United States Government Accountability Office

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VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

Promising VA Technology Education Pilot Would Benefit from Better Outcome Measures and Plans for Improvement

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Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government helps veterans pursue skills needed in the civilian workforce. Specifically, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 instructed VA to develop a 5-year pilot program to help veterans obtain high-technology jobs. VA created VET TEC to support veterans who enroll in high-technology education programs through VA-approved training providers.

The act includes a provision for GAO to assess VET TEC. This report examines the (1) demographic characteristics of participants, (2) employment outcomes of participants, (3) benefits and implementation challenges reported by training providers, and (4) steps VA has taken to improve the VET TEC program.

GAO analyzed data on VET TEC participants and reviewed relevant VA documents, federal laws, and regulations. GAO interviewed VA officials and a nongeneralizable sample of approved training providers selected for variation in the number of veterans served and locations. GAO also compared VA's efforts to leading practices for effective pilot design.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that VA develop an employment rate calculation consistent with standard approaches; determine data needed to fully inform employment outcomes; and develop clear, measurable objectives for VET TEC. VA neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation to develop a standardized employment rate calculation and generally agreed with the other recommendations.

View GAO-23-105343. For more information, contact Dawn Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Over 6,700 veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program from May 2019 through May 2, 2022. They were generally more racially and ethnically diverse and more likely to have a service-connected condition, compared to working-age veterans in the U.S. population. Most veterans (66 percent) who enrolled in the program completed their training (see figure).

Did not complete	Currently enrolled	Completed
13% (888)	**21%** (1,403)	**66%** (4,502)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105343

VA calculates an employment measure for certain VET TEC participants for whom VA has made a final milestone payment decision. However, VA does not calculate an employment rate for all VET TEC participants who completed the program, in accordance with other government and industry approaches. As a result, VA lacks sufficient information to compare VET TEC to other programs or to assess the effectiveness of the program at getting veterans into jobs. In addition, VA does not use all available data or collect additional data on employment outcomes. For example, VA does not use information it collects on the type of employment program participants obtain (e.g., full-time, part-time, self-employed, etc.). In addition, VA does not systematically collect data on whether veterans retain employment. Without fully using available data or collecting additional relevant data, VA does not have a full picture of VET TEC employment outcomes.

Training providers told GAO that key benefits of VET TEC include an accelerated path to employment and virtual training. Three of five training providers said VET TEC allows veterans to enter the workforce quickly. Veterans completed training in 3 months, on average, according to GAO analysis of VA data. Training providers also cited challenges with some aspects of VET TEC. For example, three training providers said they faced delays in getting their applications approved, and four training providers said some application instructions were unclear. VA has taken some steps to address these challenges, such as revising certain aspects of its training provider approval processes.

VA has identified several actions for enhancing VET TEC. Specifically, VA has identified specific areas of improvement for VET TEC, with over 80 related tasks. For example, VA is planning to develop a scorecard to assess training provider quality and update its employment certification form. However, as of May 2022, VA had not developed consistent, clear, and measurable program objectives—a leading practice of effective pilot program design. Over the course of GAO's review, VA officials provided various versions of program objectives for VET TEC that were not consistent. These objectives were also not measurable because they did not include an indicator of how VA will measure progress. As a result, assessing and evaluating VET TEC by the end of the pilot will likely be difficult for VA.

United States Government Accountability Office

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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October 27, 2022

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Chairman
The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Bost
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

The federal government offers many educational and skill-building programs to veterans to support their transition from military to civilian employment. For example, the Post-9/11 GI Bill— the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) largest educational program—generally provides payments for eligible veterans to cover tuition, fees, and housing while they are pursuing a qualifying program of education.[1] In 2017, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act (commonly referred to as the "Forever GI Bill") instructed VA to develop a pilot program to provide tuition and other financial support to eligible veterans who enroll in high-technology education programs through eligible training providers.[2]

In response, VA implemented the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program to help veterans quickly acquire high-technology skills in the fields of computer programming, computer software, media applications, data processing, or information sciences. Unlike Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits that may be used by veterans for college, graduate school, and training programs, VET

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[1]The "Post-9/11 GI Bill" educational assistance benefits were created by the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. Pub. L. No. 110-252, tit. V, 122 Stat. 2323, 2358-86 (codified, primarily, at 38 U.S.C. Chapter 33).

[2]Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-48, tit. I, § 116, 131 Stat. 973, 986-89.

TEC is exclusively a vocational training program. Veterans are expected to find meaningful employment after completing training.[3]

The VET TEC pilot was authorized for 5 years from when VA entered into its first participation agreement with a training provider.[4] According to VA officials, this occurred in April 2019. The law initially authorized that $15 million per fiscal year shall be available for the pilot program, and VA began paying benefits in October 2019. According to VA, the agency has exhausted VET TEC annual funding three times since the program began.[5] When VET TEC has run out of funding, new veterans have been unable to enroll in the program, though they could continue to find out if they were eligible for the program.

In January 2021, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 was enacted, which, among other things, increased VET TEC's annual authorization to make $45 million available per fiscal year. In March 2022, as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, an additional $80 million for VET TEC was authorized, making a total of $125 million available for fiscal year 2022. As of March 31, 2022, VA reported expending $78.3 million on the program since it began operations.

The Forever GI Bill includes a provision for us to assess VET TEC. In February 2022, we submitted a statement for the record to Congress on our preliminary observations of VET TEC, which found that VA had not implemented most leading practices for effective pilot program design.[6] This work builds on that statement and examines (1) the demographic characteristics of veterans who have enrolled in VET TEC, (2) employment outcomes of VET TEC participants, (3) benefits and challenges training providers have reported in implementing VET TEC,

[3]VA defines "meaningful employment" as traditional employment in a career supported by the completed program of study; promotion in the veteran's current career if the veteran is currently employed in a career supported by the completed program of study; or self-employment if the veteran owns or operates a business and is utilizing the skills obtained through the completion of the program of study.

[4]See Pub. L. No. 115-48, tit. I, § 116(h), 131 Stat. 973, 989 (2017).

[5]According to VA officials, the VET TEC program ran out of funding in fiscal year 2020 and twice in fiscal year 2021—once in October 2020 when it exhausted the initial $15 million authorization for the program and again in August 2021, when VA exhausted the additional $30 million funding increase that was authorized for VET TEC.

[6]GAO, *Veterans Employment: Preliminary Observations on VA's Technology Education Pilot Program*, GAO-22-105720 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2, 2022).

and (4) steps VA has taken to improve its design and implementation of VET TEC.

To determine what is known about the demographic characteristics and employment outcomes of veterans who have enrolled in VET TEC, we obtained and analyzed VA data on veterans who enrolled in or completed one training program from May 2019 through May 2, 2022, the most recent data available.[7] We also obtained summary level data from VA on the number of veterans who were eligible to participate in VET TEC. We assessed VA's efforts to collect and report data against leading practices for effective pilot program design that we identified in prior work and federal standards for internal control related to communicating externally.[8]

To describe the benefits and challenges training providers have reported in implementing VET TEC, we interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of five of 39 training providers that were approved to participate in VET TEC in fiscal year 2021. We selected these five providers based on variation in the number of veterans served, number of training locations, preferred provider status, and re-approval status for fiscal year 2022.[9] We also reviewed VA data on training provider applications submitted from February 2019 through May 6, 2022, such as length of time between application and decision.

To determine what steps VA has taken to improve its design and implementation of VET TEC, we reviewed VA documents that described objectives and plans for the program, interviewed VA officials from the Veterans Benefits Administration responsible for overseeing the VET TEC program, and reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations. We assessed VA's efforts against generally recognized project management practices, leading practices for effective pilot program design that we

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[7]We excluded a small number of VET TEC participants who enrolled in more than one course.

[8]See GAO, *Data Act: Section 5 Pilot Design Issues Need to Be Addressed to Meet Goal of Reducing Recipient Reporting Burden,* GAO-16-438 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2016) and GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government,* GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

[9]A preferred training provider is one that agrees to refund tuition and fees if a student does not find meaningful employment within 180 days of completing the program. In exchange, a preferred provider receives special designation on the VET TEC website and exemption from certain program rules. For example, a preferred provider may charge more in tuition and fees than a non-preferred provider.

identified in prior work, and federal standards for internal control related to designing objectives.[10]

We determined that VA's data on VET TEC participants and training providers were sufficiently reliable to identify what is known about the demographic characteristics and employment outcomes of veterans who have enrolled in VET TEC. To assess the reliability of VA's data, we interviewed VA officials knowledgeable about the data, and we conducted electronic testing of the data to, for example, identify missing data, outliers, or obvious errors.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2021 to October 2022 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.

Background

Participating in VET TEC

Any veteran who meets program eligibility requirements may be approved to participate in VET TEC. To be eligible for VET TEC, a veteran must not be on active duty or must be within 180 days of separating from active duty; qualify for VA education assistance under the GI Bill; and have at least 1 day of unexpired GI Bill entitlement.[11] A veteran applies to participate in VET TEC by submitting an online application to VA. If approved, VA issues a certificate of eligibility, at which point a veteran can apply to a specific program offered by a participating training provider. Training providers use their own admissions criteria in determining whether to accept a veteran into their programs. Once veterans complete training, they are required to submit an employment certification form to VA that provides information on the nature of their employment.[12]

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[10]See Project Management Institute, Inc. *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (*PMBOK® Guide*), Sixth Edition, 2017. *PMBOK* is a trademark of Project Management Institute, Inc. See also GAO-16-438 and GAO-14-704G.

[11]An eligible veteran is one who is entitled to educational assistance under 38 U.S.C. Chapters 30, 32, 33, 34, or 35 or 10 U.S.C. Chapters 1606 or 1607.

[12]The form requires signatures from the veteran and the training provider. The veteran may submit the form to VA directly, or the training provider may submit the form on the veteran's behalf, which is more often the case, according to VA officials.

Training providers also apply to VA to participate in VET TEC, and they must meet certain eligibility requirements. For example, training providers cannot be institutions of higher learning, and the training programs they offer cannot lead to a degree. In addition, instructors affiliated with training providers must be approved by VA. As of May 6, 2022, VA had approved 32 training providers for fiscal year 2022.

VA generally covers tuition and fees associated with VET TEC by reimbursing training providers using a milestone-based payment system.[13] Training providers receive an initial payment of 25 percent of tuition and fees when the veteran enrolls in VET TEC and attends at least 1 day of class. VA reimburses training providers another 25 percent when a veteran completes their VET TEC training program. VA provides the remaining 50 percent in tuition and fees once VA receives the veteran's employment certification form attesting that they found meaningful employment within 180 days of completing the VET TEC training program.

Participating training providers may choose to be "preferred providers" for VET TEC. A preferred provider agrees to refund all payments of tuition and fees for any veteran who does not obtain meaningful employment within 180 days of program completion. Specifically, in such instances, preferred providers must return the first 50 percent of tuition and fees received and must forgo the final 50 percent payment. In return, preferred providers receive special designation on the VET TEC website and are exempt from certain program rules. Specifically, preferred providers may charge more than non-preferred providers because they are not subject to a cap on the amount of tuition and fees that VA will reimburse on behalf of their students.[14] In addition, preferred providers may be able to enroll more students because they do not have limits on the percentage of students who can receive financial assistance.[15] Nine of the 32 training providers approved for fiscal year 2022 were preferred providers. Figure 1

[13]VA also covers housing costs associated with VET TEC, which are paid directly to the veteran.

[14]The Post-9/11 GI Bill established a cap on the amount of tuition and fees that entities offering educational programs can be reimbursed by VA for each enrolled veteran. For example, for non-college degree granting institutions the maximum reimbursement for the academic year from August 1, 2021 to July 31, 2022 is $26,042.81 for in-state tuition and fees. For the academic year from August 1, 2022 to July 31, 2023, the maximum reimbursement amount is $26,381.37.

[15]VA does not apply the 85-15 rule to preferred providers. This rule stipulates that no more than 85 percent of students in a course can have all or part of their tuition, fees, or other charges paid for them by the educational institution or by VA under Titles 10 or 38 of the U.S. Code.

shows the typical process for veterans and training providers to participate in VET TEC.

Figure 1: Veteran and Training Provider Participation in the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program
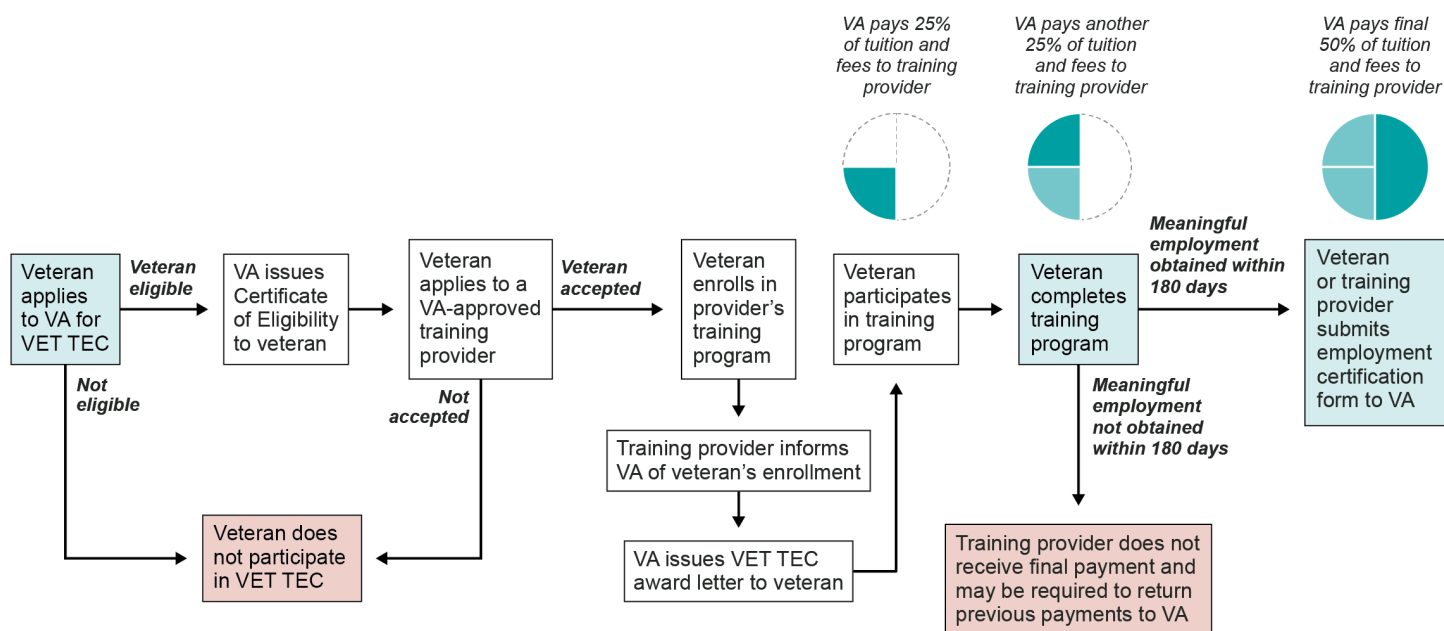
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs documents. | GAO-23-105343

Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design

According to leading practices for effective pilot design, a well-developed and documented pilot program can help ensure that agency assessments produce the necessary information to make effective program and policy decisions. In 2016, we identified five leading practices for designing a well-developed and documented pilot program that covered the following areas: objectives, assessment, evaluation, scalability, and stakeholder communication.[16] These practices enhance the quality, credibility, and usefulness of pilot program evaluations and help ensure that time and resources are used effectively. While each of the five practices serves a purpose on its own, taken together, they form a framework for effective pilot design (see fig. 2.)

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[16]GAO-16-438.

Figure 2: Leading Practices for Effective Pilot Design

Objectives		Establish well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives.
Assessment		Articulate assessment methodology detailing type and source of information necessary to evaluate pilot; and methods for collecting that information, including timing and frequency.
Evaluation		Develop a plan that defines how the information collected will be analyzed, to evaluate the pilot's implementation and performance.
Scalability		Assess scalability of pilot design to inform a decision on whether and how to implement a new approach in a broader context.
Stakeholder communication		Identify and involve relevant stakeholders and establish appropriate two-way communication and input at all stages of the pilot.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105343

VET TEC Enrollees Are Generally Diverse and Are Likely to Complete Training, but VA Collects Limited Data on Why Some Drop Out

VET TEC Enrollees Are Generally More Diverse than Working-Age Veterans in the U.S. Population

From May 2019 through May 2, 2022, 6,793 of the 43,968 veterans who VA deemed eligible for VET TEC (15 percent) enrolled in the program, according to our analysis of VA data. These enrollees were generally more racially and ethnically diverse and more likely to have a service-connected condition than working-age veterans (see table 1).[17] For example, 33 percent of VET TEC enrollees were Black and 16 percent

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[17]VA determines whether a veteran has a service-connected condition—a disabling injury or illness incurred or aggravated during active duty military service. Federal law refers to these as service-connected disabilities. For the purposes of this report, we refer to these as service-connected conditions.

were Hispanic whereas 15 percent and 11 percent of working-age veterans were Black and Hispanic, respectively.[18]

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Enrollees in the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program Compared to Working-age Veterans

Demographic characteristic	Number of VET TEC enrollees[a]	Percent of VET TEC enrollees	Number of working-age veterans (in thousands)[b]	Percent of working-age veterans
Race/ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	2,520	37%	5,075	67%
Black, non-Hispanic	2,208	33%	1,160	15%
Other, non-Hispanic[c]	975	14%	489	6%
Hispanic	1,090	16%	844	11%
Service-connected condition[d]	5,731	84%	2,730	36%
Sex				
Male	5,797	85%	6,379	84%
Female	996	15%	1,189	16%
Total	**6,793**		**7,568**	

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and U.S. Census Bureau data. | GAO-23-105343

[a]We analyzed VA data on veterans who participated in VET TEC from May 2019 through May 2, 2022, the most recent data available at the time of our analysis.

[b]Economists generally refer to the age range of 25 to 54 as prime working age. To identify working-age veterans in the U.S. population, we analyzed 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data on those who served in the time period from August 1990 to December 2018. See Jonathan E. Vespa, Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror, ACS-43, American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau (Washington, D.C.: June 2020). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, approximately 84 percent of veterans in the labor force who served from August 1990 to December 2018 are between 25 and 54.

[c]The category "Other, non Hispanic" includes those VET TEC participants who identified as Asian, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or unknown race. The U.S. Census Bureau report we reviewed did not specify which groups are included in this category.

[d]This includes only veterans who reported a service-connected condition.

[18]Economists generally refer to the age range of 25 to 54 as prime working age. To identify working-age veterans in the U.S. population, we analyzed 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data on those who served in the time period from August 1990 to December 2018. See Jonathan E. Vespa, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror*, ACS-43, American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau (Washington, D.C.: June 2020). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, approximately 84 percent of veterans in the labor force who served from August 1990 to December 2018 are between 25 and 54.
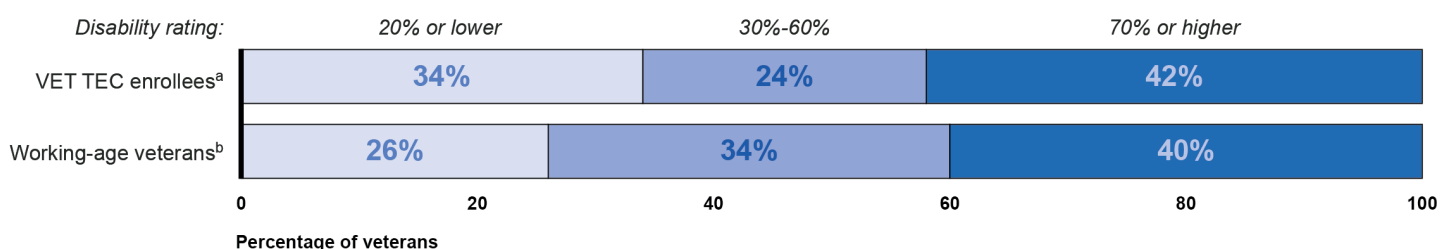
Our analysis of VA data also showed that 84 percent of VET TEC enrollees reported a service-connected condition compared to 36 percent of working-age veterans. However, the distribution of enrollees by VA disability rating—a general indication of the severity of a veteran's condition—was similar for both groups (see fig. 3).[19]

Figure 3: Percent of Enrollees in the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program Compared to Working-age Veterans, by Disability Rating

Disability rating:	20% or lower	30%-60%	70% or higher
VET TEC enrollees[a]	34%	24%	42%
Working-age veterans[b]	26%	34%	40%

Percentage of veterans

Note: Data reported in this figure include those veterans who reported having a service-connected disability and reported a disability rating.

[a]We analyzed VA data on veterans who participated in VET TEC from May 2019 through May 2, 2022, the most recent data available at the time of our analysis.

[b]Economists generally refer to the age range of 25 to 54 as prime working age. To identify working-age veterans in the U.S. population, we analyzed 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data on those who served in the time period from August 1990 to December 2018. See Jonathan E. Vespa, Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror, ACS-43, American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau (Washington, D.C.: June 2020). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, approximately 84 percent of veterans in the labor force who served from August 1990 to December 2018 are between 25 and 54.

Our analysis of VA data also showed that 15 percent of VET TEC enrollees were female, which is consistent with the female working-age veteran population. However, we have previously reported that women are largely underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and

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[19]VA determines the severity of the service-connected condition based on criteria in the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD or rating schedule) and assigns a disability rating. The rating is expressed as a percentage from zero to 100, representing how much a person's disability decreases their overall health and ability to function. Therefore, a zero percent rating indicates that a person's disability does not decrease their overall health and ability to function. Whereas a higher disability rating indicates that a person's ability to function is much more limited.

mathematics (STEM) fields.[20] We have also reported that female, Black, and Hispanic workers remain a smaller proportion of the technology workforce—mathematics, computing, and engineering occupations—compared to their representation in the general population.[21]

To raise awareness about VET TEC, VA officials said they have conducted information sessions and have partnered with organizations to disseminate information to increase participation in VET TEC by individuals from all demographic groups, including some organizations that specifically target women in technology fields. In addition, VA has shared information about VET TEC via social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) and has posted videos about the program to YouTube to increase general awareness of the program.

We also found that the vast majority of VET TEC enrollees (84 percent) were non-commissioned officers prior to separating from the military (see fig. 4). Non-commissioned officers are enlisted personnel who have command duties and also assist officers. Depending on the branch of the military, non-commissioned officers can include corporals, petty officers, or sergeants. In addition, most VET TEC enrollees (54 percent) were between the ages of 25 and 34.

Figure 4: Percentage of Enrollees in the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program by Military Rank at Time of Separation, May 2019 – May 2, 2022
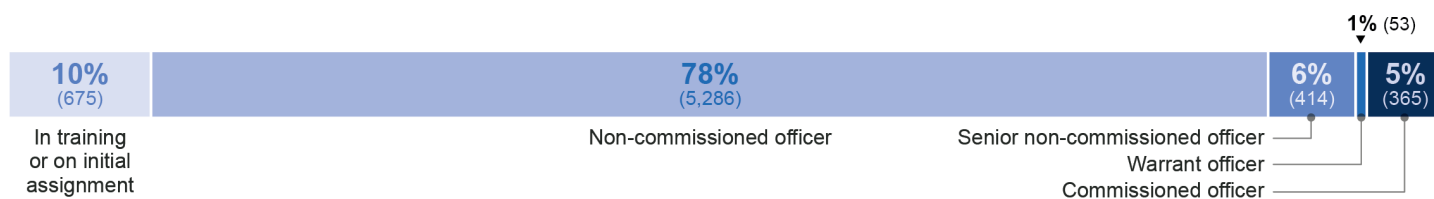
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105343

Note: We used information from the Department of Defense to group military ranks across branches of the armed services. In doing so, we grouped servicemembers whose ranks corresponded with pay grades E-1 to E-3 to create the "in training or on initial assignment" category, E-4 to E-6 to create the "non-commissioned officer" category, and E-7 to E-9 to create the "senior non-commissioned officer" category.

[20]GAO, *Women in STEM Research: Better Data and Information Sharing Could Improve Oversight of Federal Grant-making and Title IX Compliance*, GAO-16-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 3, 2015). While not a direct comparison, the fields of study covered by VET TEC generally fall under the STEM umbrella.

[21]GAO, *Diversity in the Technology Sector: Federal Agencies Could Improve Oversight of Equal Employment Opportunity Requirements*, GAO-18-69 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2017).

GAO-23-105343 Veterans Employment

Most VET TEC Enrollees Completed Training, but VA Does Not Systematically Collect Data to Understand Why Some Enrollees Drop Out

Of the 6,793 VET TEC enrollees, 4,502 veterans (66 percent) completed their training program (see fig. 5), but VA officials told us they do not systematically collect and analyze data to understand why some enrollees drop out of training.[22]

Figure 5: Completion Status for Veterans Enrolled in the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program, May 2019 – May 2, 2022

Did not complete	Currently enrolled	Completed
13% (888)	**21%** (1,403)	**66%** (4,502)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105343

VA officials said a training provider can provide information on the reason an enrolled veteran drops out of VET TEC when submitting a withdrawal or termination in VA's online enrollment system. VA officials said training providers can complete a field in the system that includes various reasons for terminating a veteran's enrollment prior to course completion.[23] However, VA does not require training providers to complete this field. VA officials also said they have heard anecdotally that some enrollees may drop out of VET TEC because they may not be interested in the area of study after starting the program, or they may be called to active duty.

We previously reported that the purpose of a pilot is generally to inform a decision on whether and how to implement a new approach in a broader context. This includes the critical consideration of how well the lessons learned from the pilot can be applied in other, broader settings.[24] VA officials said they have not taken steps to systematically collect and analyze data on enrollees' reasons for dropping out because they consider the completion rate to be high. However, there may be other reasons a veteran might drop out of the program that VA is not capturing. For example, a veteran may drop out due to concerns about program quality. Requiring training providers to submit information on reasons why veterans dropped out of VET TEC may help VA address potential

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[22]We found that the percentages of VET TEC participants who completed training was generally similar to the percentage of those who enrolled in VET TEC, by demographic group.

[23]Specifically, the reasons a training provider can select are: 1) conduct; 2) performance; 3) unsatisfactory attendance; 4) personal reasons; 5) medical reasons; and 6) secure employment.

[24]GAO-16-438.

vulnerabilities in the program during the pilot phase. Specifically, VA would be better informed to help VET TEC participants complete their programs and ultimately find meaningful employment.

VA Does Not Calculate an Employment Rate for VET TEC and Uses Limited Data to Inform Employment Outcomes

VA Calculates Certain Employment Measures for VET TEC but Does Not Calculate an Employment Rate

VET TEC participants who have completed training fall into one of four categories, depending on their meaningful employment status and how much time has elapsed since they completed training:[25]

(1) employed and less than 180 days since training completed;

(2) employed and 180 days or more since training completed;

(3) not employed and less than 180 days since training completed; and

(4) not employed and 180 days or more since training completed.

VA officials said they use a time period of 180 days after training completion to separate veterans into these four categories because that benchmark aligns with the timing of the final milestone payment for reimbursing training providers.[26] VA then calculates what it refers to as its meaningful employment rate by dividing all employed VET TEC participants (those in categories 1 and 2) by VET TEC participants who could possibly obtain employment according to VA's 180 day benchmark (those in categories 1, 2, and 4). VA excludes VET TEC participants in

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[25]We analyzed employment status and the employment rate for those VET TEC participants who completed a VET TEC training program. VA requires VET TEC participants to submit an employment certification form indicating whether they obtained or did not obtain meaningful employment, according to VA's definition. When we refer to employment or an employment rate, we are referring to meaningful employment. We found that VET TEC participants who reported finding meaningful employment did so in 67 days, on average, after completing training.

[26]As discussed previously, if a VET TEC participant does not find meaningful employment within 180 days of completing training, a preferred training provider must return all payments received to VA, and non-preferred training providers do not receive the final payment from VA.

the "not employed and less than 180 days since training completed" group from the calculation (those in category 3). VA officials said they exclude these VET TEC participants because they consider these participants to be job seeking, and they do not think these participants should be counted as unemployed.

VA officials said their approach is aligned with the milestone payment process for training providers. This process includes only those VET TEC participants with a final milestone payment decision (i.e., those who found meaningful employment within 180 days and for whom VA has made the final milestone payment or those who did not find meaningful employment within 180 days and for whom VA will not make the final milestone payment).

While VA's method provides information about VET TEC employment at a certain payment milestone, it does not provide an employment rate, as defined by other entities. For example, VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program calculates the employment rate as the total number of employed participants divided by the total number of cohort members who completed the program—those who achieved rehabilitation or were discontinued from services—according to a 2021 VR&E longitudinal study report.[27] Though the calculation is based on a representative sample of cohort participants, the calculation does not exclude participants who completed the program.

As another example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)—which, among other things, measures labor market activity in the U.S. economy—calculates the employment-population ratio. This calculation represents the percentage of the population that is currently working by measuring the number of employed persons as a percentage of the total population.[28] This calculation, which is akin to an employment rate, also does not exclude a portion of the population from its calculation.

Further, the Council on Integrity in Results Reporting (CIRR)—a nonprofit organization that measures and reports student outcomes for schools that provide intensive high-technology training programs—determines the

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[27]The VR&E program assists veterans and servicemembers with service-connected conditions and an employment barrier to prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment. See Economic Systems Inc., U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Readiness and Employment Longitudinal Study (P.L. 110-389 § 334) Annual Report 2021 for FY 2020 (Falls Church, VA).

[28]The population universe for BLS's calculation is the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years old and over.

employment rate as the number of students who found gainful employment (i.e., meaningful employment) divided by the number of graduated students. While CIRR excludes from its calculation those students who reported, prior to taking a course, no intention to start a job in the field of study within 180 days of program completion or those unauthorized to work in the country of study, the calculation does not exclude students who completed the program and planned to find work.[29] VA officials have said they have reviewed data from CIRR to help them benchmark employment outcomes, so we consider CIRR's employment measure to be applicable to VET TEC.

In addition, by referring to its calculation as an employment rate, VA may be unintentionally sharing inaccurate information about the success of VET TEC at employing veterans who complete the program. Specifically, using VA data on veterans who participated in VET TEC from May 2019 through May 2, 2022, VA calculates what it refers to as an employment rate by dividing all 2,063 employed VET TEC participants (359 + 1,704 veterans) by the 3,133 VET TEC participants who VA believes could possibly obtain employment (359 + 1,704 + 1,070 veterans). The result is in an employment rate of about 66 percent (see fig. 6). We found that calculating the employment rate based on the standard method used by VR&E, BLS, and CIRR yields a 46 percent employment rate.

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[29]By definition, VET TEC is a job-training program, and veterans who complete VET TEC are expected to find employment. While there may be some veterans who ultimately decide not to pursue employment, we assume that most entered the program to find a job. Therefore, VET TEC is comparable to CIRR.

Figure 6: Calculations of the Veterans Employment Through Technology Training Education Courses (VET TEC) Employment Rate Using the Department of Veterans Affairs Current Approach and a Standard Government and Industry Calculation
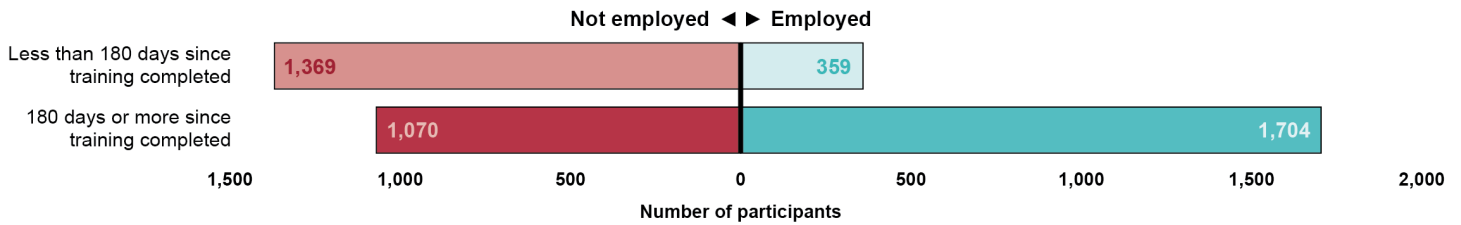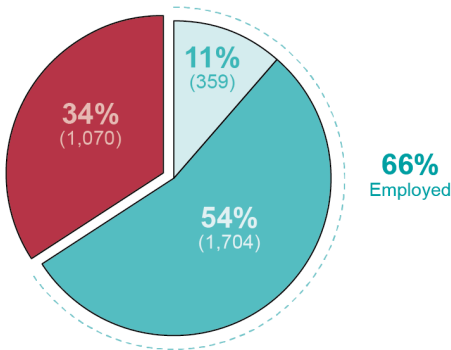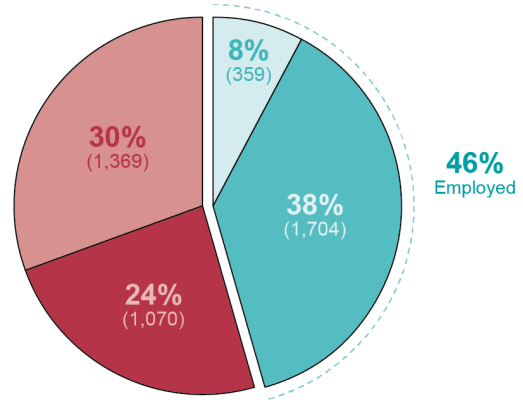

Note: Percentages do not always add to 100 due to rounding.

[a]We analyzed Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data on veterans who participated in VET TEC from May 2019 through May 2, 2022. We compared what VA refers to as its employment rate calculation to other government and industry calculations including: the employment rate calculation for VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment program, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics calculation of the employment-population ratio, and the Council on Integrity and Results Reporting (CIRR) employment rate calculation. CIRR is a nonprofit organization that measures and reports student outcomes for schools that provide high-technology training programs.

The broad purpose of the VET TEC program is to help veterans find meaningful employment. The employment rate is an important metric for determining whether VA is effective in meeting this purpose. According to federal standards for internal control, management should communicate quality information to external parties.[30] By referring to its current calculation as an employment rate when it is more accurately a measure of employment at a specific payment milestone, VA may not be communicating accurate information about the program's success. In

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[30]GAO-14-704G.

addition, developing an employment rate calculation that is consistent with other standard measures would allow VA to share information in a manner that is commonly understood and may also allow VA to more easily compare VET TEC outcomes to other programs and measures.

## Female and Non-White VET TEC Participants Generally Had Both Lower Employment Rates and Average Salaries

Our analysis of VET TEC participants who completed training from May 2019 to May 2, 2022 shows that female and non-White participants generally had both lower employment rates and lower average salaries than male and White participants.[31] We found that 41 percent of women obtained employment compared to 47 percent of men. In addition, the employment rates for Black and Hispanic participants were 41 percent and 44 percent, respectively, compared to White participants, who had an employment rate of 51 percent.[32] The average salary for VET TEC participants who reported obtaining meaningful employment was $62,491. Among those who obtained meaningful employment, females earned approximately 3 percent less, on average, than males. Black and Hispanic participants' average salaries were 7 to 9 percent lower than the average salary for White, non-Hispanic participants (see fig. 7).[33]

[31]Asian participants had a lower employment rate than White, non-Hispanic participants but had a higher average salary.

[32]The employment rate for Asian participants was 47 percent and Other, non-Hispanic participants was 44 percent.

[33]Average salaries for participants in the "other, non-Hispanic" group were 2 percent lower than the average salary for White, non-Hispanic participants. We also examined average salaries for VET TEC participants by sex and race or ethnicity and found that these salary differences generally persisted. For example, compared to White males, Black and Hispanic males earned 7 and 8 percent less, respectively. In addition, Black and Hispanic females earned 10 and 15 percent less, on average, than White males.

Figure 7: Average Salaries for Veterans Who Obtained Employment after Completing the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program, by Demographic Group
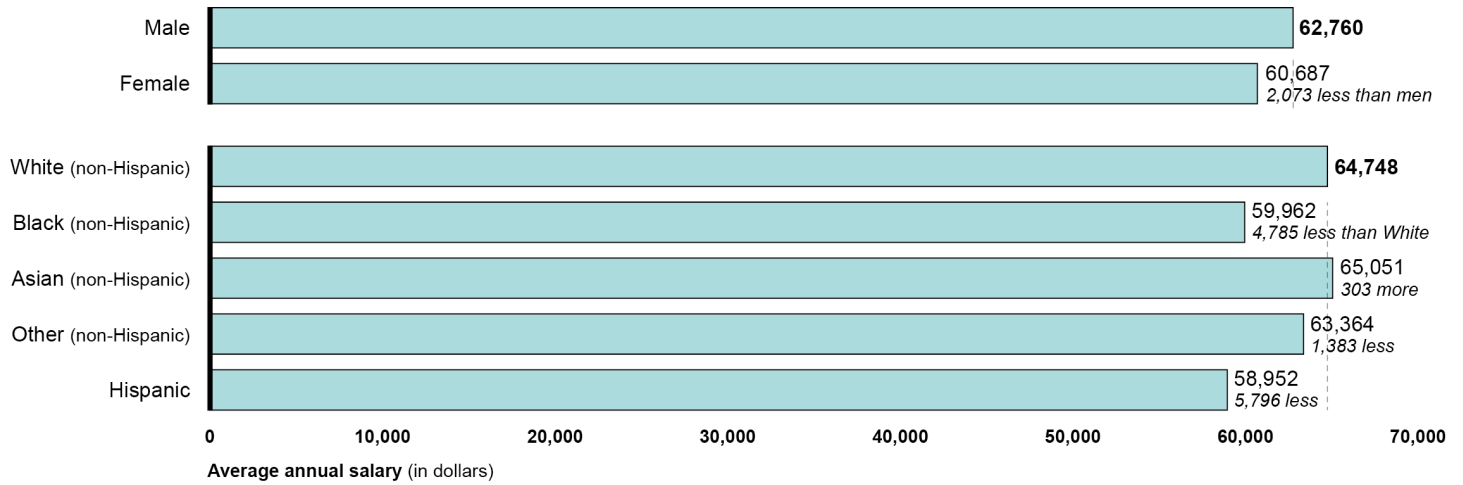
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105343
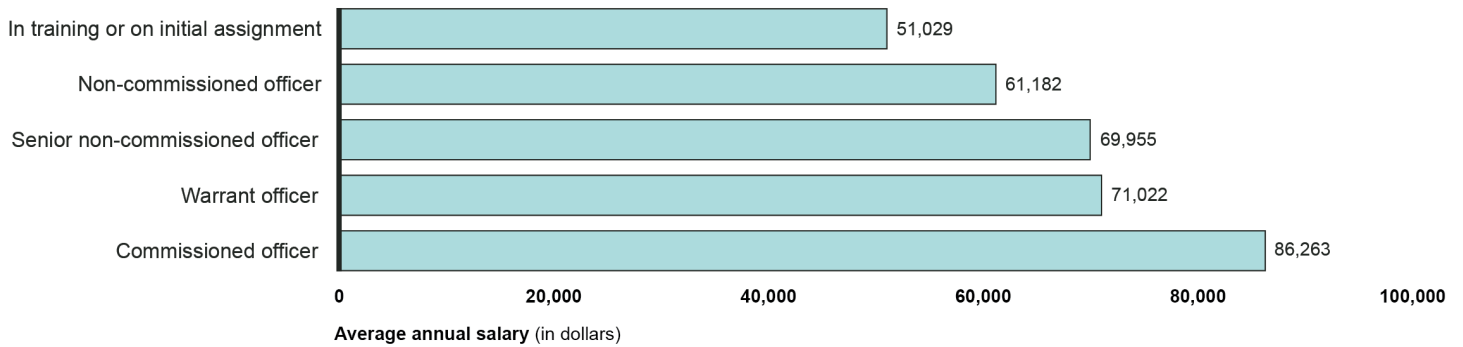
Notes: We excluded a small number of veterans whose race or ethnicity was missing or unknown. Veterans self-report their salary to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The category "Other, non Hispanic" includes those VET TEC participants who identified as American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or unknown race.

Our findings are generally consistent with a 2021 Pew Research Center report on gender, racial, and ethnic diversity among those employed in and earning degrees in STEM fields, which found that women in STEM fields tended to earn less than men, and that Black and Hispanic workers in these fields earned less than White workers.[34] Specifically, according to the Pew report, the median earnings of women in STEM fields were about 26 percent less than the median earnings of men in these fields. Also, compared to White workers in STEM fields, Black and Hispanic workers earned 22 and 17 percent less, respectively, according to the Pew report.

Our analysis also found that VET TEC participants who ranked higher in the military at the time of separation had higher average salaries upon obtaining meaningful employment than other VET TEC participants (see fig. 8).

[34]While not an exact comparison, STEM fields encompass the high-technology fields included in VET TEC. Rick Fry, Brian Kennedy, and Cary Funk, *STEM Jobs See Uneven Progress in Increasing Gender, Racial and Ethnic Diversity,* Pew Research Center (April 2021).

Figure 8: Average Salaries for Veterans Who Obtained Employment after Completing the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Program, by Military Rank at Time of Separation

Military rank	Average annual salary (in dollars)
In training or on initial assignment	51,029
Non-commissioned officer	61,182
Senior non-commissioned officer	69,955
Warrant officer	71,022
Commissioned officer	86,263

Average annual salary (in dollars)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs data. | GAO-23-105343

Note: We used information from the Department of Defense to group military ranks across branches of the armed services. In doing so, we grouped servicemembers whose ranks corresponded with pay grades E-1 to E-3 to create the "in training or on initial assignment" category, E-4 to E-6 to create the "non-commissioned officer" category, and E-7 to E-9 to create the "senior non-commissioned officer" category.

VA Does Not Use All Available Data to Fully Inform VET TEC Employment Outcomes

VA collects but does not use some available data to better understand VET TEC employment outcomes. After VET TEC participants obtain meaningful employment, they are to submit to VA an employment certification form to report information on their employment status. Specifically, participants are to report whether they are (1) unemployed or did not find meaningful employment within 180 days, (2) enrolled in another education program, or (3) found meaningful employment (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Excerpt of VET TEC Employment Certification Form

3A. VET TEC PARTICIPANTS COMPLETE ITEMS BELOW:
VET TEC PARTICIPANTS ONLY: I HEREBY acknowledge, by my signature in Item 14, that I am/have: (Check all that apply)

○ Unemployed or did not find meaningful employment, within 180 days after my program

○ Continuing education - I enrolled in a different program of education to continue my educational pursuits

○ Found meaningful employment, which aligns with the skills I acquired during my VET TEC program. Select the type of employment found by checking the appropriate box below:

    ○ Full-time, Part-time, or Temporary employment

    ○ Paid Internships, Paid Apprenticeships, or Contract employment

    ○ Self-employed or started a new business

○ Attained a recognized postsecondary credential during the 12-month period after exiting the program (a credential consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, or license recognized by the State involved or Federal Government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree)

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs. | GAO-23-105343

However, VA officials said they do not use all of the information reported, such as whether the participant enrolled in another education program, the type of employment the participant reported (e.g., full-time, part-time, self-employed, etc.), or whether the participant reported attaining a postsecondary credential after exiting the program (e.g., an industry-recognized certification). In addition, the agency does not know whether VET TEC participants remain employed because VA officials also said they stop collecting information on participants once the employment certification form is submitted.

In February 2022, VA officials said they would begin inputting additional data from the employment certification form into its database once VA transfers VET TEC data into a new system. However, in April 2022, VA officials said they had transitioned the data into the new system but had not changed what data are captured. VA officials also said they were considering options for collecting additional information beyond what is requested on the employment certification form. However, they did not

have concrete plans or time frames for collecting this information. For example, VA officials said they may collect data to understand whether veterans retain employment. Federal standards for internal control state that management should obtain relevant data from reliable internal and external sources in a timely manner so that it can be used for effective monitoring.[35] VA does not fully use available data on employment outcomes and has not determined what additional data are needed or developed concrete time frames for collecting and reporting these data. Consequently, VA does not have a complete picture of veterans' employment outcomes from VET TEC. For example, by not using data on the type of employment a veteran obtains, VA is not monitoring whether veterans obtain stable versus temporary employment, which may have different longer-term outcomes. In addition, without having concrete time frames to obtain data in a timely manner, VA cannot effectively monitor employment outcomes for veterans to provide quality information to Congress, veterans, and the public.

Selected Training Providers Said VET TEC Offers an Accelerated Path to Employment and Cited Some Program Requirement Challenges

VET TEC Programs Are Shorter than Degree-Granting Programs and Can Be Fully Virtual

Selected training providers we spoke with cited two key benefits to VET TEC:

Accelerated path to employment. Three of the five training providers we interviewed said veterans can use VET TEC to quickly enter the workforce. This observation is consistent with our analysis of VA data on veterans who participated in VET TEC from May 2019 to May 2, 2022. We found that training programs took, on average, 3 months to complete. Additionally, as discussed previously, VET TEC participants reported obtaining meaningful employment in 67 days, on average, from the time they completed training. Therefore, on average, participants were able to

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[35]GAO-14-704G.

enroll in a training program, complete a program, and find a job, in about 5 months. In comparison, veterans who use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for 2- or 4-year degree-granting programs may wait longer to enter the labor market.

Virtual training flexibility. Three of the training providers said VET TEC allowed them the flexibility to offer fully remote courses.[36] One training provider said there are several benefits to virtual training, including that it allows a veteran to be located anywhere, helps prepare veterans for jobs where they may be working remotely, and provides a safe environment to avoid potential illness. Another training provider said virtual training is particularly helpful for veterans in rural states because these veterans may not have options to attend training in-person. We previously reported that some veterans enroll in online courses to mitigate effects of physical or psychological challenges, including mobility disabilities.[37] According to our analysis of VA data, between May 2019 and May 2, 2022, over half of VET TEC enrollees (57 percent) took their training courses online, rather than in-person. As of May 2022, approximately 75 percent of VET TEC participants enrolled in a program in fiscal year 2022 were taking their courses remotely. While this is likely, at least in part, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least one training provider plans to continue using this flexibility. One training provider said it will be providing all of its programs online even though it will no longer be eligible to offer training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill as a result.

Selected Training Providers Cited Program Challenges with the Application Process and Other Requirements	The five training providers we spoke with cited a range of challenges they experienced with the application and payment processes while implementing the VET TEC pilot program.
Application Process	**Delays in the training provider application process.** Three of the five training providers we spoke with said VA took longer than expected to process their applications to participate in VET TEC, which affected their ability to plan for courses. Specifically, two training providers said they had to turn away students while they waited for VA's application review. A third training provider said they sought re-approval for fiscal year 2022

[36]Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of laws—which expired on June 1, 2022—were enacted to allow VA to continue providing payments to those whose courses were converted from in-person to remote.

[37]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).

and had students ready to start a program on October 1, but the training provider did not have VA's approval.

We reviewed VA data on training provider applications and found that VA did not provide a timely decision on many training provider applications.[38] Of the 32 training providers that sought re-approval for fiscal year 2022, 26 received VA's decision after fiscal year 2022 began.[39] VA officials said reviewing training provider expertise was overwhelming because of the volume of information training providers submitted and the length of time required to review it. To address fiscal year 2022 delays, VA officials said they provided provisional approval for certain courses and instructors and then provided final approval at a later date.

VA officials said they have revised the re-approval process for existing VET TEC training providers. Starting in fiscal year 2023, VA will ask approved training providers to submit participation agreements to indicate their interest in continuing with VET TEC rather than requiring them to complete a re-approval package as they have done to date. VA officials said approved training providers can assume their programs have ongoing approval to participate in VET TEC, unless they hear otherwise from VA.

VA officials said the agency is considering ways to clarify the training provider application process. VA's considerations include: developing a frequently asked questions document for the training provider application, offering training on what is required during the review process, and coordinating additional training on the re-approval process.

Unclear instructions for demonstrating the expertise of training provider faculty. Four training providers we spoke with said VA's instructions for demonstrating faculty expertise were unclear and led to delays in the application review process.[40] The training provider application requires training providers to submit information about their instructors, which VA uses to assess the instructors' expertise. One training provider said VA needed information about instructors in a very specific format. For example, the training provider said VA would not

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[38]According to VA guidance, the annual re-approval period is each August, to ensure compliance and approval by the start of the next fiscal year in October.

[39]According to VA officials, two of these training providers withdrew their applications prior to the start of fiscal year 2022 and then requested to continue with re-approval after the fiscal year began.

[40]The Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 required VA to collect information to assess the expertise of training provider staff.

accept a transcript from a vendor showing all of an instructor's certifications; instead, VA required each individual certification document. Another training provider said some programs do not have certifications substantiating an instructor's expertise, and VA did not provide guidance on how to demonstrate expertise for those instructors. Two of the four training providers said that because VA's instructions were vague, they had to communicate with VA staff several times, and one training provider added that it had to resubmit paperwork to VA multiple times.

Lack of technical or industry knowledge to assess instructor expertise. Three of the training providers thought VA lacked the technical or industry knowledge to assess whether their instructors were qualified to teach high-technology programs. One training provider said VA's requirements for instructor credentials were not connected to industry standards. Another training provider thought VA's requirements were more appropriate for professors at universities, rather than instructors for high-technology training programs. This training provider said VA asked about instructors' recent publications, but articles are less relevant to the technology industry because publishing is not how experts stay current with the industry. Two training providers suggested that VA consult with a technical expert or with training providers who have experience hiring faculty to learn more about what information is needed to evaluate faculty expertise. VA officials said the officials reviewing the expert criteria do not have a background in high-technology education programs and have used internet searches and publicly available information to learn about the certifications, credentials, or licenses that might be required of an expert instructor. VA officials said they have gotten better at understanding the requirements over time.

| Training Provider Payment | **Limited benefits for preferred providers.** We spoke to three training providers that had preferred status who said this status offers few benefits and poses a financial risk. For example, one benefit is an acknowledgement on the VET TEC website that the training provider is preferred; however, two of the preferred providers said veterans neither cared about nor understood the significance of this designation. Consequently, preferred provider status was unlikely to increase veteran enrollment. One training provider said they started as a preferred provider, but later opted out of the status because the provider mistakenly thought their exemption from the 85-15 rule would extend to Post-9/11 GI benefits, as well.[41] The other two training providers said they will maintain their preferred provider status because they need the 85-15 rule |

[41]The 85-15 rule stipulates that no more than 85 percent of students in a course can have their tuition and fees paid for by the training provider or by VA.

exemption to continue operating their training programs. For instance, one of the training providers runs a training program for active duty servicemembers and the other operates a training program on a military base. In both cases, the programs are offered to military personnel only, with more than 85 percent receiving assistance with tuition and fees. A fourth training provider said they did not choose to become a preferred provider because the provider thought the criteria were too daunting; this provider thought guaranteeing employment within 180 days was too short, and said 1 year would be a better deadline.

Lack of student accountability. Three training providers said it would be helpful if VA would hold veterans accountable for seeking jobs and reporting employment given that full tuition payment is contingent on veteran employment. In addition, three training providers said there are no consequences for VET TEC participants who obtain employment but do not report it to VA. When this occurs, training providers do not get fully reimbursed, and preferred providers must return all prior payments to VA, even though a veteran achieved a positive outcome. Two training providers said they wish they could ask VET TEC participants who do not obtain meaningful employment or do not report obtaining it to assume the costs of the program.

VA officials said they were aware that some students may not seek employment and have developed a form in response. The officials said they developed a student acknowledgement form in April 2021 for training providers to use. The form asks a VET TEC participant to affirm, among other things, that they are expected to find employment after completing their program, and that they may be required to repay tuition and fees paid on their behalf if they do not fulfill that expectation. VA does not require VET TEC participants to complete this form, but VA officials said training providers may use the form at their discretion. VA officials also said they make it clear to veterans that VET TEC is for people interested in employment.

Additionally, VA officials said they considered withholding a veteran's final housing payment until that veteran confirmed their employment situation, but VA decided not to pursue such a policy. One training provider recommended VA use a third-party employment verification service to confirm a veteran's employment. The training provider said this could address the issue of veterans finding jobs, but not reporting them to VA. VA officials said they were open to considering alternative methods of determining a veteran's employment status, as long as the method reliably provided detailed information, such as a veteran's job title and salary.

Uncertain funding affected training providers' ability to enroll veterans. Three training providers we spoke with said they could not predict when VET TEC would run out of funding, which affected their ability to plan courses. For example, according to two training providers, they had enrolled veterans in courses, but then VET TEC unexpectedly ran out of funding, so those veterans could not use VET TEC to pay for their programs. A third training provider said they try to enroll as many veterans as possible in October, when the new fiscal year begins. VA officials and training providers told us that some veterans may have found alternate funding sources, others may have reapplied when funding became available, or they may have decided to pursue other opportunities. Finally, one training provider suggested VA provide updates more frequently on the status of VET TEC's funding.

VA officials told us providing real-time information on VET TEC funding would be challenging because the total amount available changes day to day. However, VA officials said they have previously provided information to training providers and veterans when funding levels dropped to certain points to let them know how much longer VA expected to have VET TEC funding.

VA Has Identified Actions to Improve VET TEC but Does Not Have Implementation Time Frames or Clear Program Objectives

VA Has Identified Actions to Improve Certain Aspects of VET TEC but Has Not Established Time Frames for Implementation

VA has made some changes to VET TEC and has identified additional actions to improve the program. VA officials said they have made changes to the program on an ad hoc basis as they have learned of issues from veterans and training providers. For example, VA officials said they have added new information to program materials based on feedback from veterans.

VA also held a VET TEC summit in March 2022 to review how the program is administered, brainstorm ideas or improvements for the future, and identify future program requirements. During the summit, VA officials discussed a range of topics, including veterans' experiences and VA's processes for reviewing and approving training provider applications. VA

developed a VET TEC Summit Action Plan following the summit, with over 80 actions or tasks tied to specific topics. One topic was developing a scorecard to assess training provider quality for which VA identified two related actions: (1) forming a working group to bring the scorecard to life and (2) establishing an amount of time training providers must participate in VET TEC before scoring them and publishing results. Other topics with identified actions included tracking student feedback and satisfaction, updating the employment certification form, and updating the VET TEC website with additional resources for veterans.

Though VA has identified a range of actions aimed at improving VET TEC, the agency did not establish time frames for implementing its action plan. VA officials said they are actively establishing timeframes and have completed some actions. VA officials also said they will prioritize actions based on importance and availability of resources. However, they did not provide information on which actions are priorities to complete, have been completed, or when they expect to complete the remaining actions. Generally recognized project management practices from the Project Management Institute state the importance of sequencing activities, estimating the amount of time needed to carry out activities, and then developing a schedule with planned dates for completing activities to help with project execution and monitoring.[42] VA is 3 years into the pilot, with 2 years remaining. Establishing time frames would provide VA with an accountability mechanism and better position VA to make program improvements before the pilot ends.

VA Has Not Established a Consistent Set of Clear and Measurable Objectives to Evaluate VET TEC but Is Assessing Scalability

In the 3 years since VA entered into its first training provider agreement, VA has not developed consistent objectives for VET TEC that are well-defined, appropriate, clear and measurable. In February 2022, we reported that VA did not have documented measurable objectives for VET TEC.[43] At that time, VA verbally shared three objectives for the program but had not documented the tasks needed to measure progress toward meeting the objectives. In April 2022, VA provided a 2018 project charter and 2020 white paper that contained objectives for VET TEC. As shown in table 2, the three different versions of objectives VA provided overlap somewhat but are generally inconsistent. For example, all three sets of VA's program objectives have one objective focused on veterans' employment outcomes, but the remaining objectives differ. In addition,

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[42]PMBOK® Guide, Sixth Edition (2017).

[43]GAO-22-105720.

these objectives are not measurable because they do not indicate how VA will determine progress toward meeting each objective.

Table 2: Various Objectives of the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) Pilot Program Reported by the Department of Veterans Affairs

2018 project charter	2020 goals and objectives white paper	2022 objectives shared verbally
• Identify an efficient educational institutional selection and vetting process. • Identify an efficient veteran student preparation and vetting process. • Develop an effective communication strategy to link the veterans and the providers participating in the pilot. • Develop and instill a sense of community between the participants across the providers within the pilot. • Demonstrate a positive connection between education and employment.	• Learn whether permitting veterans' participation in high-technology programs provided by non-traditional providers helps veterans find meaningful employment. • Examine student outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of these non-traditional providers. • Assess quality-assurance processes that are appropriate for non-traditional providers and the programs they offer. • Identify ways to protect students and taxpayers from risks in an innovative and emerging area of postsecondary education.	• Determine if the new payment system being used for VET TEC is viable. • Improve employment outcomes for veterans. • Determine whether VET TEC will be able to attract training providers to participate in the program.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) documents and GAO interviews with VA. | GAO-23-105343

When asked how VA is able to assess the pilot without a consistent set of objectives, VA officials said, in May 2022, that they continually monitor program performance and review application, graduation, employment, and training provider data to assess progress towards meeting VET TEC objectives. We previously reported that establishing well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives is a leading practice of effective pilot program design.[44] We have also reported that these objectives are necessary to determine an assessment methodology or evaluation plan to measure performance of the pilot, two other leading practices for effective pilot program design.[45] Furthermore, federal standards for internal control state that an agency should define objectives in measurable terms so that performance toward achieving those objectives can be assessed.[46] However, with three different sets of objectives, it is unclear whether agency officials agree on the program's

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[44]GAO-16-438.

[45]GAO-22-105720.

[46]GAO-14-704G.

objectives and how VA is using them to measure progress by the end of the pilot.

In February 2022, we reported that VA was not well-positioned to assess the scalability of VET TEC because VA officials may not have had a complete picture of veteran or training provider demand for the program.[47] VA officials have said recruiting training providers has been a challenge because providers may be hesitant to participate in a program with inconsistent funding. When we met with VA officials in April 2022, they said they analyzed data on veteran applications and enrollment in VET TEC and current training provider capacity, and determined that the program costs approximately $10 million per month. VA used that figure and included an additional $5 million for anticipated program changes—such as annual adjustments to housing payments—to determine that $125 million per year was needed to run the VET TEC program.

In March 2022, an additional $80 million was authorized for VET TEC, authorizing the availability of $125 million for fiscal year 2022. VA officials said they had spent about $60 million, as of March 2022, and said the program was on track to use the full amount of funding available. While VA has estimated how much funding is needed to run VET TEC, it remains to be seen whether additional training providers will apply to participate, which would increase the capacity of the program. VA officials also told us they are monitoring demand for the program and will make adjustments when fiscal year 2023 funding authorization reverts back to making $45 million available or if demand for the program decreases.

Conclusions

VA implemented VET TEC to help veterans obtain high-technology education training that ultimately leads to employment. The program has been popular among veterans, and an additional $80 million in funding was authorized for VET TEC for fiscal year 2022. While VA has cited the need for increased funding to attract additional training providers to meet program demand, VA, policymakers, and veterans do not have a full picture of how well the pilot program is working and opportunities for improvement. For example, VA does not know why some veterans drop out of the program. In addition, while VA is calculating an employment metric to better understand the milestone payment process, it is not calculating an employment rate for VET TEC, which may leave VA, policymakers, and veterans without sufficient information to assess the effectiveness of the program at getting veterans into jobs. Furthermore,

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[47]GAO-22-105720.

VA does not analyze all available data, and does not systematically collect other relevant data to inform employment outcomes.

Having such information will help VA make improvements to the program. VA is aware of areas that need improvement—such as developing a training provider scorecard and tracking student feedback and satisfaction—but until VA establishes time frames for implementing these actions, it lacks an accountability mechanism to ensure needed changes are made in the next 2 years before the pilot program ends. In addition, without a single set of well-defined, clear, measurable objectives, VA will not be able to effectively evaluate the pilot and determine next steps for the program. Taking action to address these issues would help position VA to have a better understanding of pilot program outcomes and take any needed steps to make program adjustments.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making six recommendations to VA:

The Secretary of VA should require training providers to inform VA of the reasons why veterans drop out of the VET TEC program. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of VA should adjust the terminology it uses to describe its current employment rate calculation to clarify that the calculation is not measuring the employment rate but is instead measuring employment at a specific payment milestone. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of VA should develop an employment rate calculation consistent with standard approaches used by government or industry entities. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of VA should use available data, determine what additional data are needed to fully inform VET TEC employment outcomes, and develop concrete time frames for collecting and reporting these data. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of VA should establish time frames for addressing actions it has identified for improving VET TEC. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of VA should identify and document a single set of clear, measurable objectives for the VET TEC program. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for review and comment. We received written comments from VA, which are reproduced in appendix I and summarized below. VA also provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

In its written comments, VA agreed with five of the draft report's seven recommendations. VA provided time frames for implementing four of the recommendations and implemented one, as discussed below. For the remaining two recommendations, VA agreed in principle to one and neither agreed nor disagreed with one, as discussed below.

In our draft report, we recommended that VA update its training provider website with the most current application materials. In written comments, VA stated that it updated its training provider website in September 2022 with documents training providers must complete on the expert credentials of their instructors. We confirmed that the website has been updated, removed the recommendation, and revised the report accordingly.

With respect to the recommendation that VA collect information on reasons veterans drop out of VET TEC, VA agreed in principle. In its written comments, VA stated that it requires training providers to submit a change in enrollment status in VA's online enrollment system, at which point a training provider can complete a field in the system that includes six pre-populated reasons for terminating a veteran's enrollment prior to course completion related to unsatisfactory attendance, conduct, or academic progress. VA acknowledged that there may be additional reasons why a veteran might drop out of VET TEC that are not captured in this field. VA further stated in its comments that training providers are required to provide information to VA on the reason a veteran was dropped from the rolls due to unsatisfactory attendance, conduct, or academic progress. However, in April 2022, VA officials told us training providers were not required to complete this field when withdrawing or terminating a veteran's enrollment prior to completion. VA officials also did not indicate that they collect information on reasons for early termination from other sources. After receiving its written comments, we followed up with VA officials to clarify, and VA officials reiterated that it is optional, and not required, for training providers to complete the field with the reason for early termination. We continue to recommend that VA require training providers to inform VA of the reasons why veterans drop out of VET TEC so that VA can identify and address potential vulnerabilities in the program during the pilot phase.

VA neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation that it develop an employment rate calculation consistent with standard approaches used by government or industry entities. In written comments, VA stated that it plans to conduct an environmental scan of employment rate calculations used in similar programs to determine whether it should develop such a calculation for VET TEC. VA further stated that the employment rate measures highlighted in our report exclude certain populations and are, therefore, not comparable to VET TEC. However, as noted in the report, these measures are comparable. For example, while the Council on Integrity in Results Reporting (CIRR) excludes individuals who did not intend to find employment before starting a program, this is likely not applicable to VET TEC. By definition, VET TEC is a job-training program, so individuals presumably enroll to find employment. Ultimately, CIRR's calculation accounts for all individuals who completed a program and planned to find work whereas VA's current calculation does not. We encourage VA to prioritize the calculation of a standardized employment rate in order to share information in a manner that is commonly understood and to allow VA to compare VET TEC outcomes to other programs and measures.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of VA, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or locked@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 II.

Dawn G. Locke
Acting Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs

October 7, 2022

Ms. Dawn Locke
Acting Director
Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Locke:

　　The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report: *VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: Promising VA Technology Education Pilot Would Benefit from Better Outcome Measures and Plans for Improvement* (GAO-23-105343).

　　The enclosure contains general and technical comments and the action plan to implement the draft report recommendations. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

Tanya J. Bradsher
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
*VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: Promising VA Technology Education Pilot
Would Benefit from Better Outcome Measures and Plans for Improvement*
(GAO-23-105343)

<u>Recommendation 1</u>: **The Secretary of VA should require training providers to
inform VA of the reasons why veterans drop out of the VET TEC program.**

<u>VA Response:</u> Concur in principle. Currently, the Veterans Benefits Administration
(VBA) requires schools to certify enrollments and changes to enrollment status through
the VA Online Certification of Enrollment system. This system allows schools to select
from various reasons for why there was a termination of enrollment prior to the course
completion date when the termination was due to unsatisfactory attendance, conduct, or
academic progress. The following reasons are below:

1. Conduct
2. Performance
3. Unsatisfactory Attendance
4. Personal Reasons
5. Medical Reasons
6. Secure Employment

VBA believes this list can be expanded to include additional termination reasons with a
required response if the termination was initiated by the school; however, we want to
ensure capturing the new data points will not be an additional burden on the school. The
above reasons are the only situations where the school has reliable information
concerning the reason for the termination because it is only in these situations where
the school was the decision maker. Any other reason for a termination prior to
completion would be a personal decision by the student.

VBA will not put School Certifying Officials (SCO) in a position where they must invade
the privacy of each student who has made the deeply personal decision to make a
significant life change to drop out from training. Students are already afforded the
opportunity to inform VBA directly the reasons for their decisions when requesting relief
through mitigating circumstances. However, whether a student provides such
information to VBA is only required if the student is requesting mitigating circumstances
relief. VBA has no authority, de facto or de jure, to mandate such information from the
student. Furthermore, VBA would have no means to enforce the mandate as it cannot
withhold benefits or increase a debt based on such information. The only reason a
student would need to provide such information is for a possible reduction in debt that
VBA already does through the current mitigating circumstances relief adjudication
process.

VBA will begin discussions with schools to identify the additional data points and optimal
way to collect and report the data to VBA. As a result, the timeline for implementation of
the recommendation is to be determined.

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Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
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Recommendation 2: The Secretary of VA should adjust the terminology it uses to describe its current employment rate calculation to clarify that the calculation is not measuring the employment rate but is instead measuring employment at a specific payment milestone.

VA Response: Concur. VBA will adjust the terminology to clarify what the employment calculation rate is based on and the employment status of students who have completed a Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program.

Target Completion Date: December 30, 2022

Recommendation 3: The Secretary of VA should develop an employment rate calculation consistent with standard approaches used by government or industry entities.

VA Response: VBA continues to evaluate this recommendation and is conducting an environmental scan of employment rate calculations used in similar programs, to assess the feasibility, applicability and whether it is advisable for implementation with the VET TEC program.

VBA will provide an update on its evaluation pertaining to this recommendation by December 23, 2022.

Recommendation 4: The Secretary of VA should use available data, determine what additional data are needed to fully inform VET TEC employment outcomes, and develop concrete timeframes for collecting and reporting these data.

VA Response: Concur. VBA will require information technology modifications to automate the collection of additional data from VA Form, 22-10201, *Employment Certification*. VBA has included this recommendation as part of its Digital GI Bill data mart development effort.

Target Completion Date: September 30, 2024

Recommendation 5: The Secretary of VA should update its training provider website to include the most current training provider application.

VA Response: Concur. VBA most recently updated the training provider website in September 2022 by uploading additional documents pertaining to the instructor expert requirement to support a Training Provider's application. The application itself has not

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been changed. The website link can be found at:
https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/fgib/VetTec_Providers.asp and the application link
is: https://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/FGIB/VetTecTPApplication.pdf.

VBA considers the recommendation fully implemented.

Recommendation 6: The Secretary of VA should establish timeframes for addressing actions it has identified for improving VET TEC.

VA Response: Concur. VBA will prioritize and set timeframes for the actions or tasks identified during the March 2022 VET TEC Summit.

Target Completion Date: December 30, 2022

Recommendation 7: The Secretary of VA should identify and document a single set of clear, measurable objectives for the VET TEC program.

VA Response: Concur. VBA will identify and document a single set of clear, measurable objectives for the VET TEC program.

Target Completion Date: December 30, 2022

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Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
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General Comment:

VBA appreciates GAO's review of the VET TEC program. We acknowledge that the report highlights several areas for improvement, and we concur or concur in principle with most of the recommendations. However, VBA does not agree with the conclusion regarding training provider certification requirements.

Regarding GAO's findings on VBA's calculation of an employment rate for VET TEC, VBA notes that every student who completes a VET TEC program will be counted as employed or unemployed within 180 days of program completion, so at the relevant juncture, each student is included in VBA's rate. This is unlike the measures highlighted by GAO, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) or the Council on Integrity in Results Reporting (CIRR) that exclude certain populations. For instance, the unemployment rate calculated by BLS or CIRR job placement rate excludes students who prior to beginning their training state that their intent is to not seek employment post-program completion.

VBA does not agree that training providers are not required to inform VBA of the reasons why a Veteran has dropped out of the VET TEC program. VBA does require training providers to inform the agency of the reason why a Veteran was dropped from the rolls due to unsatisfactory attendance, conduct, or academic progress. These are the only situations where a school can reliably know and report the reason for a student's decision to drop classes.

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Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	Dawn G. Locke, (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the contact named above, Amber Yancey-Carroll (Assistant Director), Nisha R. Hazra (Analyst in Charge), Gabrielle Crossnoe, and Michael Naretta made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were James Bennett, Peter Del Toro, Jennifer Gregory, Kirsten Lauber, Aaron Olszewski, Sara Rizik, Almeta Spencer, and Kate van Gelder.