

Highlights of [GAO-13-338](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

VA provided nearly \$10 billion in education benefits to almost 1 million veterans and beneficiaries in fiscal year 2011. The majority of these benefits were provided through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which in 2008 established what has since grown into VA's largest education program. GAO was asked to review VA's education programs. This report examines: (1) what challenges, if any, veterans face pursuing higher education; (2) how VA supports student veterans on campus; and (3) to what extent veterans are achieving successful academic outcomes and how VA uses data on student outcomes to improve its education benefit programs.

To address these topics, GAO reviewed existing government studies and scholarly research on veterans' educational challenges, services, and outcomes; reviewed VA's strategic planning documents; interviewed officials from VA, Education, higher education associations, and veteran service organizations; and conducted focus groups with student veterans and interviewed school officials at 11 postsecondary institutions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA: (1) provide veterans with more information on payment timelines and policies; (2) work with schools to facilitate earlier access to other sources of federal financial aid; (3) promote opportunities to share best practices for serving student veterans; and (4) create a plan to use new data on student veteran outcomes to improve program management. VA agreed with GAO's recommendations and noted a number of actions it is taking to address these issues.

View [GAO-13-338](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov.

May 2013

VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students

What GAO Found

Student veterans face many challenges pursuing higher education, and problems with the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill create financial challenges that also affect veterans' academic success. Veterans already cope with challenges transitioning into college as nontraditional students (older or with family obligations) while they are readjusting to civilian life and potentially managing disabilities. However, veterans and school officials told GAO that delays in VA benefit payments create financial challenges for veterans that threaten their ability to pursue higher education. In fiscal year 2012, VA's average processing times for new Post-9/11 GI Bill applications (31 days) and benefit payments claims (17 days) were over a third higher than its performance targets. Processing times during the fall of 2012 were at times even longer. These delays led many veterans GAO spoke with to take on personal debt to cover their housing expenses or consider dropping out of school. VA has taken steps to reduce processing delays, and GAO previously made recommendations to address these issues. However, VA provides limited information about benefit processing timelines and payment policies to student veterans prior to enrollment, which can leave them unprepared to deal with these payment delays. In some cases, these delays also made it difficult for veterans to access other sources of federal grants and loans since some schools are reluctant to distribute this aid to students until after tuition and fee payments are received from VA.

VA provides limited direct support to veterans on campus, and schools are generally building their own veteran support services without any assistance from VA. VA has initiated the VetSuccess on Campus pilot, which provides veterans on 32 campuses with direct access to VA counselors who help them connect to services. VA also offers counseling and funding for academic tutoring to eligible student veterans. Some schools are developing services to meet the needs of these students, including creating new administrative offices to serve them. However, smaller schools have limited resources to devote to veteran services and may require different approaches to effectively meet veterans' needs. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has also sparked rapid growth in student veteran enrollments, and schools have reported concerns about the challenges of supporting this emerging population. VA recognizes the need to leverage partnerships with stakeholders to better support veterans, but has not sought opportunities to disseminate information about best practices for supporting veterans that would help schools more effectively build their own on campus services.

It is unclear the extent to which veterans are achieving successful academic outcomes, and VA lacks a plan for using student outcomes data from its new data collection efforts to improve its education programs. Current data on student veteran outcomes are outdated or incomplete. For example, existing studies from VA and the Department of Education (Education) do not capture the increase in beneficiaries under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. VA is coordinating with Education and the Department of Defense to develop additional outcome measures and has multiple efforts to collect new data on student veterans, including a study that will track Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries over the next 20 years. However, VA does not yet have a plan to use these data to improve program management. These data could provide VA with a tool for assessing the effectiveness of its education benefit programs in facilitating student veterans' academic success.