



March 4, 2026

The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair,
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Governor

Wes Moore

Lt. Governor

Aruna Miller

Secretary

Sanjay Rai, Ph.D.

Commission Chair

Catherine J. "Cassie" Motz

Commission Vice Chair

Chike Aguh

Commissioners

Kathleen Bands, Ph.D.

Mickey L. Burnim, Ph.D.

Charlene Mickens Dukes, Ed.D.

Barbara Kerr Howe

Narcisa A. Polonio, Ed.D.

Rebecca Taber Staehelin

Sheila D. Thompson, Ph.D.

Craig A. Williams, Ph.D.

Janet E. Wormack, Ed.D.

Sarah Otwey, Student
Commissioner

Principal Counsel

Kimberly Smith Ward

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on Senate Bill 709 – Education – Purple Star Schools Program and Purple Star Colleges Program, sponsored by Senator Carozza. The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) submits this letter to outline implementation and statutory considerations related to the bill.

SB 709 establishes the Purple Star Colleges Program within MHEC to recognize institutions of higher education and private career schools that demonstrate a commitment to serving veterans, service members, and their families. MHEC strongly supports the goal of easing transitions for military-connected students and recognizes the value of a clear, trusted designation that signals an institution's readiness to meet their unique academic, financial, and support needs.

MHEC also appreciates the thoughtful expansion of the Purple Star framework from the K–12 environment into postsecondary education. Extending this recognition to public and private institutions, as well as private career schools, has the potential to strengthen continuity across Maryland's K–20 military support pipeline. At the same time, implementation in the higher education space presents additional considerations given the diversity of institutional missions, governance structures, and student populations.

Under SB 709, MHEC would be responsible for developing designation criteria, administering application and renewal processes, and ensuring ongoing adherence to requirements related to professional development, public-facing resources, and student transition supports. To implement the program with the consistency, rigor, and credibility envisioned by the legislation, MHEC has identified a need for dedicated staffing capacity.

MHEC's current staffing levels are fully committed to existing statutory, regulatory, and financial aid responsibilities. Successful implementation of the Purple Star Colleges Program would require:

- A Director to lead program development, ensure regulatory alignment, and oversee the designation and renewal process; and

MARYLAND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

217 East Redwood Street • Suite 2100 • Baltimore, MD 21202

T 410.767.3300 • 800.974.0203 • F 410.332.0270 • TTY for the Deaf 800.735.2258 www.mhec.maryland.gov

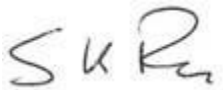
- A Technical Assistance and Outreach Specialist to serve as a liaison to campus military-connected coordinators and to develop and deliver the statewide professional development resources required under the bill.

MHEC currently supports veterans and service members through its State Approving Agency (SAA), which operates under a federally mandated contract with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. In the most recent fiscal year, the SAA provided oversight to more than 400 postsecondary institutions statewide to ensure programs meet federal requirements for GI Bill® eligibility. This work is highly technical, compliance-driven, and narrowly defined by federal statute.

Because the administration of the Purple Star Colleges Program falls outside the scope of the SAA's federal contract, and given the intensity of the SAA's existing responsibilities, those functions cannot be absorbed within current resources. Dedicated, state-funded staff would be necessary to ensure the Purple Star designation remains meaningful, sustainable, and trusted by students and institutions alike.

The Purple Star Colleges Program has the potential to serve as an important tool for military-connected students navigating Maryland's postsecondary landscape. MHEC looks forward to continued collaboration to ensure the program is implemented in a way that upholds its intent and long-term success.

Yours in Service,



Secretary,

Maryland Higher Education Commission