



May 2014

# VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

## VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans Make Informed Education Choices

## Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2013, VA provided over \$12 billion in benefits for veterans' postsecondary education; however, questions have been raised as to whether some schools are receiving these funds as a result of inappropriate recruiting practices. GAO was asked to examine issues related to schools' recruitment of veterans. This report examines (1) how selected schools recruit veterans, (2) veterans' school search and recruiting experiences, and (3) VA's actions to help veterans make informed decisions and to identify inappropriate recruiting practices.

For the first question, GAO interviewed officials from 9 schools and reviewed websites of 30 additional schools; both groups were selected for variation in sector (public, nonprofit, and for-profit) and other criteria. For the second question, GAO surveyed a nationally representative group of student veterans, producing results generalizable to the student veteran population. For the third question, GAO reviewed relevant federal requirements and agency documents and interviewed agency officials. GAO also spoke with veteran and higher education organizations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA improve outreach and accessibility of its educational counseling services and more consistently develop and communicate realistic timelines as it implements initiatives based on federal requirements. VA agreed with GAO's recommendations and noted its current efforts to improve its outreach and planning efforts. The Department of Education had no comments on our findings or recommendations.

View [GAO-14-324](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov).

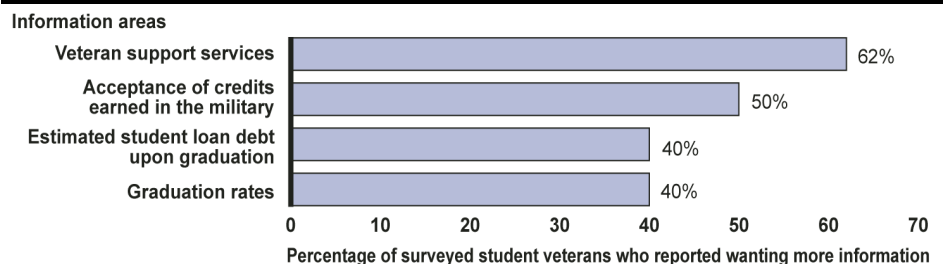
## VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

### VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans Make Informed Education Choices

## What GAO Found

Selected schools used various practices, from mass advertising to individual outreach, to recruit and inform prospective student veterans. Eight of nine schools GAO interviewed reported advertising in print or online media dedicated to military audiences. Most of the nine schools contacted veterans directly by phone or email, sometimes with military-focused recruiters, to provide information on benefits or services or to highlight the school as "military-friendly." Further, 29 of the 30 school websites GAO reviewed included a section specifically for veterans, some of which were featured prominently on the home page.

Many surveyed veterans reported that school communication was important in selecting a school; however, nearly 23 percent (about 15,200 veterans when generalized nationally) reported excessive contacts from schools and an estimated 10 percent (about 6,900 veterans nationwide) said they felt pressure to enroll. In addition, while most surveyed veterans reported receiving generally accurate information from their school, about 23 percent (about 16,500 veterans nationwide) reported receiving some information they viewed as inaccurate, such as estimated student loan debt. Many veterans also wanted more information from their schools, such as on veteran support services (see figure below). Inaccurate or incomplete information can lead veterans to choose schools that do not meet their needs and exhaust their benefits before achieving their goals. Veteran and higher education groups said that greater access to independent and objective advice would help veterans with their education choices.



Source: GAO analysis of responses to a nationally representative survey of student veterans receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for the first time in 2012. The error margins for these estimates are plus or minus 8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken steps to inform and protect student veterans, but some efforts have been insufficient. VA is developing tools to help veterans understand their education benefits and compare information on schools. VA has also taken some action to improve veterans' awareness of its free education counseling services, as required by law, but its efforts to expand awareness among prospective students and ease the application process have been limited. At the same time, almost half of surveyed veterans were not aware of VA's counseling when considering schools. To help identify misleading or aggressive recruiting, VA has launched a new complaint system, created a risk-based approach to oversee schools, and taken other steps. While VA has made some progress implementing federally required initiatives, its project planning has lacked realistic timelines and goals—in contrast to sound planning practices. As a result, Congress and others lack information on VA's progress implementing planned initiatives to protect and inform student veterans.

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**Abbreviations**

Education	U.S. Department of Education
Post-9/11 GI Bill	Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008
VA	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Yellow Ribbon Program	Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program

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May 13, 2014

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chairman  
Committee on the Budget  
United States Senate

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
Chairman  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate

The Honorable Jay Rockefeller  
United States Senate

In fiscal year 2013, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provided over \$12 billion in benefits for veterans' postsecondary education; however, questions have been raised as to whether some schools receive such funds as a result of inappropriate recruiting practices.<sup>1</sup> Since the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 GI Bill) went into effect, the number of veterans receiving VA education benefits has almost doubled—to over 1 million in fiscal year 2013—and the use of these benefits will continue to grow as the number of post-9/11 veterans is expected to increase to more than 5 million by 2020.<sup>2</sup> Because of these education benefits, schools may be particularly interested in enrolling veterans. For-profit schools may have added incentive to enroll veterans because of requirements related to other federal student aid programs

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<sup>1</sup>In this report, we use the term “recruiting” to mean to seek to enroll students in a school. Recruiting would involve a school’s advertising, marketing, outreach, contacts, and communication with students.

<sup>2</sup>Pub. L. No. 110-252, tit. V, 122 Stat. 2323, 2357-86. For the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA makes tuition and fee payments directly to schools. Other VA education programs typically provide a fixed monthly payment to a veteran to be used for tuition, books, or living expenses while in school.

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administered by the Department of Education (Education).<sup>3</sup> Recent congressional hearings and press accounts have included anecdotal reports of veterans experiencing aggressive recruiting practices or being misled by school recruiters. Additionally, some state attorneys general have begun investigations or filed lawsuits against schools for deceptive marketing and other consumer fraud concerns regarding veterans or other students, while the Federal Trade Commission recently issued a notice advising veterans about how to avoid schools that may pressure them to enroll in a program that does not meet their educational needs.<sup>4</sup>

Reports of misleading and aggressive school recruiting practices, as well as concerns about whether veterans have access to clear and accurate information about schools, have resulted in recent federal actions. Specifically, the President issued Executive Order 13607, which calls on VA and other agencies to strengthen enforcement mechanisms to ensure that schools are not engaged in deceptive or aggressive recruiting practices toward veteran and military students.<sup>5</sup> In addition, legislation enacted in January 2013 (Public Law 112-249) required VA to develop a comprehensive policy to improve outreach and transparency to veterans and provide information to help veterans make informed education choices.<sup>6</sup>

Given the large and growing federal investment in veterans' education benefits, GAO was asked to examine issues related to schools' recruitment of veterans. This report provides information on the following questions:

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<sup>3</sup>Specifically, for-profit schools (referred to as "proprietary institutions of higher education" in statute) must comply with the 90/10 rule in order to maintain their eligibility for federal student aid programs, such as Pell Grants and federal student loans. 20 U.S.C. § 1094(a)(24). Under this requirement, for-profit schools must obtain at least 10 percent of their total revenues from sources other than federal student aid programs. VA education payments are not counted as federal student aid for this purpose and, as a result, enrolling veterans helps for-profit schools meet the 90/10 rule.

<sup>4</sup>See Federal Trade Commission, *Choosing a College: 8 Questions to Ask* (Washington, DC: January 2014). An online version of this notice can be found at <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0395-choosing-college>.

<sup>5</sup>Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members, Exec. Order No. 13,607, 77 Fed. Reg. 25,861 (April 27, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Act of January 10, 2013, Pub. L. No. 112-249, § 1, 126 Stat. 2398, 2398-2401.

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1. How do selected schools recruit veterans?
  2. What are the school search and recruiting experiences of student veterans?
  3. What actions has VA taken to help veterans make informed education decisions and to identify inappropriate school recruiting?

To address the first question, we conducted phone interviews with officials from nine schools (three schools in each sector—public, for-profit, and nonprofit) to gather information on the extent and ways they reach out to veterans and military servicemembers.<sup>7</sup> We also reviewed the websites of an additional 30 schools (10 per sector) to review basic information on how schools' websites are used to engage interested students and to provide information aimed at prospective veteran or military students. We selected the schools for our interviews and website analysis for variation in sector, VA funding levels, and level of degrees offered (e.g., bachelor's vs. associate's), among other criteria. All of our selected schools received at least \$2 million in total Post-9/11 GI Bill payments from fiscal years 2010 through 2011, the most recent data available when we selected our schools. The information gathered from our school interviews and website review is not generalizable to all schools, but is useful in illustrating the range of recruiting practices used by selected schools.

To address the second question, we administered a survey to a nationally representative sample of 900 recently enrolled student veterans (300 per sector) to ask about their recruiting experiences and information they received from their current school. A total of 254 students responded to the survey—an unweighted response rate of 28 percent. We conducted a nonresponse bias analysis with available administrative data from the sample population to determine whether any characteristics were correlated with the propensity to respond. We determined that our survey respondents were more likely to be older than the general population of veterans using VA education benefits. We therefore adjusted the sample weights so that our survey responses reflect the age distribution in the population. All survey results presented in the body of this report are generalizable to the population of student veterans receiving Post-9/11 GI

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<sup>7</sup>While this report focuses on student veterans, schools' advertising and recruiting practices are often aimed at the larger group of military-affiliated students that includes both veterans and active-duty servicemembers.

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Bill benefits for the first time in 2012. Due to an insufficient response rate, we were not able to report results by sector. A detailed description of our sampling methodology can be found in appendix I. The survey instrument and a tabulation of the results can be found in appendix II.

To address the third question, we reviewed pertinent federal laws and requirements, including Executive Order 13607 and provisions in Public Law 112-249. We interviewed VA officials and reviewed agency documents to examine VA's progress in implementing relevant portions of the executive order and the public law. We also interviewed officials and obtained documents from Education to better understand any relevant interagency work with VA. In addition, we asked students we surveyed and school officials we interviewed about the content and usefulness of relevant information and assistance provided by VA. Lastly, we interviewed officials from several veterans service organizations and higher education organizations to obtain their perspectives on key issues.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2013 through May 2014, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits

Among VA's several educational benefit programs, the Post-9/11 GI Bill program, which took effect on August 1, 2009, has become the largest (see fig. 1). In fiscal year 2013, the Post-9/11 GI Bill program had 754,529 participants and accounted for about \$10.2 billion in obligations, representing the majority of participants and funding of all VA education programs. This program provides benefits generally to veterans who served on active duty for at least 90 days after September 10, 2001.<sup>8</sup> For those who served on active duty for 36 months, VA will pay the full tuition and fees at an in-state public school and up to an annual maximum

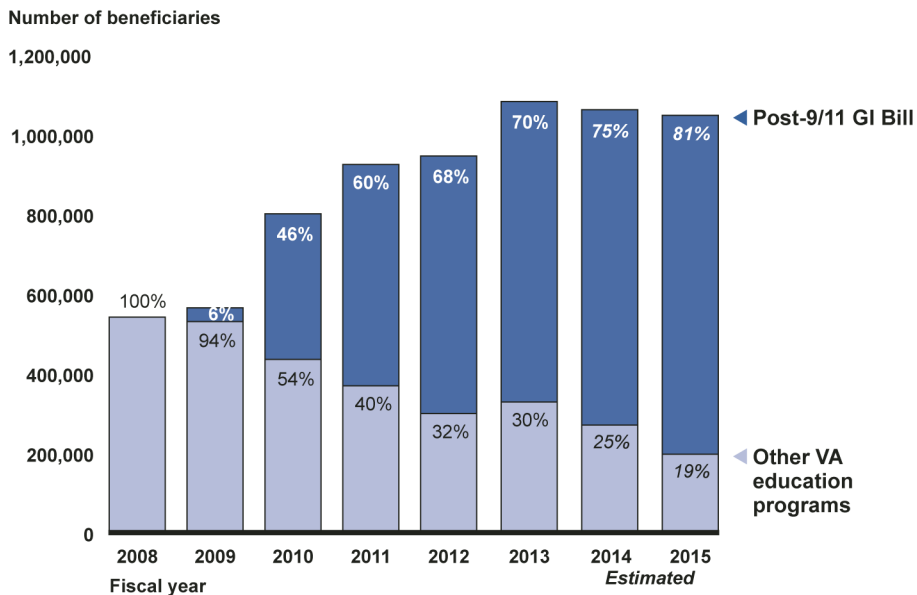
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<sup>8</sup>38 U.S.C. §§ 3311(b)(1) and 3313(c)(2).



amount at nonprofit and for-profit schools (\$19,198 in academic year 2013-14).<sup>9</sup> Veterans may also receive payments towards housing and other expenses, such as books. Veterans attending participating nonprofit or for-profit schools, or public schools as out-of-state students, may receive additional benefits to cover tuition and fees through the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program (Yellow Ribbon Program).<sup>10</sup> Under this program, schools enter into voluntary agreements with VA to pay a portion of the tuition and fees that exceed an individual's Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit and VA matches the schools' contribution.

**Figure 1: Beneficiaries of VA Education Programs, Fiscal Years 2008-2015**



Source: GAO analysis of VA's fiscal year 2012 Annual Benefits Report and VA's Congressional Budget Submission for fiscal year 2015.

Note: Other VA education programs include the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty, the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve, Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance, Reserve Educational Assistance, and Veterans Retraining Assistance programs, but not education payments made by VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program.

<sup>9</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3313. Under certain circumstances, veterans can transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to spouses and children. 38 U.S.C. § 3319.

<sup>10</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3317.

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VA education benefits, including Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, may be used at different types of postsecondary schools. Veterans may use these benefits at schools from any of the three sectors: (1) public schools, which are operated and funded by state or local governments; (2) nonprofit schools, which are owned and operated by nonprofit organizations whose net earnings do not benefit any shareholder or individual; and (3) for-profit schools, which are privately owned and whose net earnings can benefit individuals or shareholders. Additionally veterans may use benefits for a variety of schools and degree programs, including 4-year colleges and universities that typically offer bachelor's degrees or higher, community colleges that typically offer associates degrees, and vocational and technical schools that offer certificates, but typically not degrees.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, students may participate in a program on a physical school campus, through online programs, or both. To receive education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, students submit applications to VA, schools certify students' enrollment in classes, and VA processes claims and payments. VA then pays schools directly for tuition and fees and sends payments for housing allowances and book stipends to students who are eligible for these payments.<sup>12</sup>

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## VA Oversight of Education Benefits

### School Oversight

VA conducts compliance reviews to assess whether schools that receive VA education benefits adhere to applicable laws and regulations.<sup>13</sup> VA's central office develops policies for these reviews, which are implemented by compliance personnel in VA's regional offices, along with state approving agencies.<sup>14</sup> To conduct these reviews, compliance personnel at VA and state approving agencies visit schools, examine school records,

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<sup>11</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3313(g)(1).

<sup>12</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3313(a) and (c).

<sup>13</sup>These reviews are referred to as compliance surveys in statute. 38 U.S.C. § 3693.

<sup>14</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3313(b). State approving agencies are created or designated by the governor of each state and staffed by state employees, but are federally funded. 38 U.S.C. §§ 3671 and 3672. The purpose of state approving agencies is to review, evaluate, and approve the quality of educational and training programs that receive VA education benefits based on state and federal criteria.

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and interview school officials and students to check, for instance, if a school is enrolling beneficiaries in approved courses and making payments properly. Compliance personnel must also review whether a school's advertising, sales, or enrollment practices are erroneous, deceptive, or misleading, under existing law.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, existing law mandates that compliance reviews be conducted annually at all schools with 300 or more students who receive VA education benefits and at all schools that receive benefits and do not award college degrees; however, VA has the authority to waive these reviews for schools with a demonstrated record of compliance.<sup>16</sup>

## New GI Bill Requirements

Executive Order 13607 and Public Law 112-249 require VA to take additional steps to oversee schools and inform student veterans about their education choices (see table 1). The executive order, issued in April 2012, aims to better protect veteran and military students from inappropriate school behavior, as well as provide these students with useful information on their school choices. For instance, the executive order required VA and other agencies to establish "Principles of Excellence," calling on participating schools to end fraudulent and unduly aggressive recruiting practices and provide students, prior to enrollment, with a personalized form covering the total cost of an education program, among other things. Although schools receiving VA education benefits are not required to adopt the Principles of Excellence, VA strongly encourages schools to do so and posts lists of participating schools on the GI Bill website.<sup>17</sup> Public Law 112-249, enacted in January 2013, focused on improving outreach and transparency of information to veterans and has elements similar to the executive order. It required VA to develop a comprehensive policy to include, for example, a public feedback system on schools and expand its outreach on its educational counseling service.<sup>18</sup> This free service is available, upon request, to all

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<sup>15</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3696.

<sup>16</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3693.

<sup>17</sup>The Principles of Excellence promote certain school practices, some of which are covered by existing statutory requirements. For example, as referenced earlier, VA is prohibited by statute from approving the enrollment of a veteran in any course offered by a school using advertising, sales, or enrollment practices that are in any way erroneous, deceptive, or misleading per existing law, regardless of whether or not a school agrees to adopt the Principles of Excellence. 38 U.S.C. § 3696(a).

<sup>18</sup>§ 1(a)(1), 126 Stat. 2398 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3698).

individuals who are eligible for VA education benefits and can help them explore their career and educational goals and consider options for attaining those goals.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1: Selected VA Initiatives Based on Information and Oversight Requirements in Executive Order 13607 and Public Law 112-249**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Type of initiative</b>
<b>Executive Order 13607</b>	
<b>Develop tools for student veterans</b> that allow them to compare schools on key points (e.g., costs, graduation rates) before they use their benefits	Information
<b>Establish the Principles of Excellence for schools</b> which, among other things, require participating schools to end fraudulent and aggressive recruiting techniques	Oversight and information
<b>Assess participating schools for compliance with the Principles of Excellence</b>	Oversight
<b>Develop a risk-based approach to compliance reviews</b> that targets high-risk schools for additional oversight	Oversight
<b>Create centralized complaint system</b> for students receiving VA education benefits to register complaints against schools	Oversight
<b>Take steps to prevent deceptive and fraudulent marketing by websites and educational programs</b>	Oversight
<b>Public Law 112-249</b>	
<b>Improve outreach of VA educational and vocational counseling</b> through efficient and effective ways	Information
<b>Provide student veterans with information on schools</b> , including tuition and fees, loan default rate, graduation and retention rates, academic and support services	Information
<b>Establish a public feedback system</b> that tracks and publishes veterans' reviews of schools regarding their recruiting practices, quality of instruction, and employment outcomes	Oversight and information

Source: GAO analysis of selected requirements of Executive Order 13607 and Public Law 112-249.

<sup>19</sup>38 U.S.C. § 3697A. Educational counseling services are provided by VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, which helps veterans with service-connected disabilities obtain and maintain suitable employment.

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## Selected Schools Use Veteran-Focused Recruiting Practices Ranging from National Advertising to Individual Communication

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### Veteran-Focused Recruiting, Advertising, and Promotion

Officials from all of the nine schools we interviewed told us that their schools engaged in recruiting efforts specifically focused on attracting student veterans.<sup>20</sup> For instance, three schools had a separate department for military relations or services, which handled all of the recruiting and outreach for veteran and military students and coordinated with the school's marketing and admissions departments. Four other schools did not have a separate office, but designated an admissions director or other official whose role was to oversee recruiting efforts for veteran and military students.

Officials from five of the nine schools also said that they were actively trying to increase their military or student veteran population through their recruitment efforts. For example, officials at a nonprofit school said that in recent years it has placed a higher priority on adult students and online learning, in part, to increase enrollment and meet the needs of the veteran and military student population. Similarly, officials at a public community college near several military bases said that it wanted to increase its student population, with a specific focus on student veterans because they were a large and growing part of their local community. Officials at one nonprofit and one for-profit school said that they were interested in attracting student veterans for a variety of reasons, including a desire to meet the needs of this population and the availability of VA benefits to pay for tuition costs.

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<sup>20</sup>The information we gathered from our selected schools is not representative of all schools and is meant for illustrative purposes.

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**Examples of Criteria Used by External Organizations to Designate Schools as Military Friendly**

**Simplified, expedited, or flexible enrolment processes** for veteran or military students.

**Proportion of veteran or military students** of all enrolled students.

**Credit transfer policies** that minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of course work, including academic credit for military training or experience.

**Campus support services**, such as full-time veteran counsellors at the school, mentoring, networking events, clubs and associations, and veterans' lounges and centers.

**Flexible policies for veteran or military students**, such as availability of evening, weekend, and online academic programs or accommodating needs of military students who are deployed.

**Military student outcomes**, such as graduation rates or employment rates for veteran and military students.

**Participation in VA and Department of Defense programs**, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Yellow Ribbon Program, and Department of Defense's education benefits program for servicemembers.

Source: GAO analysis of criteria organizations use to designate schools as military friendly.

Selected schools' websites also demonstrated a focus on recruiting veteran or military students, as 29 of the 30 school websites we reviewed included sections dedicated to veteran or military students. Over half (19) of these schools had a direct link on their home page to a veteran or military student section that included information on veterans' benefits, the school's Yellow Ribbon Program, or information to help veterans apply to the school (5 public, 7 nonprofit, 7 for-profit). Moreover, seven schools featured veterans or military servicemembers prominently on their home page when we reviewed their websites, such as by posting photos of students in military attire or promoting the school's veteran scholarship programs.

As part of their focus on the prospective veteran and military student population, eight of the nine schools we interviewed promoted themselves as "veteran friendly" or "military friendly," and 14 of the 30 schools whose websites we reviewed (4 public, 6 nonprofit, 4 for-profit) used these or similar terms.<sup>21</sup> Schools generally cited ratings from external organizations, such as GI Jobs' MilitaryFriendlySchools.com, as sources for their designation as a military friendly school.<sup>22</sup> These organizations rate schools on various criteria, such as the availability of veteran or military support services or academic credit for military training or experience (see sidebar). Officials at one public school stated that they use such criteria to guide them in considering additional ways to support veterans and servicemembers at their school.

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<sup>21</sup>Two of the schools in our website review cited the term "Best for Vets," instead of military-friendly or veteran-friendly.

<sup>22</sup>Other rating organizations cited by schools we interviewed or reviewed included Military Advanced Education, Military Times, the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium, and U.S. Veterans Magazine.

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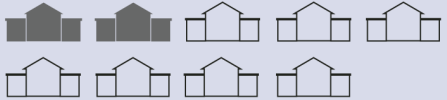
Officials from eight of the nine schools we interviewed reported advertising to some extent in print or online media dedicated to military audiences (see fig. 2). For instance, eight schools advertised in print media, ranging from national military publications to local military base newspapers. Officials from one for-profit school said that their school advertised in about 20 military base newspapers across the country, typically at bases where the school is regularly invited to speak.<sup>23</sup> Some of the schools we interviewed also advertised to veteran or military students through social media, such as Facebook© and Twitter©, and online advertising, such as banner advertisements on military-affiliated websites.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Department of Defense officials told us that the agency has issued proposed regulations that, among other things, would implement rules to strengthen existing procedures for access to military installations by schools. They noted that if finalized, the regulations would limit such speaking opportunities. See Voluntary Education Programs, 78 Fed. Reg. 49,382 (to be codified at 32 C.F.R. pt. 68) (August 14, 2013).

<sup>24</sup>Banner advertisements are a form of online advertising that embeds an advertisement into a web page. It is generally intended to attract traffic to a website by linking to the website of the advertiser.

**Figure 2: Selected Advertising Practices for Veteran or Military Students Reported by Nine Schools**

Type of practice	Number of schools that reported using practice	Examples/description
<b>Print advertising</b> (including newspapers, magazines, or journals)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advertised in national, state, and local publications                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National publications: Military Times, the Edge, Military Advanced Education, and Military Spouse</li> <li>State and local publications: state national guard magazines, military base newspapers</li> </ul> </li> <li>Published advertisements with varying frequency (annually to several times a year) and size (quarter page to full page)</li> </ul>
<b>Social media,</b> such as Facebook and Twitter		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicated information regarding school events (e.g., Memorial Day, Veterans Day) and information (e.g., online programs) of interest to prospective veteran and military students</li> <li>Coordinated with schools' admissions departments and veterans centers to post on Facebook® or send tweets aimed at prospective veteran and military students</li> </ul>
<b>Online advertising</b> outside of the school's website		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advertised on military-affiliated websites, such as military.com and militaryfriendlyschoools.com; in some cases, when students click on those advertisements, they are directed to the veteran or military section of the school's website</li> <li>Hired a contractor to help them strategically place online advertisements (one school)</li> </ul>
<b>Advertising on billboards</b> or other public spaces		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displayed posters at recreational centers on military bases, VA hospitals, and veteran service organizations</li> </ul>
<b>Television or radio advertising</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Included television commercials explicitly directed toward prospective veteran or military students, as well as those with more implicit references, such as military images</li> <li>Advertised on local radio stations near military bases</li> </ul>

Source: Interviews with officials from nine selected schools.

Note: In all cases, schools also reported using these practices for prospective students generally.

In addition to broad advertising, officials from all nine schools we interviewed reported conducting in-person recruiting activities, such as participating in education fairs, where they could interact with prospective



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veteran and military students. For instance, all nine schools participated in education or career fairs specifically for veteran or military students, with one school participating in around 70 such events a year. Officials at seven schools said that they made recruiting visits on military bases to which they were invited, generally those that were located near their campuses. For example, officials from one nonprofit school said that they did recruiting visits at the 18 military bases where they had a campus, as well as other bases to which they were invited. Officials from one for-profit school said that it visited about 30 military bases in a year, generally through education fairs held on bases. This school also routinely held office hours for military students currently enrolled in the school, and these office hours also provided opportunities for school representatives to meet prospective students who had heard about the school through word of mouth.<sup>25</sup> Beyond military bases, several schools participated in education or career fairs sponsored by veterans service organizations or held campus visits specifically for veteran or military students, such as on Veterans Day.

Two recent studies conducted large surveys of schools and similarly found that many schools use recruiting practices that are focused on veteran and military students. In February 2014, Education published a study based on a nationally representative survey of schools that enrolled veterans, military service members, or their dependents in the 2012-2013 academic year.<sup>26</sup> It found that 63 percent of these schools provided information at college admissions fairs for veterans and servicemembers, 32 percent provided information at events held on military bases, and 28 percent held campus admissions events customized for prospective veterans or military students.<sup>27</sup> Another recent study conducted a survey of schools that offered services and programs designed for veteran and military students and found that almost two-thirds of responding schools

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<sup>25</sup>Department of Defense officials stated that the agency's proposed rule on access to military bases would limit which schools can make recruiting visits and hold office hours.

<sup>26</sup>B. Queen and L. Lewis (2014). Services and Support Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions, 2012–13 (NCES 2014-017), a report for the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: 2014). Retrieved Mar. 3, 2014 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

<sup>27</sup>These estimates have a margin of error no larger than plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence.

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reported engaging in similar recruiting efforts specifically designed to attract veteran or military students.<sup>28</sup>

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## Identification of Veterans and Individual Communication

To communicate with individual students, selected schools identified a prospective student's veteran or military status in various ways. Seven of the nine schools we interviewed explicitly asked if a prospective student was a veteran or affiliated with the military. While two of these schools asked this on the application, five schools asked this earlier in the recruiting process. For instance, officials at two for-profit schools said that one of the first questions asked of prospective students is whether they are affiliated with the military—in order to transfer these students to specialized recruiters who are familiar with VA and military education benefits. Officials at two nonprofit schools said they do not explicitly ask if a prospective student is a veteran, but can ascertain their status in other ways, such as when veterans discuss their background on the phone or because the contact was made at a veteran or military event. Officials at these schools also said that they know whether a prospective student is military affiliated based on the website through which the student came to them (e.g., a banner advertisement on a military site) or if they were on the veteran or military section of the school's website.

In addition, officials at four of the schools we interviewed said that they work with military-affiliated "lead generator" websites that identify students who have submitted their contact information and agreed to be contacted by schools that may match their interests.<sup>29</sup> Officials at one nonprofit school noted that it used a lead generator for one campus near a military base and was considering using it with other campuses. Officials from a public school's online program said the school used several lead generator companies to identify potentially interested students, including prospective veteran or military students. Two nonprofit schools that used lead generators also purchased military-affiliated names through other means. One school purchased a list of addresses for military residents in

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<sup>28</sup>American Council on Education, *From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members* (Washington, D.C.: July 2012). Available online at <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/From-Soldier-to-Student-II.aspx>. This study reports survey results from a nonstatistical sample of chief student service administrators.

<sup>29</sup>Schools sometimes contract with lead generators, which are usually a third-party entity and can help organizations identify potential customers who may be interested in purchasing their products or services.

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an urban area with a heavy military presence to send direct mailings, and another school purchased a list of e-mails of subscribers to a military magazine.

Although not veteran specific, some of the 30 school websites we reviewed used techniques focused on encouraging students to provide their contact information or engage directly with the school at the start of their website search. For example, 10 of the 30 schools' websites we reviewed (8 for-profit schools and 2 nonprofit schools) had a separate advertising link that appeared at the top of search engine results. This link opens up a separate "home page" for the school that includes a prominent request for a person's contact information and much less information about the school than the school's official home page. Also, some school websites encouraged students to engage with them right away. Specifically, 9 of the 30 schools (6 for-profit schools and 3 nonprofit school) used prominent pop-up chat windows or links to "live chats" on their traditional home page to respond to questions from prospective students about the school.

Once a veteran is identified, officials from most of the nine schools we interviewed said that they contacted veterans directly, such as by phone or email, and their school made special efforts to customize the individual communication. Officials from six schools said that they contacted prospective veteran or military students by phone. For instance, officials at one for-profit school said that they had around 400 admissions advisors who made individual contacts with prospective students, and about 60 were dedicated to communicating with military-affiliated students. Similarly, the recruiting official at a public school's online program said that 6 of their 15 enrollment advisors were specifically designated to respond to inquiries from prospective veteran or military students, and that they did not have designated enrollment staff for any other student population group. Also, six schools sent veteran-focused e-mail messages and four schools sent veteran-focused direct mailings, communicating information such as the military-friendly nature of the school or information on veteran or military benefits. For example, officials of one public school said that while they send a general "thank you" e-mail to all students who apply, they send a second e-mail to veterans that encourages them to contact their office of veteran and military support services or seek out the school's former-military peer advisors to respond to inquiries. Officials at most of the nine schools said that they did not make any contacts with students who had not first indicated interest or requested information. For instance, officials at all of the schools said that they did not make "cold calls," or calls to someone who had not previously

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expressed interest in the school or provided their contact information. Officials from seven of the nine schools we interviewed said that they did not send any e-mails or direct mailings to individuals who had not previously expressed interest or agreed to be contacted.

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## A Large Number of Veterans Reported Experiencing Problems with School Interactions and Facing Challenges Obtaining Complete School Information

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### School Communications Influence Veterans' Decisions, but Almost a Quarter of Veterans Reported Unwanted School Contacts

Many of the student veterans we surveyed relied on school communication and information when deciding where to enroll. For instance, 73 percent of our survey respondents reported direct communications with school personnel as extremely or very important in their school selection.<sup>30</sup> Veterans cited this as one of the highest rated factors in their school selection decision, along with school location and financial considerations. Also highly rated was a school's military friendliness—a characteristic that schools promote to appeal to veteran and military students. Additionally, about half of veterans rated schools' websites as an extremely or very important factor in their school selection and almost three-fourths of veterans requested more information after visiting a school website.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>A copy of the full questionnaire and aggregate responses for all close-ended survey questions is included in appendix II. The 73 percent estimate for the importance of direct communications with schools has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 66 to 80 percent.

<sup>31</sup>The 54 percent estimate for the importance of school websites has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 46 to 62 percent. The 73 percent estimate for website follow-up has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 66 to 80 percent.

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The majority of veterans reported being exposed to school advertisements—an indirect form of school communication—which, although not rated as important in their final school selection, may have influenced the schools they considered in the first place. About 64 percent of student veterans reported seeing some type of advertisement for the school they enrolled in and other schools they considered, most commonly on television or the Internet.<sup>32</sup> While a small percentage of veterans indicated that advertising was an extremely or very important factor in their ultimate school selection (12 percent), advertising may influence their decision to consider a particular school.<sup>33</sup> According to a study by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization, advertisements are one of the most common ways that students learn about college choices after having spent some or many years away from school.<sup>34</sup> Veterans who use VA education benefits are often nontraditional students, in that they are typically older and have families and did not go to college immediately after high school.

Our survey results indicate that veterans generally had positive experiences regarding the amount and nature of communication from schools; however, almost a quarter reported receiving unwanted school contacts. The majority of veterans felt that they received the right amount of email and phone contacts from schools.<sup>35</sup> When asked about school actions they found helpful, a number of student veterans said that the prompt e-mail replies they received and the conversations they had with school recruiting personnel who were aware of VA benefits and veteran needs were particularly helpful in deciding where to attend school. In contrast, however, about 23 percent—or an estimated 15,200 veterans when generalized to the population of veterans receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits—said that they felt the contacts they received from schools were

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<sup>32</sup>The 64 percent estimate for exposure to advertisements has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 57 to 71 percent.

<sup>33</sup>The 12 percent estimate for the importance of advertising has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 7 to 18 percent.

<sup>34</sup>Public Agenda, *Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School* (New York, N.Y.: November 2013). Available online at: <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/is-college-worth-it-for-me>.

<sup>35</sup>The 55 percent estimate for those receiving about the right amount of phone calls has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 47 to 62 percent. The 55 percent estimate for those receiving about the right amount of e-mails has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 47 to 62 percent.

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excessive, generally from schools they considered but did not ultimately attend.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, about 4 percent of student veterans reported feeling that the school they chose to attend contacted them excessively, while 19 percent reported excessive contacts from other schools they considered.<sup>37</sup>

Further, approximately 1 in 10 student veterans—or an estimated 6,900 veterans when generalized to the population—also reported feeling pressure from a school to enroll.<sup>38</sup> In open-ended comments, a few students explained that their experiences included receiving “constant” or “daily” e-mails or phone calls, even after they informed the school that they were no longer interested or had enrolled in another school. In one instance, a student said that a school both called and e-mailed her for a month after she requested an information packet, and then encouraged her to attend a campus out of state after closing down the campus that was nearest to her. Another student said that his school called him repeatedly after he had finished classes to encourage him to enroll in more classes, even though he was not ready to do so at that time.

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### Veterans Reported Facing Challenges Obtaining Accurate and Complete Information to Make Informed School Choices

Although most student veterans we surveyed considered the information they received from their schools—such as on financial issues or credit transfer policies—to be accurate, almost a quarter reported receiving inaccurate information. About 23 percent of student veterans—or about 16,500 veterans when generalized to the population—reported receiving generally inaccurate information in at least one of the 13 topic areas in our survey.<sup>39</sup> For example, about 12 percent reported that the information

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<sup>36</sup>The 23 percent estimate for excessive contacts received has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 17 to 30 percent, which would be a range of 10,600 to 19,800 veterans when generalized to the population of veterans receiving benefits for the first time in 2012. When reporting population numbers, we round to the nearest 100 veterans.

<sup>37</sup>The 4 percent estimate for the excessive contact from schools attended has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 2 to 8 percent. The 19 percent estimate for the excessive contact from other schools considered has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 14 to 26 percent.

<sup>38</sup>The 10 percent estimate for veterans experiencing pressure from schools has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 6 to 15 percent, which would be a range of 3,900 to 9,900 veterans when generalized to the population of veterans receiving benefits.

<sup>39</sup>The 23 percent estimate for veterans receiving inaccurate information has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 17 to 30 percent, which would be a range of 11,100 to 21,900 veterans when generalized to our population of veterans receiving benefits.

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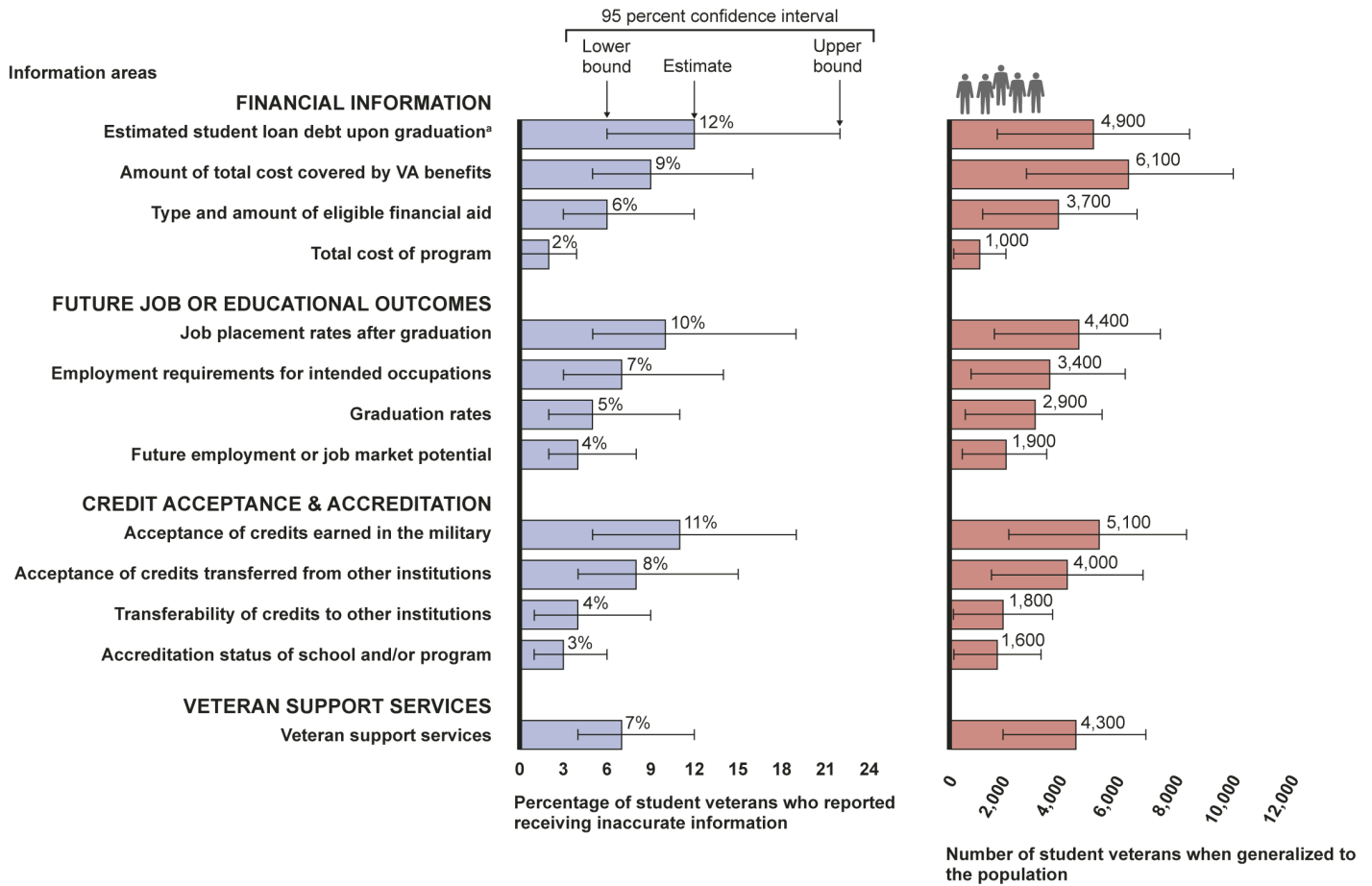
they received on their estimated student loan debt upon graduation was generally inaccurate.<sup>40</sup> Similar rates of inaccuracy were reported for job placement rates, the acceptance of military experience for academic credit, and the extent to which VA funds would cover total school costs (see fig.3). Some veterans we surveyed were not able to assess the accuracy of the information they received from their school, with up to a third reporting that they were not sure if the information in each of the areas was accurate or inaccurate.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>The 12 percent estimate for inaccurate information received on estimated student loan debt has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 6 to 22 percent.

<sup>41</sup>See appendix II for more information about the percentages of student veterans for each area who reported that the information was generally accurate or who were not sure about the accuracy of the information.

**Figure 3: Estimated Percentage of Student Veterans Who Reported Receiving Generally Inaccurate Information from Their Schools and Estimated Number of Student Veterans When Generalized to the Population**



Source: GAO analysis of responses to a nationally representative survey of student veterans receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for the first time in 2012.

Note: Percentages and the numbers of student veterans generalized to the population are based on respondents who obtained information, which varies for each item, and excludes those who did not look for or did not obtain information. Respondents who did obtain information from their school on a topic area could rate the information as “generally accurate,” “generally inaccurate,” or “not sure.” The percentage of student veterans who considered school information to be generally inaccurate cannot be determined based on the percentage of students who considered school information to be generally accurate. For example, while 11 percent of student veterans we surveyed considered information on credits for military training or experience to be inaccurate, 73 percent considered this information to be accurate and 16 percent were not sure about the accuracy of the information.

<sup>a</sup>For this item, a lower number of respondents looked for or obtained information; thus, the number of student veterans generalized to the population is relatively smaller, despite having a higher percentage of respondents reporting that they received generally inaccurate information.



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Student veterans may report receiving inaccurate information when schools provide misleading or incorrect information, but students may also do so if they do not understand the information provided, even if the information is accurate.<sup>42</sup> Given the complexities of higher education information, some veterans may not fully understand the school information they obtain and a lack of familiarity or experience with higher education issues can make it difficult to assess the accuracy of information. For example, while most veterans reported that they obtained information on a school's accreditation, representatives from several schools and veterans service and higher education organizations we interviewed said that veterans sometimes lacked a clear understanding about the importance of accreditation and how different types of accreditation could affect their ability to transfer credits to other schools.<sup>43</sup> If a veteran cannot transfer credits earned previously at a different school, he or she may have to take additional courses, incur additional tuition charges, and possibly use all of his or her VA education benefits before completing the educational program or degree.

Reports of inaccuracy can be useful in highlighting areas that warrant additional attention, as selecting a school based on inaccurate information or an incomplete understanding of available information can adversely affect a veteran's education or career plans. For example, representatives from one veterans service organization said several veterans told them that they were led to believe by school staff or marketing materials that successfully completing their chosen program would allow them to work in a certain occupation (e.g., information technology) or obtain a certain type of job (e.g., police officer); however, these veterans later discovered that potential employers generally did not

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<sup>42</sup>It was not possible to independently assess the accuracy of information provided by schools to our survey respondents. In addition, we surveyed veterans who had recently begun using their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and their status as current students could affect how they assessed the accuracy of certain information. For example, students who are still enrolled in school and have not yet tried to transfer credits to another school or started looking for employment may not have complete information about the accuracy of a school's information about transfer credits or job placement rates.

<sup>43</sup>Educational institutions can be accredited by national or regional accrediting agencies, and these types of accreditation are often considered when schools evaluate credits for transfer. As we have previously reported, students can face numerous challenges transferring credits from one school to another, due in part to differences in accreditation. See GAO, *Transfer Students: Postsecondary Institutions Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation*, [GAO-06-22](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 18, 2005).

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hire graduates of their program or required additional job experience. One of these veterans said that he was unable to obtain a job in his chosen field and was left with tens of thousands of dollars in debt and no remaining VA education benefits. When commenting on the accuracy of the information he received from his school, a veteran we surveyed said that although he received credits for his military training, he did not expect that they would be counted as elective credits and would not satisfy the required credits he needed to earn the degree in his program.<sup>44</sup> If veterans do not have accurate or complete information on the ability to obtain credit for past military experience, they may need to take additional classes to complete their degree and may not be able to accomplish their educational goals in the time frame they had anticipated.

Many veterans also reported that they would have liked more information from schools about each of the 13 topic areas on our survey, suggesting that students may not obtain all the information they would like during their school search. For instance, more than 60 percent of student veterans—or about 37,300 veterans when generalized to the population—reported wanting more information on veteran support services from schools (see fig. 4).<sup>45</sup> Other key areas in which veterans wanted additional information included financial issues, such as financial aid eligibility and the extent to which VA benefits cover school costs, as well as job outcomes, such as job placement rates and employment opportunities in their field. For example, one student in an open-ended survey comment wrote that he thought it would have been helpful if his school had told him that a veteran receiving VA benefits can also receive other types of financial aid. Veterans who do not have complete information on possible financial aid options may face challenges

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<sup>44</sup>If a school accepts previously taken classes, they may choose to accept them as elective credits rather than crediting them toward a student's degree or major. In this case, the student may need to take additional courses to meet the degree requirements of the program or major. As a result, the transferred credits may not reduce the number of classes the student must take or the amount of time needed to complete the degree or program.

<sup>45</sup>For more information on the importance of veteran support services for student veterans, see GAO, *VA Education Benefits: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students*, [GAO-13-338](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2013). The 62 percent estimate for wanting more information on veteran support services has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 54 to 69 percent. See appendix II for more information about the percentages and associated confidence intervals of student veterans for each area who reported wanting more information.

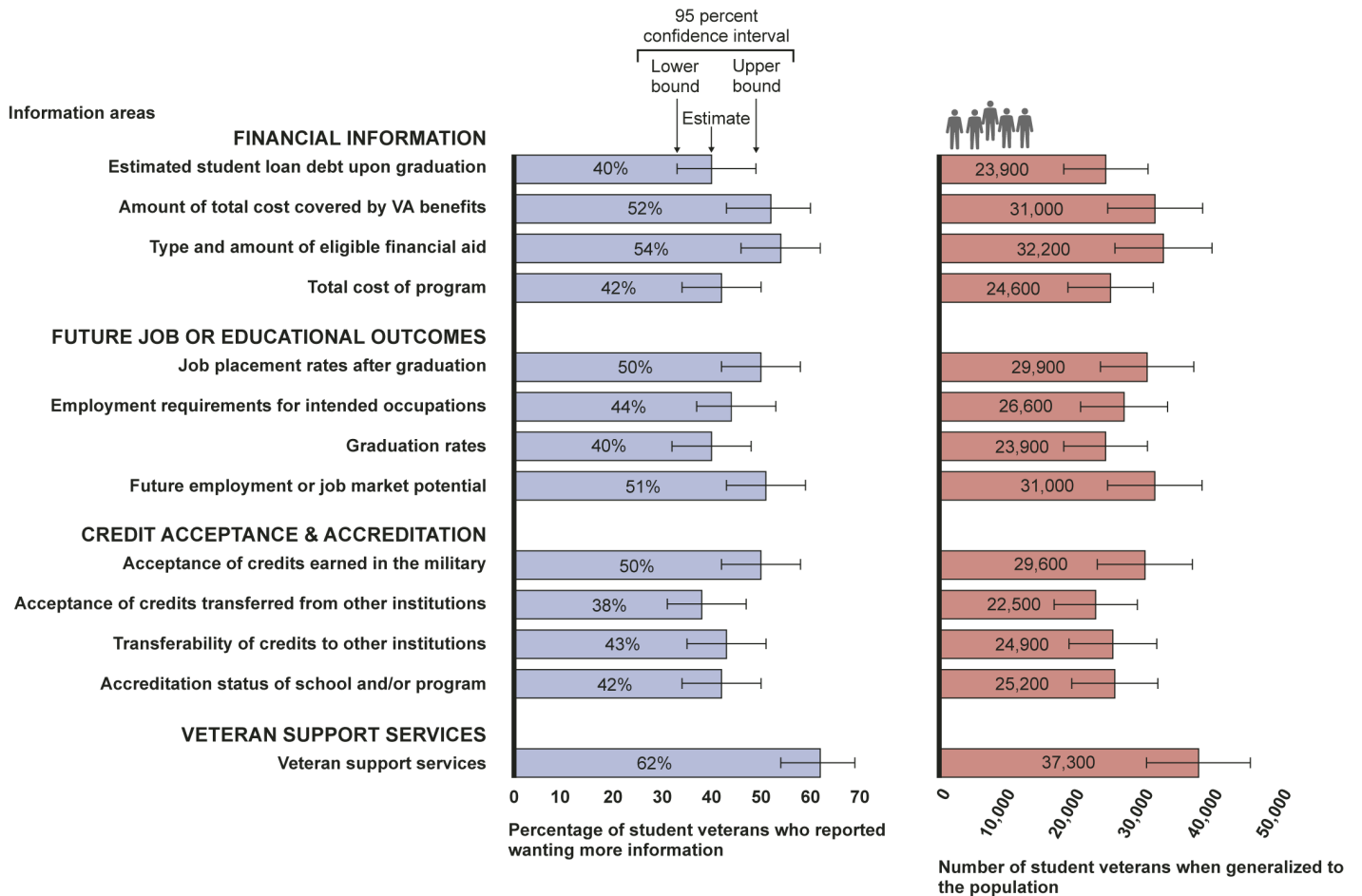
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financing their education and may have to incur personal loan debt. Further, in our review of 30 school websites, a key source of information cited by most of our survey respondents, we also found that information veterans want may be difficult to locate in some cases. For instance, when we looked for information on costs and fees, tools to help a student calculate out-of-pocket costs, and graduation rates, in several cases we found this information under sections called “Consumer Information,” “Program Disclosures,” or “Regulatory Disclosures.” Headings such as these may not be obvious to, or may be easily overlooked by, a prospective student.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Schools participating in programs under the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, are required to make certain information available to current and prospective students, such as on the cost of attendance, financial assistance, graduation rates, and future employment outcomes. 20 U.S.C. § 1092(a)(1).

**Figure 4: Estimated Percentage of Student Veterans Who Reported Wanting More Information from Schools and Estimated Number of Student Veterans When Generalized to the Population**



Source: GAO analysis of responses to a nationally representative survey of student veterans receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for the first time in 2012.

In some cases, veterans may not actively seek information on job or educational outcomes associated with schools or programs.<sup>47</sup> For example, about 35 percent of student veterans reported on our survey

<sup>47</sup>Schools participating in programs under the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, must make certain job placement rate data available to prospective students if they advertise these rates to attract students. 20 U.S.C. § 1094(a)(8).

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that they did not seek or obtain information on job placement rates.<sup>48</sup> According to the study by Public Agenda, barely half of adult students look for information on a graduate's average debt from a particular school or a typical graduate's success in the labor market before deciding to attend.<sup>49</sup> The study found that many prospective nontraditional students do not think these types of information are essential in selecting schools, even though their primary goal in seeking education is often to advance their careers.

Representatives from several veteran and higher education organizations noted that some veterans could benefit from greater access to independent and objective advice from knowledgeable individuals, who could help them sort through all the factors they must consider to make well-informed education decisions and navigate the higher education system. A representative from one higher education organization noted that more traditional students have access to high school guidance counselors to guide them through their decision-making process. Many of the nontraditional students surveyed by Public Agenda said that they would benefit from personal contact with experts who could help them weigh their options and navigate the college process. A representative from a veterans service organization noted that many veterans are first generation college students, who may not necessarily know how to distinguish between different types of schools and may be more susceptible to "hard sells" from aggressive recruiters. A representative from another veterans service organization also explained that some veterans may not be aware of the differences in the quality of education provided by different schools; as a result, they can end up with a degree that does not help them obtain the kind of job they want.

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<sup>48</sup>The 35 percent estimate for veterans who did not obtain job placement rate information has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 28 to 43 percent.

<sup>49</sup>Public Agenda, *Is College Worth It for Me?*

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## VA Is Taking Steps to Better Inform and Protect Student Veterans, but Its Counseling Outreach and Planning Efforts Are Insufficient

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### VA Plans to Offer More Information about Schools, but Is Not Effectively Promoting Educational Counseling

#### New Information Tools

**The Principles of Excellence** set forth requirements for schools to provide meaningful information to veterans about schools and prevent abusive and deceptive recruiting. For example, schools who have signed on to these principles must:

- provide students with a personalized form on total school costs
- designate a point of contact to provide academic and financial advice to veteran and military students
- provide educational plans for students receiving veteran and military education benefits
- accommodate servicemembers and reservists who are absent due to service requirements
- end fraudulent and unduly aggressive recruiting practices and misrepresentations.

Source: GAO analysis of Executive Order 13607 and VA information on the Principles of Excellence.

In response to the Executive Order and recent legislation, VA is taking steps to help veterans more easily obtain information on schools to support their decision making. For example, starting in the 2013-2014 school year, VA required schools that have formally agreed to the Principles of Excellence (see sidebar) to provide prospective students with a personalized form that contains information on total school costs. This form, known as the “Financial Aid Shopping Sheet,” provides information on a school’s tuition, fees, and other expenses; personalized information on available grants and loans (based on the student’s federal financial aid application), and a school’s graduation rate and loan default rate, among other information.<sup>50</sup> The Financial Aid Shopping Sheet is meant to help prospective students calculate how much they would have to pay out-of-pocket at different schools and compare costs and outcomes across schools.

More recently, VA launched the “GI Bill Comparison Tool” on its website that provides an interactive way for veterans to obtain school information, as well as estimates on how much they can receive in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. Over the longer term, future phases of this tool are meant to

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<sup>50</sup>The Financial Aid Shopping Sheet was developed by Education and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

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provide more customized and veteran-specific information, as such data become available and as required by the executive order.<sup>51</sup>

- The current comparison tool, a preliminary version of which was launched in February 2014, allows veterans to:
  - estimate education benefits they may be eligible for under the Post-9/11 GI Bill (previously this information was not readily available until after a veteran applied for benefits);
  - obtain information on a school's participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program and the Principles of Excellence; and
  - access graduation rates, default rates, and median borrowing for a school's student body as a whole, as well as access to further information about a school through a link to Education's College Navigator database.<sup>52</sup>
- VA is planning future versions of the comparison tool that are intended to allow veterans to:
  - more precisely calculate personalized Post-9/11 GI Bill and other VA education benefits, as well as out-of-pocket costs for tuition and fees;
  - obtain information on veteran-specific outcome measures (e.g., a school's graduation rate for veterans, specifically), whether a school provides credit for military experience, a school's dedicated point of contact for veteran support services, and other veteran-related information as these data become available (data collection is estimated to start in the 2014-2015 school year);<sup>53</sup> and

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<sup>51</sup>See <http://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/gi-bill-comparison-tool/>.

<sup>52</sup>College Navigator provides a variety of information on individual schools, including tuition and fees, enrollment, and graduation rates.

<sup>53</sup>In school year 2014-2015, Education will begin to collect outcome data specifically on student veterans, which we have noted in prior work is lacking (see [GAO-13-338](#)). The current outcome measures collected by Education may not be applicable for many student veterans. For instance, the graduation rates include only first-time, full-time students and exclude students who attend part-time or transfer to another school, which likely include many student veterans.

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- more easily search for schools and compare information across multiple schools.

VA officials said that the Comparison Tool is intended to provide veterans with school information collected from multiple sources in one central location. It also supplements the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet, which provides a student with more personalized information on loans and grants available from the Department of Education, but not on how much a veteran may be able to receive in VA education benefits. Both the Comparison Tool and the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet facilitate access to information that may be hard for students to find on some schools' websites and may help respond to the needs of veterans who reported wanting more information on issues such as finances, outcomes, and veteran support services. Our survey results indicate student veterans want this information from VA and not just from schools themselves. More than half of student veterans reported that they wanted more information from VA on VA education benefits, federal financial aid, or out-of-pocket costs.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, about half of the veterans we surveyed reported wanting more information from VA about school graduation rates and employment outcomes.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to providing more accessible information on schools, VA also expanded access to CareerScope, an online tool that allows veterans to assess their interests and aptitudes and help them develop their career goals. The tool also helps veterans determine if they are ready for college or other postsecondary training opportunities or if they need additional preparation. Public Law 112-249 required VA to make available an off-the-shelf tool to help veterans determine if they are ready for college. VA previously offered the Career Scope tool only to veterans with service-connected disabilities as part of its Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program, but now offers it to any veteran who is eligible for

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<sup>54</sup>An estimated 64 percent of veterans wanted more information from VA about VA education benefits, with a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 56 to 72 percent. Likewise, an estimated 70 percent of veterans wanted information from VA on federal financial aid (with a confidence interval that ranges from 61 percent to 78 percent), and an estimated 60 percent of veterans wanted additional information on out-of-pocket costs (with a confidence interval that ranges from 52 percent to 68 percent).

<sup>55</sup>An estimated 51 percent of veterans reported wanting more information from VA on academic outcomes, with a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 43 to 60 percent. An estimated 53 percent of veterans wanted information from VA on employment outcomes, with a confidence interval that ranges from 45 percent to 61 percent.



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VA education benefits. According to VA officials, many more veterans have used CareerScope since VA more prominently featured the tool on its GI Bill website and expanded veterans' access to it. VA officials said that CareerScope and the Comparison Tool are intended to allow veterans at different stages of their decision-making process to more easily access the information they need.

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## Educational Counseling

### Outreach

VA has taken some steps to increase awareness of its educational and vocational counseling services, which have not been widely used. Veterans who are eligible for VA education benefits are also eligible to apply for free education counseling. This service offers one-on-one, objective advice from knowledgeable counselors and can help veterans formulate their career and educational goals and plans. Less than 2 percent of eligible veterans, however, have applied for this service in the last few years.<sup>56</sup> Servicemembers learn about VA's educational counseling services as one of many VA-offered benefits and services when they are transitioning out of the military.<sup>57</sup> However, about half of student veterans we surveyed said that they did not start thinking about schools until after leaving the military.<sup>58</sup> As a result, many veterans may not know about educational counseling services or may not remember them when they decide to return to school, according to several veteran groups and schools we interviewed. To improve awareness of these services among veterans, VA officials told us that VA has encouraged schools participating in its VetSuccess on Campus program to remind

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<sup>56</sup>Based on numbers of applicants of VA's counseling services and total beneficiaries receiving VA education benefits in fiscal years 2011, 2012, and 2013.

<sup>57</sup>Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program provides services and information to help departing servicemembers transition from the military to civilian life, including information on federal veteran benefits. For more information on this program, see GAO, *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, [GAO-14-144](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2014).

<sup>58</sup>Veterans may decide much later that they want to return to school, as Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are available for use up to 15 years after a servicemember is discharged. 38 U.S.C. § 3321(a). The 50 percent estimate for veterans who made the decision to start looking for schools after being released from military service has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 42 to 58 percent.

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veterans on their campuses of these services.<sup>59</sup> VA is also currently working with VA's vocational rehabilitation staff nationwide to increase the visibility and use of counseling at schools without the VetSuccess on Campus program. In addition, VA provides information about counseling services on its GI Bill website, on the CareerScope web page, and through social media platforms to increase awareness. VA officials also stated that they are working to finalize a communications plan for educational counseling that includes additional outreach to schools, veterans service organizations, and government agencies.

Although some of VA's promotion efforts, such as the GI Bill website and social media, are aimed at both current and prospective students, VA has not taken sufficient steps to promote counseling as a service for prospective student veterans. For instance, VA does not mention counseling in its recently updated guide on choosing a school (or its corresponding web version) or on the web page that lists resources for helping veterans make school decisions.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, while VA included educational counseling on the web page with its new GI Bill Comparison Tool, the service was promoted as a way to help veterans "succeed in school," after they have chosen a school and applied for benefits, and not as a tool for veterans in the process of selecting a school (see fig. 5). VA officials told us that they believe that educational counseling is useful for veterans both while they are making educational decisions and while they are in school and that veterans may learn about counseling in an earlier phase of their decisionmaking process (for example, while using the CareerScope tool). However, based on this presentation, a prospective student may see counseling as a resource to enhance their study skills or other ways to do well in school and not as a resource to help them identify schools that can best suit their needs. VA officials have stated that counseling awareness is more difficult to promote among prospective students because the agency doesn't know which veterans are considering school when they have not yet applied for education benefits. However, VA is neglecting to highlight counseling services in resources

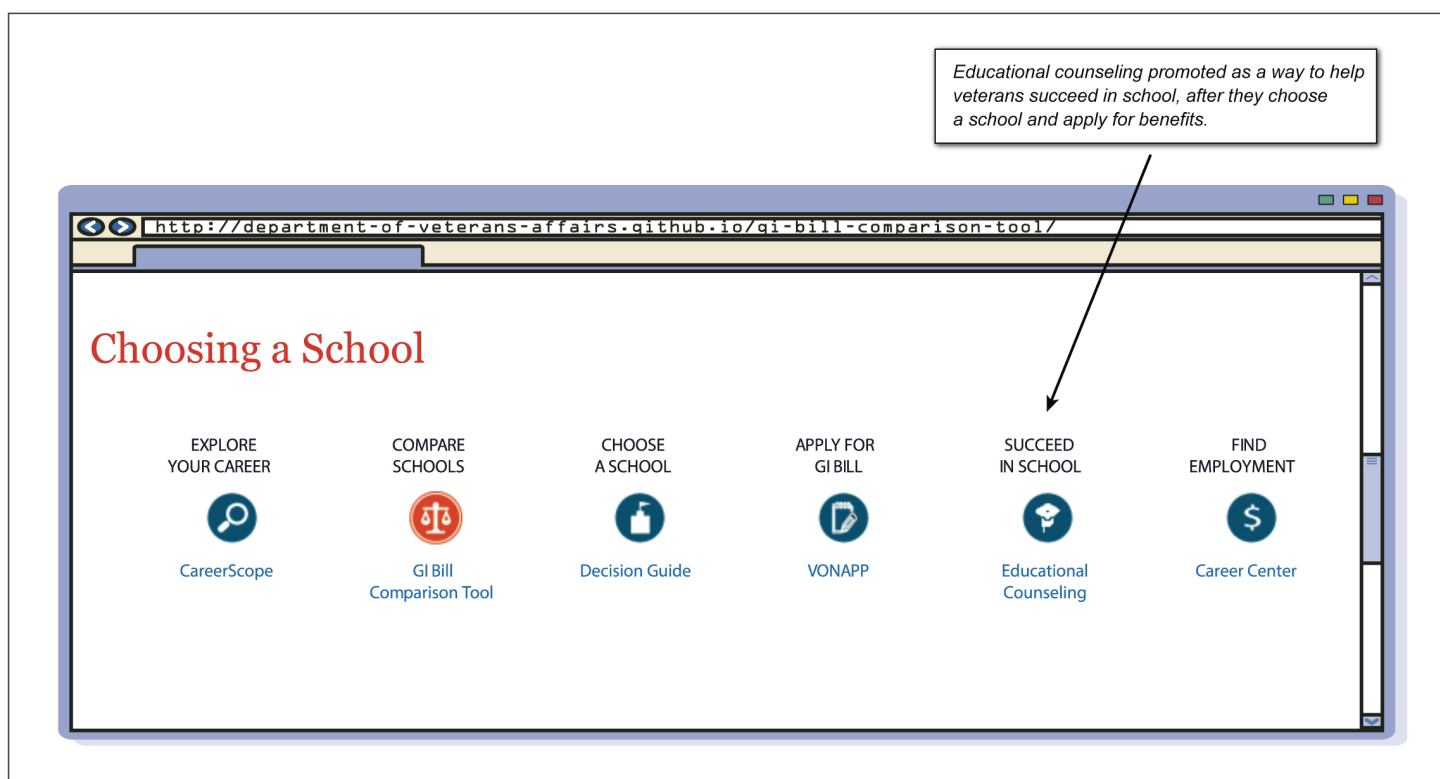
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<sup>59</sup>The VetSuccess on Campus program, currently available on 94 campuses nationwide, helps veterans transition from military service to student life through career, academic, and readjustment counseling.

<sup>60</sup>See VA, *Factors to Consider When Choosing a School: A guide before using the GI Bill*® SECOND EDITION, (Washington, D.C.: August 2013). The web version of this guide can also be found on VA's website:  
[http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/choosing\\_a\\_school.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/choosing_a_school.asp).

that prospective student veterans would be expected to use when considering a return to school. According to officials from one school we interviewed, the most effective way to facilitate veterans' use of VA services is to make information accessible to veterans when they are looking for it and in resources they will turn to for guidance.

**Figure 5: Part of VA's GI Bill Website Featuring Informational Tools and Resources for Choosing a School**



Source: VA website.

The need for more effective outreach to prospective students is underscored by our survey results and the recent law, which calls for more comprehensive outreach. Almost half of the veterans we surveyed, or an estimated 33,000 veterans when generalized to the population, were not aware of VA's educational counseling services when they were

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considering schools.<sup>61</sup> While Public Law 112-249 calls on VA to increase awareness of its counseling services through efficient and effective ways, as mentioned above, VA is overlooking some simple ways to inform prospective students about these services. Veterans who are considering school, but not yet enrolled are a critical group for counseling outreach, according to various veterans groups, higher education organizations, and schools we interviewed. While some veterans may be able to successfully navigate the higher education decision-making process on their own, others may need additional assistance. Officials from veteran and higher education organizations emphasized the need for veterans to take advantage of VA's educational counseling services before enrolling in a school that does not meet their needs and possibly exhausting their GI Bill benefits (and expending taxpayer dollars) without achieving their educational and career goals.

### **Application process**

Even if veterans are aware of VA's educational counseling, they may be deterred by the current paper application process. In contrast to many of VA's other services for which veterans can apply online, the process for obtaining educational counseling involves finding the application form online, printing a hard copy, filling it out, and mailing it to a VA office. Officials from a higher education organization and several veterans service organizations noted that the cumbersome application process can deter veterans from using these services. According to officials, VA has not yet automated the application—a simple 2-page form that primarily asks for basic identifying information and dates and branch of service—due to limited information technology resources. Yet, VA indicated in its April 2013 report to Congress that it would prioritize creating an online application for its counseling services, and Public Law 112-249 required VA to develop an outreach policy that includes effective and efficient methods to inform individuals of education counseling.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, in its current strategic plan, VA has emphasized the importance of providing

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<sup>61</sup>The 49 percent estimate for veterans who were not aware of VA's educational counseling services when considering schools has a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 42 to 57 percent, which would be a range of 26,200 to 36,900 veterans when generalized to our population of veterans receiving benefits.

<sup>62</sup>See VA, *Report to Congress: Implementing Public Law 112-249: Improving Transparency of Education Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2012* (Washington, D.C.: April 2013).

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benefits and services to veterans through automated and paperless processes, with the goal of reducing the burden for veterans and meeting their needs in a timely way.<sup>63</sup>

### **Data on service timeliness and other program elements**

VA lacks key data to manage its educational counseling program, including the extent to which it provides counseling services in time to meet veterans' needs. For instance, even when veterans complete the application process, many do not follow through with the counseling itself. After veterans mail in their application form, they must wait for VA to contact them to set up a counseling session. In fiscal year 2013, VA closed almost half its counseling applications as incomplete because it attempted to contact applicants, but was unable to do so.<sup>64</sup> Such data suggest that counseling services may not be offered in time to be useful. While VA officials managing the program did not know why the agency was unsuccessful in these attempts, they stated that one reason could be that some individuals no longer needed counseling services by the time VA contacted them.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, several veteran groups we interviewed noted that the length of time it takes to receive services can be an impediment to veterans' use of VA's counseling services. Our survey results also indicate that some veterans are making school-related decisions in a relatively short window of time, often starting and completing their school search within 2 months.<sup>66</sup> VA officials told us that they are developing a new performance measure to gauge how quickly the agency administratively processes counseling applications—from receipt of an application to closure of the file. However, VA does not have plans to measure how quickly counseling services are actually offered or provided to veterans, due to limitations with its case management system. Despite these limitations, this lack of customer-focused performance data is not aligned with one of the agency's guiding principles outlined in its

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<sup>63</sup>VA, *Strategic Plan Refresh 2011-2015* (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>64</sup>Fiscal year 2013 was the first year VA tracked information on the completion of counseling applications.

<sup>65</sup>VA officials also said that a veteran may relocate without providing updated contact information, making it impossible for VA to schedule the counseling sessions.

<sup>66</sup>An estimated 42 percent of student veterans reported spending fewer than 2 months looking at schools before deciding where to enroll with a 95 percent confidence interval that ranges from 35 to 50 percent.

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strategic plan: to provide client-centered services to best meet the needs of veterans. Moreover, VA's lack of knowledge about whether they are providing counseling services in a timely way prevents VA from conducting efficient and effective counseling outreach, as required by Public Law 112-249.

VA does not collect or have readily available data on counseling applicants and users, which hinders it from conducting effective outreach. While the current application form asks for some information about applicants, such as what VA education benefits they have applied for, it is not collected or stored in a way that allows VA to use or track the information. As a result, officials told us that they are not able to identify, for example, how long after leaving military service veterans generally apply for counseling or what percentage of counseling applicants are Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries. Additionally, VA does not collect information on why veterans seek counseling, such as to obtain help determining career goals, selecting a school, or completing a degree. Officials said that while it might be possible to collect some of these data through the addition of a few questions when VA develops a new online application, they have not developed any plans to do so. The lack of basic data on counseling applicants and users prevents program managers from being able to understand service trends and gaps. Without such operational information, managers are unable to assess if program goals are being met and resources are being used effectively, according to federal internal control standards for effective program operations.<sup>67</sup> Further, without a better understanding of when and why veterans are applying for counseling services, VA's ability to conduct effective counseling outreach is hindered, as is its ability to provide services in a client-focused way, as laid out in its strategic plan.

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<sup>67</sup>See [GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1](#).

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## VA Is Implementing Recent Requirements to Strengthen School Oversight

### New System for Complaints about Schools

In January 2014, VA launched its new system to allow veterans to file complaints about abusive and misleading school recruiting and other violations of the Principles of Excellence, as required by the Executive Order.<sup>68</sup> The new system is the first to systematically track veterans' complaints about aggressive or misleading school recruiting actions. Previously, VA had only anecdotal information about this type of school behavior, which had been difficult to identify through its regular school compliance reviews. Under the system, students receiving veteran education benefits can submit a brief description of the complaint and VA will work with the school and veteran to come to a resolution.<sup>69</sup> VA will forward these complaints to a central database operated by the Federal Trade Commission and the complaints will be accessible to other relevant federal agencies, as well as state and local law enforcement.<sup>70</sup> This new coordinated system should allow agencies to more easily identify complaints involving individual schools across agencies or patterns of complaints across school chains. To create awareness of the new complaint system, VA featured it on its GI Bill website and used social media platforms to announce it. As of March 2014, VA officials said that they had received over 1,000 complaints through the system and about 12 percent were related to recruiting and marketing practices.

VA has also taken some initial steps to develop a related system to publish student feedback on schools' recruiting practices, quality of

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<sup>68</sup>See <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/feedback.asp>.

<sup>69</sup>Before contacting the school, VA will determine if the complaint is relevant. For instance, complaints about VA payments would not be relevant for this complaint system and would be addressed by another VA process. Complaints regarding Department of Defense programs would be transferred to the Department of Defense to address.

<sup>70</sup>The Department of Defense system also logs similar complaints submitted by servicemembers. VA, the Department of Defense, Education, the Department of Justice, and the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau have access to the Federal Trade Commission's central database. Education also has a complaint system for veterans and servicemembers and is transmitting these complaints monthly to the Federal Trade Commission.

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Enhancements to Existing  
Compliance Review Process

instruction, and postgraduation employment outcomes, as required by Public Law 112-249.<sup>71</sup> In contrast to the complaint system, this feedback can be positive or negative and will be made public so that veterans can use it in making their education decisions. VA has yet to determine key aspects of the feedback system, such as how to categorize the feedback (e.g., using stars, grades, or reviewer comments); how schools would verify feedback; and how to determine what feedback should be made available to the public. VA officials said that when the feedback system is completed, it will ultimately be integrated with the complaint system.

VA has also taken steps to strengthen its school oversight by enhancing its existing compliance process and policies, as required by the Executive Order.

- Risk-based reviews: VA has established a new process to identify high-risk schools for compliance reviews, specifically schools that are considered at high-risk of failing to comply with the Principles of Excellence, including employing aggressive or deceptive recruiting practices.<sup>72</sup> To identify schools as high-risk, VA is using information from its new complaint system and prior compliance reviews, as well as external data from other federal agencies and publicly available information. For instance, VA's risk factors include:
  - complaints that a school is inappropriately inducing students to enroll,
  - large increases in tuition and fees or in veteran attendance,
  - whether a school is close to being out of compliance with the 90/10 rule.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>§ 1(a)(1), 126 Stat. 2398 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3698(b)(2)).

<sup>72</sup>VA's risk-based review protocols note that they are applicable to all schools approved to receive VA education benefits, not just signatories to the Principles of Excellence. The new protocols will augment VA's existing process for selecting schools for review, in which schools with over 300 veterans and schools that offer noncollege degrees are reviewed on an annual basis regardless of whether they are Principle of Excellence signatories.

<sup>73</sup>As mentioned earlier, the 90/10 rule requires that for-profit schools obtain at least 10 percent of their funding from sources other than student aid programs administered by Education, such as Pell Grants, in order to be eligible for these programs. 20 U.S.C. § 1094(a)(24).



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- Principles of Excellence checklist: VA has added a checklist of questions on school compliance with the Principles of Excellence to its existing compliance review protocols, including a specific question about fraudulent or unduly aggressive recruiting. While VA’s existing protocols contain a review of school marketing information to identify potentially deceptive advertising or enrollment practices, the existing compliance reviews have generally emphasized identifying payment issues, according to officials from several state approving agencies.<sup>74</sup>
  - New training to identify inappropriate recruiting practices: VA has begun training compliance staff to better identify “red flags” of potentially misleading, fraudulent, or unduly aggressive recruiting practices. The training, developed by the Department of Justice, helps staff identify a variety of possibly misleading statements or practices that might be made on school websites or recruitment materials, or identified through student interviews. Examples include:
    - marketing materials stating that federal money, including GI Bill funds, will cover the entire cost of the program;<sup>75</sup>
    - lack of clarity about a school’s accreditation, such as not distinguishing between different types of accreditation; and
    - endorsements by, or affiliation with, the military.

According to VA officials, this training should help compliance staff, who are not investigators or enforcement officials, better identify problematic school practices and answer the new Principles of Excellence compliance question on fraudulent and aggressive recruiting. One official noted that the new training as well as other efforts to enhance school oversight under the Principles of Excellence would help bring recruiting issues to the forefront.

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<sup>74</sup>We have also noted in prior work that compliance reviews generally focus on the accuracy of payments to schools and students. See GAO, *VA Education Benefits: Actions Taken, but Outreach and Oversight Could Be Improved*, [GAO-11-256](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb, 28, 2011).

<sup>75</sup>Post-9/11 GI Bill funds may not fully cover school costs if, for example, the school is a private school with costs that exceed a veteran’s allotted GI Bill fund amount and the school does not participate in VA’s Yellow Ribbon Program.

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- GI Bill trademark: VA has protected the phrase “GI Bill” by registering it as a trademark to combat fraudulent use of the term and to prevent websites and others from implying VA endorsement.

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## VA’s Project Planning Is Inconsistent and Lacks Realistic Time Frames

While VA has made progress implementing its multiple new oversight and information responsibilities based on the Executive Order and Public Law 112-249, VA’s plans have not consistently included realistic timeframes for achieving project goals. VA’s plans—including its revised plans—have frequently underestimated the amount of time needed to implement these complex efforts and achieve various goals by many months. For example:

- VA initially planned to launch the new online complaint system by November 2012. After learning about delays outside of VA’s control in June 2013, VA revised that date to November 2013. However, VA was not able to accept complaints—a key source of risk information for the risk-based review protocols—until January 2014.
- VA proposed to establish its targeted risk-based review program by August 2012, then estimated March 2013. While it had a draft policy in place by October 2013 and stated that it was implementing it for fiscal year 2014, VA did not finalize the policy until January 2014. VA also had not determined or documented the general data analyses it would conduct to assess risk by the start of the fiscal year.
- Although VA stated in an April 2013 report to Congress that it would prioritize efforts to allow veterans to apply online for its educational counseling service, almost a year later, VA officials said that they are just beginning to plan the steps required for this to occur.
- As recently as its January 2014 monthly report, VA was communicating that the next phase of the Comparison Tool would be implemented by April 2014. However, the next phase of the tool has not yet been implemented—it is still in preliminary planning stages, as VA officials said that they cannot develop a more detailed implementation plan before they have identified additional funding.

VA has also not consistently documented accurate and detailed assessments of work to be done or accounted for resource constraints or other risks that can affect its ability to meet projected goals and deadlines. Although VA created plans for its new complaint system that identified the resources necessary to accomplish goals, planning for other key efforts has been more limited and has not included such information. For the risk-based review protocols and procedures, the educational

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counseling outreach, and the school Comparison Tool, for instance, VA relied mostly on monthly status reports to track work accomplished and tasks to be done the next month. While these monthly reports sometimes included future actions, they frequently did not lay out specific activities needed to achieve these goals and the associated timing beyond the next month. The monthly status reports, which are communicated to external shareholders, such as the White House, also frequently did not outline necessary resources, such as financial or personnel needs. Additionally, the reports did not identify potential internal or external risks that could create implementation delays—such as coordination with other internal efforts to update VA’s website or external approval for VA’s new complaint form—and ways to manage these risks.

Key elements of sound planning include identifying specific activities needed to achieve project goals and realistic timelines that outline when activities will occur and how long they will take, according to project planning practices developed by GAO.<sup>76</sup> According to these practices, sound planning also lays out resource issues or other potential internal or external risks that may affect the ability to meet project goals and deadlines. Effective management also requires documentation and communication of plans and progress to facilitate informed decision-making among stakeholders, based on federal internal controls for effective government management and strategic planning standards.<sup>77</sup> Although VA officials said that their working groups met regularly to discuss implementation tasks, given the scope and complexity of the multiple initiatives VA must implement, the agency’s planning efforts have been insufficient. Without more realistic time frames and communication of more complete planning, Congress, other federal agencies, veterans, and the public lack complete and reliable information to be able to fully collaborate, assess VA’s plans and progress, and make informed decisions on resource allocation or other priorities.

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<sup>76</sup>GAO developed these sound practices by reviewing research on project management standards, internal controls for effective government management, and prior GAO work as part of its assessment of VA’s update of its disability compensation program. See GAO, *VA Disability Compensation: Actions Needed to Address Hurdles Facing Program Modernization*, [GAO-12-846](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2012).

<sup>77</sup>See [GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1](#), GAO, *Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act*, [GAO/GGD-96-118](#) (Washington D.C.: June 1996), and *Results Oriented Government: Practices that Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration Among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington D.C.: October 21, 2005).

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## Conclusions

A sizeable number of veterans report experiencing problems with school recruiting and obtaining accurate information from their schools. Many others reported that they wanted more information about schools. When generalized to the entire student veteran population, our survey results indicate that tens of thousands of veterans are affected. Such numbers highlight the need for agency action to better protect and inform veterans and prevent them from squandering their educational benefits on programs that do not meet their educational or career goals. Along with efforts to enhance oversight, VA has taken steps to provide veterans with information to become better consumers of higher education. However, information alone may not be enough to help veterans navigate the complex decision-making process involved in selecting a school that will best meet their needs. VA provides individual counseling that can help veterans fully understand the higher education environment and make informed decisions, but it is missing opportunities to improve the effectiveness of its outreach and connect prospective student veterans with these services. Without easier and timely access to objective information and guidance, veterans may rely on readily available marketing materials and advice from school representatives, even the best-intended of which may not align with a veteran's specific needs or goals.

Further, while VA has made some progress in meeting the multiple and substantial goals for informing and protecting veterans that were laid out in recent executive and legislative actions, various obstacles have caused these initiatives to be delayed. Some of these obstacles have been out of VA's control. However, VA has often moved forward without identifying realistic time frames based on sound planning practices—practices that are critical to ensure that VA can effectively implement the complex initiatives with which it has been tasked. Subsequently, stakeholders and policymakers have frequently lacked reliable information on VA's progress in implementing measures that will better protect and inform student veterans. Such information is critical to ensure that VA implements these new initiatives as quickly as possible, given the many thousands of veterans using their GI Bill benefits now and in the coming years and the significant federal investment involved.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure that veterans' education benefits are used effectively, we recommend that the Secretary of VA take the following actions:

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1) Take additional steps to improve the outreach, accessibility, and usefulness of its educational counseling services, particularly for prospective student veterans, for example by

- featuring these services in resources intended for prospective students veterans;
- prioritizing efforts to enable veterans to apply for educational counseling online; and
- considering cost-effective ways to gather more information on applicants, users, and key program areas (such as the timeliness of service) to better identify service needs or gaps and to improve the effectiveness of future outreach.

2) More consistently develop, document, and communicate realistic timelines and goals for implementing VA initiatives based on federal requirements by identifying specific activities needed to achieve goals and associated implementation timelines, as well as resource issues or potential internal or external risks that may affect timing.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft copy of this report to VA and Education for review and comment. VA concurred with our recommendations. In agreeing with our recommendation related to its educational counseling services, VA noted that it has started making plans to develop an online application and is taking additional steps to enhance the outreach and delivery of these services. In concurring with our recommendation to use sound planning practices to implement its ongoing initiatives, VA acknowledged it was slow to use formal project management concepts when it began to implement Executive Order 13607. VA stated that it has since used more formal project management methods to implement Public Law 112-249, citing as evidence of its improved planning the use of interagency working groups to identify activities necessary to achieve goals, the development of a master schedule, and the anticipated timeframes for various initiatives outlined in its April 2013 report to Congress. In our report, we acknowledge the considerable new initiatives that VA was responsible for implementing and we note examples of VA's working groups and the

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plans and timeframes outlined in VA's April 2013 report to Congress.<sup>78</sup> While VA's more recent actions represent a step in the right direction, its overall efforts did not consistently produce sound planning activities and documents that included appropriate timeframes, specific identification of activities and resources needed, and risks that could delay implementation. We continue to believe that, moving forward, VA needs to improve its planning efforts to ensure that it implements the future initiatives required by the Executive Order and Public Law 112-249 as quickly as possible. For example, to mitigate risks and better establish realistic timeframes, VA could do more to develop implementation plans for the feedback system and the next phase of the comparison tool. VA's comments are reproduced in appendix III.

Education had no comments on our findings or recommendations, but outlined its efforts to help veterans and other students make informed educational choices and noted its collaboration with VA and other agencies to support implementation of the Executive Order. Education's comments are reproduced in appendix IV. VA and Education provided technical comments that were incorporated, as appropriate. We also provided selected relevant portions of the draft to the Department of Defense and incorporated its technical comments, as appropriate.

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We are sending copies of this report to relevant congressional committees, the Secretaries of VA and Education, and other interested parties. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on GAO's website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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<sup>78</sup>VA did not provide us with any master schedule during our review. In response to VA's comment, we asked for this document and VA provided it. While we support VA's use of this type of schedule to improve its planning, the schedule provided does not include substantive information on several of VA's key initiatives. When it provided the master schedule, VA also provided minutes from its working groups implementing Public Law 112-249, documents that VA did not provide during our review. These minutes reflect some discussion of risks and financial contingencies, but do not fully incorporate all elements of sound planning.

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If you or your staffs have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0534 or [EmreyArrasM@gao.gov](mailto:EmreyArrasM@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

*Melissa Emrey-Arras*

Melissa Emrey-Arras  
Director, Education, Workforce, and  
Income Security Issues

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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The objectives of our report were to examine: (1) how do selected schools recruit veterans; (2) what are the school search and recruiting experiences of student veterans; and (3) what actions has the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) taken to help veterans make informed education decisions and to identify inappropriate school recruiting? To address our first question, we interviewed officials from 9 schools and reviewed the websites of an additional 30 schools. To address our second question, we administered a national survey of student veterans. To address our third question, we reviewed pertinent federal laws, regulations, and requirements, as well as agency documents, and interviewed officials from VA and the Department of Education, as well as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Justice. For all three questions, we also spoke with veterans service and higher education organizations. We conducted this performance audit from February 2013 to May 2014, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## School Interviews and School Website Analysis

We conducted phone interviews with officials from nine schools to gather information on the extent and ways they reach out and provide information to veterans and military servicemembers (see table 1).<sup>1</sup> We selected these schools for variation among sectors, degrees offered, and the amount of funds received from VA under the Post 9/11 GI Bill program. However, all of our selected schools received at least \$2 million in total Post-9/11 GI Bill funds from fiscal years 2010 through 2011, the most recent data available when we selected our schools. We also chose schools with a relatively higher proportion of veterans in their student population. Finally, we sought to include some schools that had online programs or were near a military base.

We also reviewed the websites of 30 additional schools to obtain basic information on how schools' used their websites to provide information to

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<sup>1</sup>While this report focuses on student veterans, schools' advertising and recruiting practices are often aimed at the larger group of military-affiliated students that includes both veteran and active-duty servicemembers.



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veteran or military students.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the schools selected for interview, all schools in our website analysis received at least \$2 million in total Post-9/11 GI Bill funds from 2010 through 2011. We selected 10 schools per sector, in which we randomly selected five schools that were in the top 10 percent of schools in each sector based on their Post-9/11 GI Bill funding amounts and five that were not. From each website, we determined whether the site included specific information for veterans and whether this information was featured on the home page, as well as other veteran-related communication. We also looked for the availability of certain information for students generally, such as costs and fees and graduation rates. The information gathered from our school interviews and website review is not generalizable to all schools, but is useful in illustrating a range of recruiting practices used among our selected schools.

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## National Survey of Student Veterans

### Overview

To obtain information on the factors that influenced student veterans' school decisions, as well as their experiences with school recruitment, we administered a survey to a nationally representative sample of 900 recently enrolled student veterans (300 each in the public, nonprofit, and public sectors) and asked them about their school search and recruiting experiences, information they received from their current school, and their perspectives on relevant information and services from VA. All survey results presented in the body of this report are generalizable to the population of 73,000 student veterans who were receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for the first time in 2012. Due to an insufficient response rate, we were not able to report results by sector. We administered the survey using mail and electronic distribution from July 2013 to November 2013. A copy of the full questionnaire and aggregate responses for all close-ended questions are included in appendix II. The practical difficulties of conducting any survey may introduce errors, commonly referred to as nonsampling errors. For example, difficulties in interpreting a particular question or sources of information available to respondents can introduce

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<sup>2</sup>We collected information from websites from May 2013 to November 2013, with some additional website review in January and February 2014 for verification purposes. Website content may have changed since we reviewed these sites.

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Sample Design and Survey Development and Administration

unwanted variability into the survey results. We took steps in developing the questionnaire, collecting the data, and analyzing them to minimize such nonsampling error (see below).

Using data from VA, we identified the population of all veterans who were enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time between July and December 2012 and were using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to fund their education—approximately 90,000 student veterans.<sup>3</sup> To stratify our random sample into three equal groups based on school sector (public, public, and for-profit), we merged data from the Department of Education on school sectors with our list of student veterans, using school identifier information in both data sets. While some veterans' school information could not be matched to the existing information on school sector, we matched schools representing most of the veterans in our population, which resulted in a universe of approximately 73,000 veterans from which we drew our stratified random sample of 900 student veterans, 300 attending schools in each sector.

To inform the design of our survey instrument, we met with individual veterans and veterans service organizations. We conducted seven pretests with veterans who attended schools across the sectors to ensure that survey questions collected the expected information, obtain any suggestions for clarification, and determine whether veterans were able to appropriately recall their experiences when they were selecting schools. We also discussed survey questions and administration modes with students from two veterans service organizations.

To encourage survey participation, we conducted pre-administration and follow-up phone calls, sent survey instruments to both e-mail and mailing addresses, and took other measures. Before administering the survey, we contacted individuals in our sample for whom we had telephone or e-mail contact information to inform them about the survey, update their preferred contact information, and answer any questions or concerns they had. In addition, we included information from Student Veterans of America to help promote our survey. We administered the survey using both e-mail and mailing addresses. We sent a hard copy of our survey to individuals in our sample with a mailing address but without an e-mail

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<sup>3</sup>We excluded active duty servicemembers, dependents, and spouses who were using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

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address, and sent an e-mail message with a hyperlink to an online version of the survey to those for whom we had e-mail addresses. We also included a postcard with the hard copy survey that provided instructions on how to complete the survey online, for those who preferred to respond online. A few weeks after our initial request, we did a second round of hard copy mailings to all recipients who had not completed the survey online or by mail, so that all these recipients received at least one mailed survey. We also sent follow-up emails and conducted follow-up phone calls to encourage participation. Additionally, we requested updated contact information from VA and searched public records for additional contact information for a subset of those in our sample for whom we had returned mail or other indications that their contact information was incorrect.

## Analysis of Respondents

A total of 254 students responded to the survey, for an unweighted response rate of 28 percent. We conducted a nonresponse bias analysis to see if characteristics available from the sample frame for survey respondents correlated with the propensity to respond. We used logistic regression models with a binary response variable to test for this. Our non-response bias analysis indicated that our survey respondents did not reflect the age distribution of the sample frame population. Specifically, our respondents tended to be older than the population from which we selected our sample. To adjust for this, we post-stratified the sample weights by age so that the weighted age distribution of our sample respondents reflected the age distributions in the sample frame. All estimates presented in this report are weighted to reflect the sample design, a non-response adjustment, and post-stratification for age.

Because we followed a probability procedure based on random selections, our sample is only one of a large number of samples that we might have drawn. Since each sample could have provided different estimates, we express our confidence in the precision of our particular sample's results as a 95 percent confidence interval (e.g., plus or minus 7 percentage points). This is the interval that would contain the actual population value for 95 percent of the samples we could have drawn. Confidence intervals are provided along with each sample estimate in the report.

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## Interviews with Veterans Service and Higher Education Organizations

We interviewed several veterans service organizations and higher education organizations to obtain their perspectives on key issues affecting recruitment of student veterans. These organizations included the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, American Association of Community Colleges, American

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Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, The American Legion, Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, The Institute for College Access and Success, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, National Association of State Approving Agencies, NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, National Association of Veterans Program Administrators, Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, Student Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and VetJobs.

# Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions

The questions we asked in our survey of student veterans are shown below. Our survey was comprised of closed- and open-ended questions. In this appendix, we include all survey questions and aggregate results of responses to the closed-ended questions; we do not provide information on responses provided to the open-ended questions. For a more detailed discussion of our survey methodology, see appendix I.

## Section A: Background

**1. Have you received ANY GI Bill education benefits since July 2012? We are interested in all GI Bill benefits, including Post 9/11, Montgomery, and all other GI bill education benefits.**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	95.1	90.4	97.9
No	4.9	2.1	9.6

**2. For use at what school did you most recently receive your GI Bill education benefits?**

[Open-ended]

**3. If known, where is the school located?**

[Open-ended]

**4. In what year did you first attend this school?**

[Open-ended]

**5. What degree or certificate were you working on during your most recent term of enrollment?**

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
Certificate program (less than 2 years)	4.6	2.1	8.6
Associate's degree	35.7	28.6	43.3
Undergraduate certificate/diploma	1.2	0.1	5.9
Bachelor's degree	43.1	35.8	50.7
Post-baccalaureate certificate	0.4	0	2.3
Master's degree	10.6	7.3	15.2
Post-Master's certificate	0.5	0	2.5
Professional degree (such as J.D., M.D.)	1.9	0.4	5.3

**6. In addition to GI Bill education benefits, what other sources of financial aid did you use or are you using to finance your education at current or most recent school? (Check all that apply).**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
Federal student loans (such as Direct Loans, Perkins Loans, and Stafford Loans)	44.5	34.9	54.5
Pell Grants	56.5	46.5	66.0
Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants	4.4	0.8	13.4
Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grants	0.4	0	4.3
Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grants	1.5	0.1	6.3
Federal work study	6.6	2.0	15.3
Private student loans	4.6	1.1	12.1

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Other (such as state grants, employer education assistance, and scholarships from private entities)	20.3	11.8	31.3

**Section B: Enrollment Decisions**

**7. At what point did you make the decision to start looking at schools? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Prior to entering military service	6.3	3.3	10.7
While on active duty or in service	43.8	36.4	51.5
After being released from military service	49.9	42.3	57.5

**8. How much time did you spend looking at schools? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Less than 2 months	41.9	34.5	49.6
2 to less than 6 months	26.1	20.1	33.1
6 to less than 12 months	17.4	12.3	23.9
12 to less than 24 months	6.5	3.1	11.8
More than 24 months	4.6	2.2	8.5
Not sure	3.5	1.5	7.0

**9. About how many schools did you consider attending? (Check one response.)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
Only considered the school I currently or most recently attended	19.0	13.7	25.7
2 to 4 schools	70.4	63.0	76.9
5 or more school	10.2	5.9	16.1
Not sure	0.4	0	2.3

**Section C: Factors Affecting School Selection**

**10. Before deciding to attend your current or most recent school, do you recall going to a school fair either on or off a military base? (Check one response for each item.)**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
School fairs or conferences on a military base	Yes	12.6	7.5	19.3
	No	82.5	75.3	87.9
	Not sure	5.0	2.1	9.7
School fairs or conferences off of a military base, but not on school campus	Yes	7.0	3.6	11.9
	No	85.9	79.2	91.1
	Not sure	7.1	3.3	13.1



**11. Before deciding to attend your current or most recent school, do you recall going on a campus visit to that school? (Check one response).**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	42.1	34.7	49.9
No	57.4	49.6	64.8
Not sure	0.5	0	2.6

**12. Before deciding to attend your current or most recent school, do you recall seeing advertising from any of the following sources for either the school you are attending or any other schools you were considering? (Check one response for current school and one response for other school(s) you considered.)**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
12a. Military television	Yes (current school)	1.8	0.4	4.8
	Yes (other schools)	6.5	3.2	11.8
12b. Other television	Yes (current school)	25.5	19.4	32.7
	Yes (other schools)	35.6	27.9	44.1
12c. Radio	Yes (current school)	17.9	12.4	25.1
	Yes (other schools)	25.5	18.5	33.9
12d. Emails	Yes (current school)	18.5	13.3	25.3
	Yes (other schools)	32.6	25.1	41.1
12e. Text messages	Yes (current school)	1.9	0.4	5.6
	Yes (other schools)	2.6	0.8	6.3

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
12f. Social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	Yes (current school)	23.3	17.4	30.6
	Yes (other schools)	24.0	17.3	32.3
12g. Other internet ads	Yes (current school)	23.9	18.2	30.7
	Yes (other schools)	30.7	23.5	39.0
12h. Direct mailings	Yes (current school)	18.6	13.0	25.8
	Yes (other schools)	24.9	18.0	33.2
12i. Military newspaper, magazines, or journals	Yes (current school)	12.7	8.5	18.6
	Yes (other schools)	14.3	9.1	21.1
12j. Other newspaper, magazines, or journals	Yes (current school)	14.3	10.1	19.8
	Yes (other schools)	21.9	15.6	29.8
12k. Other	Yes (current school)	13.4	8.1	20.3
	Yes (other schools)	5.8	2.5	11.0

**If yes to 12k: What other type of advertising do you recall seeing either for the school you are attending or for any other school you considered?**

[Open-ended]

**13. How important, if at all, were each of the following factors in your decision to enroll in your current or most recent school? (Check one response for each item).**

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
13a. School fairs	No basis to judge	38.3	31.3	45.9
	Extremely important	1.7	0.3	5.4
	Very important	4.6	2.1	8.7
	Moderately important	9.7	5.4	15.9
	Somewhat important	4.8	2.0	9.5
	Not at all important	40.8	33.5	48.6
13b. Campus visits	No basis to judge	25.1	19.3	32.0
	Extremely important	12.8	8.0	19.0
	Very important	14.6	9.8	21.0
	Moderately important	9.3	5.2	15.2
	Somewhat important	8.6	4.7	14.3
	Not at all important	29.6	23.1	37.1
13c. Direct communications with school personnel	No basis to judge	6.6	3.5	11.0
	Extremely important	36.4	29.3	44.1
	Very important	31.9	25.2	39.5
	Moderately important	12.7	8.5	18.5
	Somewhat important	1.7	0.4	4.8
	Not at all important	10.7	6.4	16.5
13d. Advertisements	No basis to judge	15.7	11.0	21.8
	Extremely important	4.8	1.9	9.6
	Very important	5.0	2.3	9.3

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
	Moderately important	15.6	10.7	22.2
	Somewhat important	12.7	8.4	18.7
	Not at all important	46.2	38.6	53.9
13e. School websites	No basis to judge	10.8	6.4	16.7
	Extremely important	19.1	13.7	25.9
	Very important	28.8	22.5	35.9
	Moderately important	18.3	13.0	25.2
	Somewhat important	10.1	5.9	15.9
	Not at all important	13.0	8.3	19.0
13f. Recommendations from family, mentors, or friends	No basis to judge	9.2	5.7	14.0
	Extremely important	32.3	25.4	40.0
	Very important	15.2	10.7	21.2
	Moderately important	15.4	10.8	21.5
	Somewhat important	11.5	6.7	18.0
	Not at all important	16.4	11.4	22.9
13g. Information from VA	No basis to judge	22.6	17.1	29.2
	Extremely important	18.5	13.2	25.2
	Very important	19.4	13.9	26.4
	Moderately important	11.8	7.2	17.9
	Somewhat important	7.8	4.1	13.2

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
	Not at all important	19.9	14.4	26.9
13h. Characteristics of the school program (such as size, reputation, etc.)	No basis to judge	8.0	4.4	13.1
	Extremely important	27.7	21.4	35.0
	Very important	32.6	25.8	40.2
	Moderately important	11.1	6.7	17.0
	Somewhat important	10.3	6.0	16.2
13i. School location	Not at all important	10.3	6.0	16.1
	No basis to judge	8.2	4.7	13.0
	Extremely important	42.3	34.9	50.0
	Very important	27.9	21.3	35.6
	Moderately important	11.0	6.8	16.5
13j. Financial reasons such as overall cost or availability of financial aid	Somewhat important	2.8	1.1	5.8
	Not at all important	8.0	4.8	12.3
	No basis to judge	6.4	3.2	11.3
	Extremely important	43.8	36.4	51.5
	Very important	23.0	17.2	30.0
	Moderately important	10.8	6.3	16.8
	Somewhat important	9.8	5.7	15.5
	Not at all important	6.2	3.2	10.8

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
13k. Military friendliness (such as active veterans organizations, or veterans services and programs)	No basis to judge	4.5	2.1	8.1
	Extremely important	45.3	37.9	52.9
	Very important	24.0	17.8	31.5
	Moderately important	11.6	7.1	17.6
	Somewhat important	5.8	3.0	10.2
	Not at all important	8.8	5.0	14.1
13l. Other	No basis to judge	57.9	46.2	68.8
	Extremely important	17.7	9.4	29.2
	Very important	1.7	0.2	6.6
	Moderately important	8.1	2.8	17.2
	Somewhat important	-	-	-
	Not at all important	14.6	7.3	25.0

**If yes to 13l: What other factor was important in your decision to enroll in your current school?**

[Open-ended]

**Section D: Types of Contact with Schools**

**14. Before deciding to attend your current or most recent school, did you visit the school's website? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	87.7	82.1	91.7
No	10.3	6.4	15.6
Not sure	2.0	0.5	5.2

**15. Did you request more information after visiting the website? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	73.4	65.4	80.1
No	22.0	15.9	29.6
Not sure	4.6	1.6	9.9

**16. Before you decided to attend your current or most recent school, about how many phone calls, emails, or text messages did you receive from the school encouraging you to enroll in the program? We would like you to consider only phone calls, emails, and text messages from the school you are currently attending. (Check one response on each row.)**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Phone calls	None	44.6	37.2	52.2
	1 to 2	30.8	24.2	38.1
	3 to 5	15.3	10.7	21.2
	More than 5	6.4	3.4	10.8
	Not sure	3.0	1.0	6.8
Emails	None	33.8	26.8	41.6
	1 to 2	26.0	20.0	33.2
	3 to 5	19.0	13.9	25.3
	More than 5	16.8	11.7	23.5
	Not sure	4.3	1.8	8.6
Text messages	None	94.3	90.4	96.9

Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
	1 to 2	3.7	1.7	7.1
	3 to 5	0.2	0	2.0
	More than 5	0.3	0	2.2
	Not sure	1.4	0.3	4.0

17. Do you feel that you received too few, about the right amount, or too many phone calls, emails, and texts from the school encouraging you to enroll in the program? (Check one response for each item).

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Phone calls	I did not receive any	37.7	30.4	45.5
	Too few	2.7	0.8	6.5
	About the right amount	54.6	46.8	62.1
	Too many	1.6	0.4	4.2
	Not sure	3.4	1.2	7.5
Emails	I did not receive any	31.5	24.5	39.5
	Too few	4.8	2.0	9.7
	About the right amount	54.7	46.8	62.3
	Too many	4.2	1.8	8.1
	Not sure	4.8	2.1	9.3
Text messages	I did not receive any	83.5	77.2	88.4
	Too few	1.3	0.2	4.8
	About the right amount	13.4	9.1	19.4
	Too many	0.2	0	2.1
	Not sure	1.5	0.3	4.5



**18. Thinking of the various ways schools contacted you about enrolling in the program and provided you with information, what, if anything, did you find helpful in deciding where to attend school?**

[Open-ended]

**19. We also are interested in contact you may have had with any schools other than the school you are currently attending. Do you feel that any schools, other than the one you are currently attending, contacted you excessively? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	19.2	13.9	25.9
No	80.8	74.1	86.1

**20. On average for the schools that contacted you excessively, about how many phone calls, emails, texts or other types of contact did you receive? (Check one response for each item.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)	
Phone calls	I did not receive any	18.3	7.4	34.7
	1 to 2	11.5	2.5	30.1
	3 to 5	n/r	n/r	n/r
	6 to 10	12.7	4.2	27.5
	More than 10	20.4	9.6	35.6
Emails	I did not receive any	16.0	5.8	32.5
	1 to 2	6.8	1.3	19.4
	3 to 5	14.2	4.7	30.2
	6 to 10	n/r	n/r	n/r
	More than 10	n/r	n/r	n/r
Text messages	I did not receive any	90.6	76.7	97.7
	1 to 2	5.1	0.4	19.5

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
3 to 5	-	-	-
6 to 10	-	-	-
More than 10	4.3	0.5	15.1

Note: N/R indicates that we are not reporting results because the width of the confidence interval is greater than 30 percentage points.

**21. Did you ever feel pressure from any school to enroll? (Check one response.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	10.2	6.4	15.4
No	89.8	84.6	93.6

**22. If yes to 21: What type of pressure did you experience?**

[Open-ended]

**Section E: Information Received from Schools**

**23. Do you think the following information you obtained from your current or most recent school was generally accurate or inaccurate? (Choose one response for each item.)**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)	
23a. Acceptance of credits earned in the military	I did not look for or obtain information	29.1	22.9	36.1
	Generally accurate	51.9	44.3	59.5
	Generally inaccurate	7.6	3.8	13.3
	Not sure	11.4	6.8	17.7

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
23b. Acceptance of credits transferred from other institutions	I did not look for or obtain information	24.6	18.6	31.6
	Generally accurate	63.6	56.0	70.6
	Generally inaccurate	6.0	2.8	11.0
	Not sure	5.8	2.9	10.2
23c. Transferability of credits to other institutions	I did not look for or obtain information	28.1	21.9	35.4
	Generally accurate	58.8	51.1	66.0
	Generally inaccurate	2.8	0.8	6.8
	Not sure	10.3	6.3	15.7
23d. Total cost of program	I did not look for or obtain information	7.2	3.9	11.9
	Generally accurate	86.8	81.2	90.9
	Generally inaccurate	1.5	0.3	4.0
	Not sure	4.6	2.1	8.6
23e. Amount of total cost covered by VA educational benefits	I did not look for or obtain information	2.5	0.9	5.3
	Generally accurate	85.1	78.5	89.9
	Generally inaccurate	9.1	4.7	15.5
	Not sure	3.3	1.3	6.8
23f. Type and amount of eligible financial aid	I did not look for or obtain information	10.8	7.3	15.6
	Generally accurate	76.8	70.1	82.3
	Generally inaccurate	5.6	2.4	10.9
	Not sure	6.9	3.9	11.1

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
23g. Estimated student loan debt upon graduation	I did not look for or obtain information	36.2	29.2	43.9
	Generally accurate	43.8	36.2	51.6
	Generally inaccurate	7.7	3.5	14.2
	Not sure	12.3	8.3	17.8
23h. Veteran support services	I did not look for or obtain information	9.1	5.5	14.0
	Generally accurate	80.1	73.6	85.3
	Generally inaccurate	6.4	3.3	11.0
	Not sure	4.4	1.8	8.9
23i. Accreditation status of school and/or program	I did not look for or obtain information	7.1	3.8	11.8
	Generally accurate	86.8	80.9	91.0
	Generally inaccurate	2.4	0.8	5.8
	Not sure	3.7	1.4	7.7
23j. Graduation rates	I did not look for or obtain information	17.8	12.9	24.0
	Generally accurate	68.6	61.2	75.2
	Generally inaccurate	4.3	1.6	9.3
	Not sure	9.2	5.2	14.8
23k. Employment requirements for intended occupations (such as certification or licensure requirements)	I did not look for or obtain information	26.2	20.3	33.3
	Generally accurate	54.7	46.9	62.2
	Generally inaccurate	5.2	2.0	10.7
	Not sure	13.9	9.1	20.1

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
23l. Job placement rates after graduation	I did not look for or obtain information	35.3	28.3	42.9
	Generally accurate	38.6	31.3	46.4
	Generally inaccurate	6.7	3.1	12.2
	Not sure	19.5	14.0	26.4
23m. Future employment or job market potential associated with educational program	I did not look for or obtain information	29.6	23.1	37.0
	Generally accurate	47.7	40.0	55.4
	Generally inaccurate	2.8	1.1	5.9
	Not sure	19.9	14.3	27.1

Note: Percentages reported in this table do not exclude those who reported not obtaining information in each area, as presented in the body of the report.

**In the space below, please provide any additional details you would like on the accuracy of information obtained.**

[Open-ended]

**24. In which of the following areas, if any, would you have liked more information from your current or most recent school? (Check one response for each item.)**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
24a. Acceptance of credits earned in the military	Yes	50.0	41.9	58.0
	No	50.0	42.0	58.1
24b. Acceptance of credits transferred from other institutions	Yes	38.3	30.6	46.7
	No	61.7	53.3	69.4

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<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
24c. Transferability of credits to other institutions	Yes	42.8	34.8	51.2
	No	57.2	48.8	65.2
24d. Total cost of program	Yes	41.6	33.8	49.9
	No	58.4	50.1	66.2
24e. Amount of total cost covered by VA educational benefits	Yes	51.5	43.4	59.5
	No	48.5	40.5	56.6
24f. Type and amount of eligible financial aid	Yes	53.8	45.7	61.7
	No	46.2	38.3	54.3
24g. Estimated student loan debt upon graduation	Yes	40.4	32.6	48.7
	No	59.6	51.3	67.4
24h. Veteran support services	Yes	62.1	54.2	69.4
	No	37.9	30.6	45.8
24i. Accreditation status of school and/or program	Yes	41.9	34.1	50.2
	No	58.1	49.8	65.9
24j. Graduation rates	Yes	40.1	32.3	48.3
	No	59.9	51.7	67.7
24k. Employment requirements for intended occupations (such as certification or licensure requirements)	Yes	44.4	36.5	52.6
	No	55.6	47.4	63.5
24l. Job placement rates after graduation	Yes	49.7	41.6	57.8
	No	50.3	42.2	58.4
24m. Future employment or job market potential associated with educational program	Yes	51.1	43.1	59.1
	No	48.9	40.9	56.9
24n. Other	Yes	21.7	13.3	32.3
	No	78.3	67.7	86.7

**If yes to 24n: What other type of information would you have liked?**

[Open-ended]

**Section F: Information Received from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**

**25. Did you use VA's GI Bill website to learn more about your GI Bill benefits prior to deciding to attend your current or most recent school?**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Yes	76.9	70.1	82.5
No	20.3	15.1	26.7
Not sure	2.8	0.9	6.7

**26. If yes to 25: How helpful was this website in providing you with information about your education benefits?**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
Very helpful	34.3	26.7	42.8
Moderately helpful	38.1	29.7	47.2
Somewhat helpful	23.1	16.4	31.4
Not at all helpful	4.6	1.7	9.7

**27. What, if any, suggestions do you have for improving VA's GI Bill website?**

[Open-ended]

**28. VA provides educational and vocational counseling, available to all individuals who are eligible for VA educational benefits. Were you aware of this service while considering schools? The VA educational and vocational counseling is not part of any exit briefing that you may have received.**

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
Yes	43.0	35.7	50.7
No	49.3	41.7	56.9
Not sure	7.7	4.2	12.7

**29. Did you apply for education and vocational counseling services from VA?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
Yes	24.9	15.5	36.4
No	66.0	54.2	76.1
Not sure	9.1	3.6	18.4

**30. If no to 29: Which of the following reasons, if any, best describes why you did not apply for educational and vocational counseling services from VA? (Check all that apply.)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
I did not want or need the counseling	83.7	68.9	93.4
I did not know how to apply for the counseling	n/r	n/r	n/r
I did not have time to attend counseling	11.6	2.9	28.6
I did not live near the counseling locations	n/r	n/r	n/r
I felt that applying for the service was too difficult	n/r	n/r	n/r
Other reasons	12.8	3.4	30.5

Note: N/R indicates that we are not reporting results because the width of the confidence interval is greater than 30 percentage points.



**31. If yes to 29: If you received VA's educational and vocational counseling: How satisfied, if at all, were you with the educational and vocational counseling you received from VA?**

Response	Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
I did not receive counseling	n/r	n/r	n/r
Very satisfied	n/r	n/r	n/r
Mostly satisfied	n/r	n/r	n/r
Somewhat satisfied	n/r	n/r	n/r
Not at all satisfied	-	-	-

Note: N/R indicates that we are not reporting results because the width of the confidence interval is greater than 30 percentage points.

**32. What, if any, suggestions do you have for improving VA's educational and vocational counseling services?**

[Open-ended]

**33. VA provides resource to veterans looking to go to school. Which of the following types of information, if any, did you obtain from VA about the schools you considered? (Check one response for each item.)**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
33a. Information on total costs of education	Yes	36.4	29.3	44.0
	No	63.6	56.0	70.7
33b. Information on your VA educational benefits	Yes	75.1	67.6	81.4
	No	24.9	18.6	32.4
33c. Information on other federal financial aid programs for which you might qualify	Yes	32.0	25.3	39.5
	No	68.0	60.5	74.7

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
33d. Calculation of your expected out of pocket costs	Yes	31.9	25.2	39.6
	No	68.1	60.4	74.8
33e. Information on academic outcomes, such as graduation rates	Yes	20.3	14.7	27.3
	No	79.7	72.7	85.3
33f. Information on employment outcomes, such as job placement rates	Yes	21.8	15.8	29.1
	No	78.2	70.9	84.2
33g. Other	Yes	4.4	1.4	9.9
	No	95.6	90.1	98.6

**If yes to 33g: What other information did you obtain?**

[Open-ended]

**34. If yes to any of questions 33a through 33g: how helpful was the information from VA when choosing where to attend? (Check one response for each item.)**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
34a. Information on total costs of education	Extremely helpful	29.7	18.4	43.2
	Very helpful	33.0	20.8	47.2
	Moderately helpful	30.7	18.9	44.6
	Somewhat helpful	3.3	0.5	10.3
	Not at all helpful	1.9	0.1	8.1
	No basis to judge	1.5	0	7.9

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
34b. Information on your VA educational benefits	Extremely helpful	29.4	21.7	38.6
	Very helpful	34.6	26.4	43.8
	Moderately helpful	22.1	15.2	30.8
	Somewhat helpful	8.3	3.6	15.7
	Not at all helpful	2.7	0.7	7.0
	No basis to judge	2.9	0.8	7.2
34c. Information on other federal financial aid programs for which you might qualify	Extremely helpful	32.8	20.0	47.8
	Very helpful	23.9	13.4	37.4
	Moderately helpful	28.4	16.5	42.9
	Somewhat helpful	3.4	0.3	13.5
	Not at all helpful	3.5	0.5	11.3
	No basis to judge	8.0	2.4	18.7
34d. Calculation of your expected out of pocket costs	Extremely helpful	27.6	16.2	41.7
	Very helpful	22.7	11.6	37.6
	Moderately helpful	39.2	25.0	54.8
	Somewhat helpful	4.1	0.5	13.7
	Not at all helpful	1.7	0	9.1
	No basis to judge	4.7	0.9	13.3
34e. Information on academic outcomes, such as graduation rates	Extremely helpful	22.4	10.6	38.8
	Very helpful	n/r	n/r	n/r

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

Response		Estimated Percentage	95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)
	Moderately helpful	23.3	10.8	40.7
	Somewhat helpful	4.4	0.5	15.3
	Not at all helpful	3.4	0.2	13.8
	No basis to judge	8.0	1.6	22.2
34f. Information on employment outcomes, such as job placement rates	Extremely helpful	21.3	9.6	37.9
	Very helpful	n/r	n/r	n/r
	Moderately helpful	n/r	n/r	n/r
	Somewhat helpful	12.4	3.6	28.4
	Not at all helpful	3.5	0.2	14.7
	No basis to judge	2.5	0.1	13.2
34g. Other	Extremely helpful	3.5	0.4	12.0
	Very helpful	2.1	0.1	9.3
	Moderately helpful	9.8	3.2	21.5
	Somewhat helpful	3.3	0.1	16.5
	Not at all helpful	9.0	2.9	20.3
	No basis to judge	72.2	57.7	84.0

Note: N/R indicates that we are not reporting results because the width of the confidence interval is greater than 30 percentage points.

**If yes to 34g: What other information was helpful?**

[Open-ended]

**35. In which of the following areas, if any, would you have liked more information from VA about the schools that you considered to help you make a choice about where to attend? (Check one response for each item.)**

**Appendix II: Survey of Veterans' Educational Decisions**

<b>Response</b>		<b>Estimated Percentage</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – lower bound (percentage)</b>	<b>95 percent confidence interval – upper bound (percentage)</b>
35a. Information on total costs of education	Yes	54.9	46.6	63.0
	No	45.1	37.0	53.4
35b. Information on your VA educational benefits	Yes	64.1	55.9	71.6
	No	35.9	28.4	44.1
35c. Information on other federal financial aid programs for which you might qualify	Yes	70.0	60.5	78.1
	No	30.0	21.9	39.5
35d. Calculation of your expected out of pocket costs	Yes	60.1	51.8	67.8
	No	39.9	32.2	48.2
35e. Information on your estimated student loan debt upon graduation	Yes	48.8	40.5	57.1
	No	51.2	42.9	59.5
35f. Information on policies regarding the acceptance of credits transferred from other schools	Yes	53.7	45.4	61.8
	No	46.3	38.2	54.6
35g. Information on a school's accrediting agency, including contact information to file complaints	Yes	53.5	45.2	61.6
	No	46.5	38.4	54.8
35h. Information on academic outcomes, such as graduation rates	Yes	51.2	42.9	59.5
	No	48.8	40.5	57.1
35i. Information on employment outcomes, such as job placement rates	Yes	53.3	44.9	61.4
	No	46.7	38.6	55.1
35j. Other	Yes	13.8	7.1	23.5
	No	86.2	76.5	92.9

**If yes to 35j: What other information would have been helpful?**

[Open-ended]

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**36. If you have any additional comments for us, please include them  
in the space below.**

[Open-ended]

# Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON DC 20420

April 23, 2014

Ms. Melissa Emrey-Arras  
Director, Strategic Issues  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Emrey-Arras:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report, "**VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans Make Informed Education Choices**" (GAO-14-324). VA generally agrees with GAO's conclusions and concurs with GAO's recommendations to the Department.

The enclosure specifically addresses GAO's recommendations and provides technical comments to the draft report. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jose D. Riojas".

Jose D. Riojas  
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to  
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report  
***“VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans  
Make Informed Education Choices”***  
(GAO-14-324)

**GAO Recommendation:** To ensure that veterans’ education benefits are used effectively, we recommend that the Secretary of VA take the following actions:

**Recommendation 1:** Take additional steps to improve the outreach, accessibility, and usefulness of its educational counseling services, particularly for prospective student veterans, for example by

- featuring these services in resources intended for prospective students veterans;
- prioritizing efforts to enable veterans to apply for educational counseling online; and
- considering cost-effective ways to gather more information on applicants, users, and key program areas (such as the timeliness of service) to better identify service needs or gaps and to improve the effectiveness of future outreach.

**VA Comment:** Concur. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) acknowledges the need to improve outreach, accessibility, and usefulness of educational counseling services, particularly for prospective student Veterans. VBA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service has developed standards to measure timeliness of services for educational and vocational counseling that will better identify service needs and/or gaps to improve the effectiveness of future outreach measures. VR&E Service is also moving forward with a three-phased approach to enhance outreach and service delivery of educational and vocational counseling services under Title 38, Chapter 36.

In Phase I, VR&E Service will review and revise current policies, procedures, and service delivery methods, where appropriate. VR&E Service has established a workgroup comprised of VR&E Central Office and VR&E field staff to assist with this review. Phase I will also include limited marketing activities and finalization of a strategic communications plan. In Phase II, VR&E Service will disseminate new policies and procedures governing the delivery of educational counseling services and will execute the strategic communications plan. Phase III will focus on gathering and analyzing program usage data, assessing impact and effectiveness, and adjusting execution as necessary. Target Completion Date: December 31, 2014.

VR&E Service has also developed business requirements and is working with our business partners to validate requirements and begin the planning phase of including the education counseling application as part of the Veterans Online Application system. Target Completion Date: March 31, 2015.



Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to  
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report  
***“VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans  
Make Informed Education Choices”***  
(GAO-14-324)

**Recommendation 2: More consistently develop, document, and communicate realistic timelines and goals for implementing VA initiatives based on federal requirements by identifying specific activities needed to achieve goals and associated implementation timelines, as well as resource issues or potential internal or external risks that may affect timing.**

**VA Comment:** Concur. Based on the information provided in the report, VBA believes that the initiatives based on Federal requirements referenced in the recommendation are those set forth in Executive Order (EO) 13607 and Public Law (P.L.) 112-249.

VBA acknowledges that it was slow to implement the use of formal project management concepts when work towards meeting the requirements under EO 13607 began. However, upon passage of P.L. 112-249, VA began using more formalized project management methods to develop, document, and communicate the progress of the specific activities needed to achieve goals.

In January 2013, VA established Integrated Project Teams (IPT) and sub-working groups consisting of several VBA Education Service personnel, representatives from other VBA organizations such as the VR&E Service, and representatives from the following agencies and organizations: National Association of State Approving Agencies, Department of Education (ED), Department of Defense (DoD), Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Department of Justice, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The IPTs and sub-working groups identified activities necessary to achieve goals and developed a master schedule. In April 2013, VA delivered the 90-Day Report to Congress, as required by PL 112-249. The report included anticipated timeframes for future deliverables. VA notes that the requirement for a 90-Day Report to Congress resulted in a very short timeframe to map out the way ahead and establish timelines for deliverables.

VA has maintained its commitment to deliver what was required by EO 13607 and P.L. 112-249. VA successfully completed several activities needed to achieve the requirements of the EO and P.L. since implementing more formalized project management concepts. Specifically, VA updated the School Certifying Official Handbook, launched the pilot of the academic readiness tool CareerScope®, published student outcome measure definitions on ED's College Navigator, obtained approval for the System of Record Notice and Paperwork Reduction Act, launched the centralized ED/DoD/VA Complaint System and began processing incoming complaints, launched a beta version of the GI Bill Comparison Tool, identified institutions for targeted risk-based reviews, registered the GI Bill® Trademark and began enforcement of its use, and started uploading complaints to the FTC's Consumer Sentinel.

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Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to  
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report  
***“VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans  
Make Informed Education Choices”***  
(GAO-14-324)

It is important for VA and its stakeholders to have an accurate understanding of the progress being made to accomplish mission objectives. As we continue to plan for future functionality for the Principles of Excellence (POE) and P.L. initiatives, formal project management methods are being employed to develop, document, and communicate realistic timelines and goals. Any communications to be provided in support of those initiatives will be updated timely to reflect any changes to timing should they occur.

VA requests that this recommendation be closed.

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# Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Education

**Federal Student Aid**  
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April 16, 2014

Ms. Melissa Emrey-Arras  
Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues  
United States Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Emrey-Arras:

Thank you for providing us with an opportunity to review and respond to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report "*VA Education Benefits: VA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Help Veterans Make Informed Education Choices.*" The Department of Education (ED) has been collaborating with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), as well as the Department of Defense, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), in supporting the implementation of Executive Order 13607, "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members." To that end, we have implemented several improvements to assist veterans and their families in making informed education choices. The following are a few examples:

- We developed, with assistance from the CFPB, and implemented a "Financial Aid Shopping Sheet" in 2011, which helps institutions meet a key disclosure requirement of Executive Order 13607.
- We joined a new interagency Memorandum of Understanding for the collaborative work to comprehensively redesign the military's Transition Assistance Program, and have helped provide information to our agency partners concerning federal student aid.
- We enhanced the current student compliance complaint system by establishing a complaint mailbox targeted to veterans and service members. In addition, we transmitted veteran and service member complaints monthly to the FTC.

Also, ED's College Navigator website, the College Affordability Transparency Center, the College Scorecard, the Financial Aid Toolkit, the Repayment Estimator, and a variety of other tools all provide a wealth of information on schools and financial aid. Data on individual schools includes such facts as tuition and fees, enrollment, and graduation rates, as well as search tools to assist all students, including veterans, in choosing the right school and the right financing to meet their individual needs. We also worked closely with the CFPB in the development of the Paying for College online toolkit, which includes a military benefits calculator to assist beneficiaries of the GI Bill.

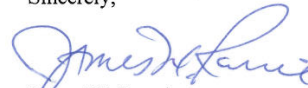
830 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20202  
StudentAid.gov

Page 2 - Ms. Melissa Emery-Arras

We remain committed to supporting veterans and their families in making informed postsecondary education choices.

We are also providing technical comments.

Sincerely,



James W. Runcie  
Chief Operating Officer  
Federal Student Aid

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# Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Melissa Emrey-Arras, (617) 788-0534 or [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov).

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Michelle St. Pierre (Assistant Director), Carl Barden, Deborah Bland, Kathleen van Gelder, Mark M. Glickman, Nathan Gottfried, Kirsten Lauber, Theresa Lo, Ashley McCall, Sheila McCoy, Amanda Miller, John Mingus, Andrew Nelson, Mimi Nguyen, Anna Maria Ortiz, Carl Ramirez, Mark Ward, James Whitcomb, and Craig Winslow made key contributions to this report.

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# Related GAO Products

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*Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program.* [GAO-14-144](#). Washington, D.C.: March 5, 2014.

*VA Education Benefits: Student Characteristics and Outcomes Vary across Schools.* [GAO-13-567](#). Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2013.

*VA Education Benefits: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students.* [GAO-13-338](#). Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2013.

*Veterans' Education Benefits: Enhanced Guidance and Collaboration Could Improve Administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill Program.* [GAO-11-356R](#). Washington, D.C.: May 5, 2011.

*VA Education Benefits: Actions Taken, but Outreach and Oversight Could Be Improved.* [GAO-11-256](#). Washington, D.C.: February 28, 2011.

*Transfer Students: Postsecondary Institutions Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation.* [GAO-06-22](#). Washington, D.C.: October 18, 2005.

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