money has brought federal interference. Washington seemingly wants to regulate everything - even what constitutes a “credit hour” - something that is fundamentally the job of colleges.

There is a lot to be said about the larger topic of the current state of higher education. However, when it comes to the 90-10 Rule, it’s arbitrary, and government engineering at its worst.

Let’s ask ourselves a few honest questions.

If 90-10 is sound policy, why not apply this rule to all schools - regardless of control type? After all, graduation rates of many nonprofit schools around the country leave much to be desired.

If 90-10 is sound policy, why not also apply it to all forms of federal aid – including university research dollars?

And if this is sound policy, why stop at a 10 percent limitation? Why not lower the threshold? How about 50 percent applied to all schools, and all federal dollars?

The truth is that 90-10 is the government picking winners and losers among colleges that have already proven themselves by being accredited, approved by State Approving Agencies and by complying with myriad forms of compliance.

In closing, let me thank our witnesses for participating. I look forward to your insights, and hope at the end of the day we identify real problems and real solutions.