



May 2013

VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

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

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.

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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.

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Abbreviations

BAH	Basic Allowance for Housing
DEA	Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
Education	U.S. Department of Education
FAFSA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
LTS	Long Term Solution
MGIB-AD	Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty
MGIB-SR	Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve
Post-9/11 GI Bill	Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
REAP	Reserve Educational Assistance Program
TBI	traumatic brain injuries
VA	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
VR&E	Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
Yellow Ribbon	Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program

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May 22, 2013

The Honorable Bill Flores
Chairman
The Honorable Mark Takano
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Bruce Braley
House of Representatives

The Honorable Marlin Stutzman
House of Representatives

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 GI Bill) significantly increased postsecondary education benefits for veterans.¹ By fiscal year 2011, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was providing almost \$10 billion in education benefits to over 900,000 veterans and their beneficiaries, mostly through the Post-9/11 GI Bill.² Participation in this program is expected to increase by almost 10 percent from 2011 to 2013, in part due to veterans returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Other veterans are still receiving benefits for prior service through older programs like the Montgomery GI Bill.³ These benefits enable veterans to pursue an education and develop work skills to help them re-enter the workforce. However, it has been reported that veterans often face numerous challenges completing their degrees and still experience high unemployment rates once they graduate.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in better understanding postsecondary student outcomes and identifying the various factors that can help students achieve academic success. Policymakers have also raised questions about the effect of federal assistance on student

¹ Pub. L. No. 110-252, tit. V, 122 Stat. 2323, 2357-86.

² 38 U.S.C. §§ 3301-3334.

³ 38 U.S.C. §§ 3001-3036.

outcomes such as graduation rates, and whether there is an appropriate return on the federal investment. In light of these issues, you asked us to review several issues related to VA's higher education programs. For this report, we examined:

1. What challenges, if any, do veterans face pursuing higher education?
2. How does VA support student veterans on campus?
3. To what extent are veterans achieving successful academic outcomes and how does VA use data on student outcomes to improve its education benefit programs?

To identify the challenges student veterans face, we conducted a literature review of relevant studies and interviewed officials from VA and higher education and veteran service organizations. We selected 11 institutions to interview school officials and facilitate focus groups with student veterans to discuss the challenges veterans face. We selected this non-generalizable sample of schools to include a mix of program lengths, sectors (public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit), traditional classroom-based as well as online schools, institutions with student veteran populations ranging from less than 200 to nearly 40,000, schools with and without VA counselors located on campus, and schools located in different geographic areas of the country, to capture diverse perspectives on the various challenges students veterans may face. We limited our scope to institutions of higher learning, defined as institutions offering postsecondary-level academic instruction that leads to an associate's or higher degree. We did not include other types of approved training programs under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, such as on-the-job training and flight training. We also reviewed VA's performance metrics for education benefit claims processing and VA's National Education Call Center, which responds to phone call inquiries regarding VA education benefits. To identify how VA supports student veterans, we reviewed program documents and interviewed VA officials. We also interviewed officials from higher education associations and at the 11 institutions in our study about the various support services schools provide specifically for veterans. To analyze the collection and use of student veteran outcomes, we reviewed existing data collected by VA, the Department of Education (Education), and other federal sources. We also interviewed officials from VA, Education, and selected schools about their data collection efforts. We reviewed VA's strategic plan and performance and accountability report, and examined federal guidance on performance measures. We also interviewed officials at VA and Education. We assessed the reliability of the outcomes data from VA, Education, and

other federal sources as well as the performance metrics data from VA by reviewing existing information about the data and the systems or studies that produced them and interviewing knowledgeable agency officials. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. See appendix I for more information about our scope and methodology and a list of the schools included in the study.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2012 to May 2013 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

VA has been providing veterans educational assistance benefits since 1944.⁴ These benefits have been put in place over time in order to compensate for compulsory service, encourage voluntary service, avoid unemployment, provide equitable benefits to all who served, or promote military retention. There are currently five major benefit programs available to eligible individuals who pursue education or training (see table 1).

⁴ Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284.

Table 1: Major VA Education Benefit Programs Available to Eligible Veterans

Program	Description	Participants (FY2011)	Obligations (FY2011)
Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Program (Post-9/11 GI Bill) 38 U.S.C. §§ 3301-3334.	Provides benefits to veterans and service members who served on active duty for at least 90 days after September 10, 2001. The program is designed to provide individuals who served on active duty for a full 36 months with the full cost of attendance at a public school and up to \$17,500 for private nonprofit and private for-profit schools. The 36 months of benefits is equivalent to a traditional 4-year bachelor's degree program (36 months of classes spread over four 9-month academic years). Veterans who served on active duty for less than 36 months are eligible for a portion of the maximum benefit amount based on their time served. Beneficiaries can also receive additional funding for housing expenses (Basic Allowance for Housing) as well as books.	555,329	\$7,656 million
Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty (MGIB-AD) 38 U.S.C. §§ 3001-3036.	Provides a fixed monthly allowance primarily to veterans who enter active duty after June 30, 1985. In fiscal year 2013, the benefit was \$1,564 per month for full-time study.	185,220	\$1,386 million
Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR) 10 U.S.C. §§ 16131-16137.	Provides a monthly benefit payment for reservists, including the National Guard, who agree to serve for 6 years. In fiscal year 2013, the benefit was \$356 per month for full-time study.	65,216	\$201 million
Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (DEA) 38 U.S.C. §§ 3500-3566.	Provides education and training opportunities to eligible dependents of certain veterans who became disabled or died during active duty service. In fiscal year 2013, beneficiaries could receive up to \$987 per month based on their enrollment status.	90,657	\$463 million
Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) 10 U.S.C. §§ 16161-16166.	Provides benefits to Reservists with at least 90 days consecutive active-duty service after September 10, 2001. In fiscal 2013, the benefit is \$1,251 per month for full-time study, with at least 2 years of consecutive active-duty service.	27,302	\$95 million
Total		923,724^a	\$9,801 million

Source: GAO analysis of VA's congressional budget submission fiscal year 2013, Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2011, and other program documents.

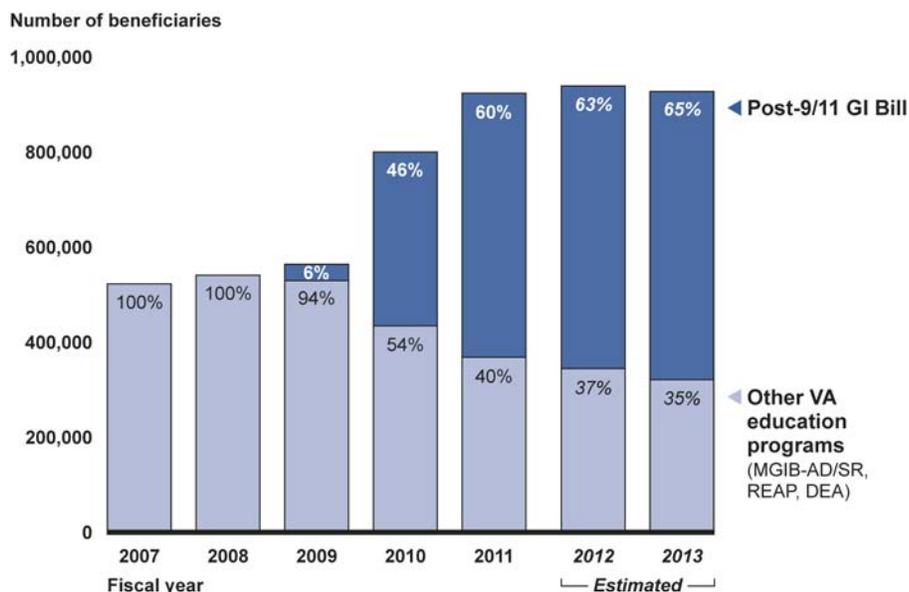
Notes: VA provides additional benefits to veterans with service-connected disabilities. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program provides services to veterans with service-connected disabilities that can include education benefits and counseling. 38 U.S.C. §§ 3100-3121. FY = fiscal year.

^a Participants would be counted twice in this total if they received benefits under more than one program.

Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill became effective August 1, 2009, the number of veterans receiving VA education benefits has increased by almost two-thirds (see fig. 1). Participation in VA education benefit programs is

expected to increase as the number of post-9/11 veterans grows to over 5 million by 2020.⁵

Figure 1: Beneficiaries of Selected VA Education Benefit Programs, Fiscal Years 2007-2013



Source: GAO Analysis of VA's Fiscal Year 2011 Annual Benefits Report and fiscal year 2013 Congressional Budget Submission.

Administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 GI Bill provided a new way for VA to deliver education benefits. Whereas VA's other education benefit programs provide a single, standard monthly payment directly to students enrolled in school, the Post-9/11 GI Bill requires VA to send multiple payments to both students and schools. Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA sends payments to

⁵ The Post-9/11 GI Bill also empowers the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to authorize the secretaries of the various military service departments to permit eligible service members to transfer their benefits to their spouses or children, and this authority has been provided to the service departments. 38 U.S.C. § 3319 and 38 C.F.R. § 21.9570 (2012), respectively. Under similar authority, while the service departments have also been authorized to permit transfers under the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty, Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve and the Reserve Educational Assistance Programs (38 U.S.C. § 3020 and 38 C.F.R. § 21.7080 (2012)), only the Army has permitted such transfers and only under the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty Program.

students for a monthly housing allowance and book stipend,⁶ and pays schools directly for tuition and fees.⁷

Veterans attending participating private schools or public schools as out-of-state students may receive additional benefits to cover costs that exceed their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit through VA's Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement (Yellow Ribbon) Program.⁸ Through this program, schools enter into voluntary agreements with VA to pay a portion of the tuition and fees that exceed an individual's Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit and VA matches the schools' contribution.

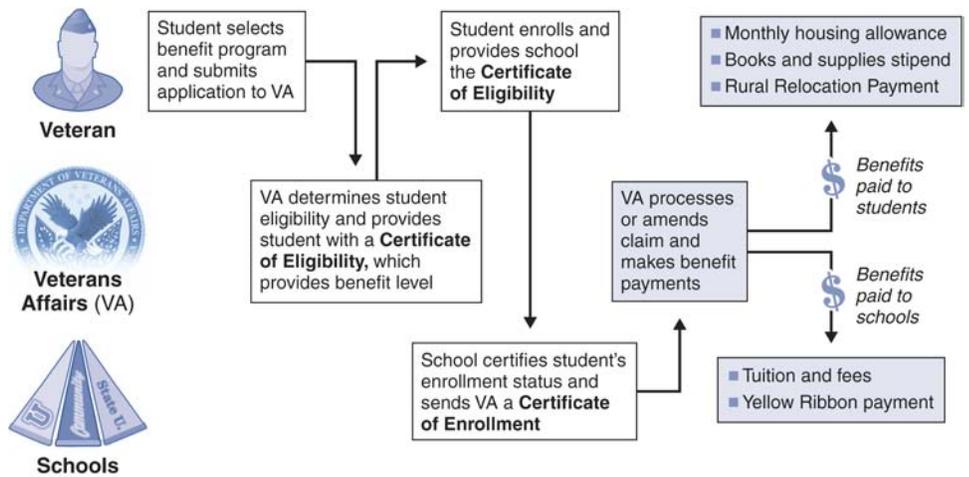
To receive education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, students submit applications to VA, schools certify enrollments, and VA processes claims and payments (see fig. 2).

⁶ The monthly housing allowance is based on the Department of Defense (DOD) Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) and the amount depends on the zip code of the school the veteran is attending (students enrolled exclusively online can also receive a portion of the housing allowance). 38 U.S.C. § 3313(c)(1)(B)(i)-(iii). The amount for books and supplies is based on the number of credits a student takes, with a maximum of \$1,000 a year. Veterans are also eligible for a one-time rural relocation payment of \$500 if they reside in a rural county and must relocate at least 500 miles or travel by air to attend school. 38 U.S.C. § 3313(c)(1)(B)(iv).

⁷ 38 U.S.C. § 3313(h).

⁸ 38 U.S.C. § 3317. The Yellow Ribbon Program is part of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. In order to be eligible for the Yellow Ribbon program, individuals must be eligible for the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit. That is, after September 10, 2001, they generally must have 36 months of active-duty service or 30 continuous days of active-duty service and be discharged from active duty for a service-connected disability. 38 U.S.C. §§ 3311(b)(1) and (2), and 3313(c)(1).

Figure 2: VA's Processing of Post-9/11 GI Bill Program Claims and Payments



Source: GAO analysis of VA documents.

Notes: Because veterans themselves are liable for any overpayment, VA regulations anticipate that schools will transmit overpayments to student veterans. 38 C.F.R. § 21.9695 (2012). However, there are some circumstances in which VA requires schools to return funds directly to VA, for example, if a school receives funds for a student not enrolled at the school. VA requires each school to designate a certifying official from one of its offices, such as the financial aid office, to administer the Post-9/11 GI Bill program. 38 C.F.R. § 21.4266(a)(2) (2012). Among other things, these officials may work with other campus officials to assist students in making decisions to finance their education.

Although veterans only have to submit one application to VA, unless they change schools or programs, the school certifying official has to submit information to VA each semester or term to verify the veteran's enrollment.⁹

Veterans' Eligibility for Other Sources of Student Aid

Student veterans may also be eligible for state and institutional aid (scholarships from state governments or schools, for example) as well as grants and loans administered by Education, which can help cover the costs of postsecondary education (see app. II for additional information on the financial aid programs administered by Education).¹⁰ Education does not count VA education benefits against the student when it

⁹ 38 C.F.R. § 21.4203(a)(5)(i) (2012).

¹⁰ Federal student aid is provided through programs authorized by Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. 20 U.S.C. §§ 1070-1099e.

calculates eligibility for the federal student aid it administers.¹¹ Therefore, the benefits a veteran receives from the Post-9/11 GI Bill or other VA programs do not affect the amount of federal student aid available from Education, and vice versa. Student veterans must submit a separate application to apply for federal student aid, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), just as other students do.¹²

Recent Executive Order

To ensure that veteran and other military educational benefits programs are providing service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members with the information, support, and protections they deserve, the President signed Executive Order 13607 in April 2012 “Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members.”¹³ The executive order directs VA, the Department of Defense (DOD), and Education, among other things, to develop these principles to ensure that institutions provide meaningful information to students, including information on student outcomes.¹⁴ The order also directs VA, Education, and DOD to develop a comprehensive strategy for developing comparable student outcome measures, including measures applicable to student veterans.

¹¹ 20 U.S.C. § 1087vv(a)(2), (b)(1)(C) and (c). The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 changed how tuition and fees are calculated for the Post-9/11 GI Bill to account for certain scholarships and waivers. Pub. L. No. 11-377, § 102(a), 124 Stat. 4106, 4108-09 (2011). Benefit payments are now based on the net cost for in-state tuition and fees after the application of any tuition waivers, scholarships, or other federal, state, institutional, or employer-based aid or assistance (excluding loans and title IV funds) that is provided directly to the institution and specifically designated for the sole purpose of defraying tuition and fees. 38 U.S.C. § 3312(c). As a result, Title IV aid, such as Pell Grants, or general scholarships do not affect a student’s eligibility for or amount of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

¹² 20 U.S.C. § 1090.

¹³ Exec. Order No. 13,604, 77 Fed. Reg. 25,861 (May 12, 2012).

¹⁴ These principles will be incorporated into new agreements with educational institutions participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program for veterans or the Tuition Assistance Program operated by DOD for active duty service members, to the extent practicable and permitted by law. Institutions participating in the Post-9/11 GI Bill program are strongly encouraged but not required to comply with the principles.

VA's Problems Administering the Post-9/11 GI Bill Add to Student Veterans' Challenges

Student veterans face multiple challenges pursuing their education, but veterans and school officials told us that problems with VA's administration of its education benefit programs create financial challenges that negatively impact veterans' academic success. Some of the challenges veterans face transitioning to college are common among nontraditional students who are older and may have families, while others are specific to veterans, such as adjusting to civilian life or managing service-related disabilities (see fig. 3). VA's delays in processing benefit payments and the lack of timely benefit information it provides can exacerbate or create new financial challenges for student veterans.

Figure 3: Notable Challenges Veterans Face Pursuing Their Education



Source: GAO analysis.

Veterans Often Cope with a Range of Challenges While Pursuing Postsecondary Education

Student veterans face a range of challenges in pursuing postsecondary education, including some that are common to other nontraditional students. Like many other nontraditional students who have not gone straight from high school to college, veterans are usually responsible for managing their own finances and may be financially supporting spouses or children, as well as managing other family responsibilities. Veterans in some of the focus groups we spoke with were also employed while pursuing their education. For example, one veteran told us that she is supporting a daughter by balancing a full-time job and a VA work-study position, and that her grades have suffered as a result of these competing demands. Another veteran mentioned the difficulty of finding part-time or full-time jobs that are flexible enough to accommodate his class schedule. These characteristics that student veterans have in common with other nontraditional students, in particular supporting children and working full-time, can put college students at greater risk of not completing their

Examples of Comments from Participants in GAO Focus Groups

"[Veterans] have to worry about their current obligations... [Veterans who have families] have work, and you have family life, and then you try to push school in instead of having prescribed times where you dedicate to it."
 —Student veteran

"[The schools] are more for traditional students. So, you have a lot of professors that treat you as if you are the 18 year old kid that just got out of high school... The school is... you know, they're not set up for us."
 —Student veteran

academic programs, according to research by Education.¹⁵ Student veterans returning to the academic environment after time away can also face challenges navigating the academic bureaucracy, whether in attempting to receive transfer credit for previous college courses or military training, or in determining what other sources of financial aid may be available to them.¹⁶ Student veterans in two focus groups told us they were not aware that they were eligible to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or that they may qualify for federal grants or loans through Education (see app. II for a list of aid programs administered by Education).

Example of Comments from Participants in GAO Focus Groups

"[The hard part about transitioning] goes back to just not being around the guys that you've been with... I want to talk to somebody who understands what I've been through."

—Student veteran

Student veterans can also face difficulty managing the cultural transition from the military to an academic environment, which can leave veterans isolated from the rest of the college community. Student veterans in most of our focus groups talked about these feelings of isolation, with one veteran saying he found it difficult to be around people who did not understand his life experiences. They also said veterans can feel uncomfortable or stigmatized when students or professors express negative views about the military or ask about combat experiences that they might not want to discuss. While some school officials said that the maturity and focus they see from student veterans helps those students succeed and become leaders on campus, they noted that these characteristics also make some veterans feel out of place on campus. Student veterans in some of our focus groups said they had difficulty relating to younger students, feeling like their classmates lacked focus and did not show appropriate respect to others.

Example of Comments from Participants in GAO Focus Groups

"If you are having problems physically, that means it may take you more semesters to accomplish what a healthy person can do quicker."

—Student veteran

In addition to balancing work and family responsibilities and transition issues, many student veterans are also dealing with the effects of combat-related physical and psychological injuries, which can make it difficult for them to participate in some classroom settings without additional effort or special accommodations. We have previously found that veterans with disabilities are an emerging population in higher

¹⁵ Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Nontraditional Students*, NCES 2002-012, (Washington, D.C.: 2002).

¹⁶ As we have previously reported, students can face numerous challenges transferring credits from one institution to another. See GAO, *Transfer Students: Postsecondary Institutions Could Promote More Consistent Consideration of Coursework by Not Basing Determinations on Accreditation*, [GAO-06-22](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 18, 2005).

education, in part due to the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.¹⁷ These students may require academic accommodations to account for their disabilities. For example, a student veteran who is deaf or hard of hearing may have a note taker assigned to provide lecture notes, or a student who has reduced ability to concentrate may require a distraction-free room to complete a test.¹⁸ Some school officials and student veterans in some of our focus groups described how physical disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or traumatic brain injuries (TBI) added challenges to student veterans' academic pursuits. Other student veterans we spoke with had not been diagnosed with a particular disability but mentioned various symptoms that are commonly associated with PTSD or TBI.¹⁹ For example, one student, while he did not acknowledge a specific disability, mentioned having a greatly reduced ability to concentrate when taking timed tests in class. Officials from two different schools described students who suffered from PTSD as having a sense of unease in large classrooms or open spaces, which limited their ability or interest in participating in both academic and non-academic activities. It can also be difficult for veterans with disabilities to balance

¹⁷ GAO, *Higher Education and Disability: Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve Its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students*, [GAO-10-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2009).

¹⁸ There are two principal federal laws that protect disabled students in postsecondary schools from discrimination. The first, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, requires that no otherwise qualified individual with a disability be, solely by reason of a disability, excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. 29 U.S.C. § 794(a). The second, the Americans with Disabilities Act, requires that no otherwise qualified individual with a disability shall, solely by reason of a disability, be excluded from participation in; denied the benefits of the services, program, or activities of; or subjected to discrimination by any public entity. 42 U.S.C. § 12132. Furthermore, the Americans with Disabilities Act also prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability on the part of public accommodations, which includes "undergraduate, or postgraduate private schools, or other places of education." 42 U.S.C. §§ 12181(7)(J) and 12182. The Higher Education Opportunity Act included a number of provisions to benefit student veterans with disabilities, canceling the liability of veterans, for example, for certain federal student loans should the Secretary of Veterans Affairs determine the borrower to be unemployable due to a service-connected disability. Pub. L. No. 110-315, § 464(b), 122 Stat. 3266-67 (codified at 20 U.S.C. § 1087dd(c)(1)(F)(iv)).

¹⁹ PTSD symptoms can be debilitating and include insomnia; intense anxiety; and difficulty coping with work, social, and family relationships. Symptoms may appear within months of the traumatic event or be delayed for years. Left untreated, PTSD can lead to substance abuse, severe depression, and suicide. See GAO, *VA Health Care: VA Should Expedite the Implementation of Recommendations Needed to Improve Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Services*, [GAO-05-287](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 16, 2005).

their class schedules with numerous medical appointments for service-related injuries. For example, a veteran in one of our focus groups reported that he decided to stop attending PTSD counseling sessions because they conflicted with his class schedule. To mitigate the effects of these various physical and psychological challenges, two student veterans told us that they chose to take classes online rather than in a traditional classroom setting.²⁰ For example, one student veteran with a mobility disability told us that online classes allow him to avoid the difficulties of commuting to a classroom building.

Delayed Benefits and a Lack of Timely Information from VA Create Financial Challenges

Delayed benefit payments and varying monthly payments add to student veterans' challenges

Student veterans in most focus groups and most school officials told us that VA's delayed processing of education benefit payments can create or exacerbate financial challenges for student veterans as they begin their postsecondary education. In fiscal year 2012, it took an average of 31 days for VA to process new applications for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, 8 days longer than VA's performance target, and 17 days to process claims for benefit payments, 5 days longer than VA's performance target.²¹ Processing times during the fall of 2012 were at times even longer, with average processing times reaching up to 45 days for new applications and 22 days for benefit payments. Student veterans in some of our focus groups reported having their benefits delayed for two months or longer. Student veterans provided several examples of challenges that they experience as a result of these delays, including threats of eviction or having utilities turned off, and student veterans in most of our focus groups reported taking on large amounts of personal debt, such as

²⁰ For additional information on online learning, see GAO, *Higher Education: Use of New Data Could Help Improve Oversight of Distance Education*, [GAO-12-39](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 17, 2011).

²¹ A student veteran may apply for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (an original claim) either before or after enrolling in school. Once a student is enrolled, the school must also submit a supplemental claim for benefit payments to VA in order for the school to receive payment for tuition and fees and the veteran to receive the monthly housing allowance.

Examples of Comments from Participants in GAO Focus Groups

"I just paid my rent today. I was about to get evicted because—I had to take out a loan—because of the payment... the VA had not paid... It does pose a lot of stress."
—Student veteran

"It really is just crossing your fingers and hoping they [VA] pay you the right amount when you are supposed to be paid... But you're still having to worry about that financial issue—it takes away your want to go to school."
—Student veteran

"Because normally the most [payment] problems occur the first semester you're in school... If that is a veteran's first experience with school I think a lot of veterans are just like 'if this is how it is going to be I'm not going to do it.'"
—Student veteran

"You only get [VA housing allowance] for the month that you are full time, so it's virtually impossible to have a consistent income so that you can have a place to live and continue your—I mean—and continue your education."
—Student veteran

incurring credit card debt or bank loans to make up the shortfall. A veteran in one focus group told us that he and his family brought another student veteran into their home when they found out he was living in his car because his benefits were delayed and he did not have money to cover his housing expenses. These financial concerns create an additional challenge for students that can make it difficult for them to concentrate on their school work. Some student veterans and school officials told us that the delays are a particular pressure point during the first semester of enrollment. Student veterans in some focus groups said these payment delays caused them or other student veterans to reconsider their decision to pursue higher education and to contemplate dropping out of school, and officials at several schools said that payment delays have caused some veterans to drop out of their institutions.

Student veterans can also face challenges budgeting for their housing expenses during school breaks due to recent statutory changes that eliminated benefit payments during breaks in the academic calendar, known as "interval payments" or "break pay." Until passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010,²² VA had been authorized, under certain conditions, to pay eligible student veterans housing allowances under the Post-9/11 GI Bill during periods between school terms.²³ The 2010 act eliminated these payments for any breaks longer than seven days.²⁴ As a result, housing allowance payments are now prorated in any months during which there are school breaks, such as December and January and during spring break at many schools. This change ensures that veterans preserve their 36 months of benefits for when they are actually taking classes, but it creates significant challenges for students who lack other means of paying their monthly living expenses. The resulting variability of housing allowance payments combined with delayed payments increase the complexity faced by student veterans in budgeting for household needs or

²² Pub. L. No. 111-377, 124 Stat. 4106 (2011).

²³ VA was authorized to pay allowances to student veterans during any breaks that did not exceed eight weeks and were shorter than both the terms preceding and following. 38 U.S.C. § 3680(a) (2006).

²⁴ § 206, 124 Stat. 4126 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3680(a)). This change originated out of concern that veterans using part of their entitlement during periods when they "were not actively pursuing an education" could result in failure to complete their educational objectives within the 36 months of benefits to which they are entitled. It was also expected to reduce program expenditures. S. Rep. No. 111-346, at 23-24 and 27-28 (2010).

determining needs for additional funding, such as seeking employment or applying for federal student aid from Education. Veterans in some of our focus groups said it is difficult for them to find outside employment for just a month or less, or to increase hours at existing part-time jobs to make up for the loss of benefits during school breaks.

Although schools we visited generally allow veterans to stay enrolled in classes despite VA's processing delays,²⁵ the delays can also limit student veterans' ability to access alternative federal sources of student aid to cover their housing expenses while they await their benefits from VA.²⁶ Student veterans in some of our focus groups said that their schools do not disburse to veterans any other sources of aid they may have been awarded, including federal grants and loans provided by Education,²⁷ until payments are received from VA to cover the veterans' charges for tuition and fees.²⁸ As we have previously reported, the effective integration of related federal activities is necessary to achieve cross-cutting goals.²⁹ Although VA and Education both provide funding to help veterans afford higher education, VA's payment delays hinder schools' abilities to timely provide other needed federal financial

²⁵ Some school officials told us that their schools allow veterans to remain enrolled in class even if tuition and fee payments from VA are still being processed past the university deadline. Two school officials said the schools understand that VA is still working through processing issues, and they assume that if a student has a certificate of eligibility VA will eventually process the student's tuition and fees payment.

²⁶ We previously found that veterans generally received similar amounts of grants and loans from Education as nonveterans. See GAO, *Higher Education: Veteran Students Received Similar Amounts of Title IV Aid As Nonveterans but More Total Aid with GI Benefits*, [GAO-08-741](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2008).

²⁷ Students may apply for federal student aid funds in greater amounts than the tuition and fees charged by their school. Additional costs factored into "cost of attendance" can include average payments for books and supplies, room and board, dependent care, or costs related to disabilities. Because the cost of attendance is higher than tuition and fees, many students will apply for aid beyond the costs directly payable to the school, which results in a refund of remaining funds to students after tuition has been paid.

²⁸ Because VA benefits are excluded from the calculation for Title IV financial aid, it is possible that a student veteran could receive grants and loans covering the full cost of attendance in addition to their Post-9/11 GI Bill or other VA benefits. Officials from a higher education association representing schools said that, in such cases, it would be possible to have a credit balance even before VA benefits are disbursed.

²⁹ GAO, *Managing for Results: GPRA Modernization Act Implementation Provides Important Opportunities to Address Government Challenges*, [GAO-11-617T](#) (Washington D.C.: May 10, 2011).

assistance to student veterans. These barriers to the timely distribution of other federal grants and loans can therefore impede the effective operation of other federal student aid programs and stewardship of federal resources. Students' inability to access other forms of aid to cover their living expenses reduces their financial options and can lead to increased reliance on personal loans or credit card debt. An official from a higher education association representing schools said they knew of some schools that will occasionally pay students other aid they have been awarded in advance of VA payments if the school knows that the money will be coming from VA for tuition and fees. The official said schools' ability to provide students earlier access to other sources of financial aid may be limited in part because the schools don't have enough information from VA about how much money to expect.

We have previously issued recommendations to VA to address longstanding concerns with Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit processing delays, and VA has taken some steps in response (see app. III for the status of our recent recommendations to VA regarding its education benefit programs). In 2011, we examined the cause of these delays and determined that VA faced many challenges in processing the volume of claims it received, including the absence of an adequate information system to process claims.³⁰ VA has been developing a new system to address payment delays by automating key functions of the claims process, and implementing the program in multiple phases. However, the full implementation of this system, the Long Term Solution (LTS), has faced repeated delays. VA officials told us that recent statutory changes to the program required VA to modify the system and extend its deployment schedule. For instance, VA had to modify its system to reflect

³⁰ See GAO, *Veterans' Education Benefits: Enhanced Guidance and Collaboration Could Improve Administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill Program*, [GAO-11-356R](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 5, 2011). GAO recommended that VA should collaborate with Education to leverage their experience administering student aid and explore opportunities for streamlining VA's administrative practices. As a result of this recommendation, officials from VA and Education met on several occasions to discuss the processes used by each agency to deliver and recoup funds issued for educational assistance. VA determined that existing statutory and technical differences prevent VA from adopting certain Education processes that have been deemed effective in administering federal student assistance. See [GAO-11-356R](#).

statutory changes to the way tuition and fees are calculated.³¹ Because of these and other delays, VA officials said they were not able to fully deploy the most recent wave of LTS, which introduced automated processing of some claims, until September 24, 2012. VA officials told us that this delay, in conjunction with increasing claims volume, contributed to longer average processing times for original claims (which establish a veteran's eligibility) and supplemental claims (which initiate benefit payments).

VA officials said the recent deployment of the LTS is already helping address the backlog of unprocessed claims. Although all original claims are still processed by hand, VA officials said that LTS now automatically processes more than 45 percent of supplemental claims. According to VA officials, the average processing times for supplemental claims dropped to 6 days in April 2013 due primarily to the automation provided by LTS. Officials also said that the automation of supplemental claims allowed the agency to shift human resources to processing original claims, which decreased original claims processing times to 19 days in April 2013. VA has traditionally struggled with the volume of claims during peak fall processing months, so this coming fall (2013) will show the extent to which automation has increased capacity since it will be the first time claims processing will be automated for the full fall semester.

A Lack of Information from VA About Benefit Policies and Process May Further Impede Student Veterans' Educational Success

VA offers little information about its benefit processing times and housing allowance policies, and leaves student veterans unprepared to deal with the financial consequence of payment delays and prorated housing allowance payments during school breaks. While delayed and varying payments present financial challenges for student veterans and their households, a lack of advance notice about benefit policies and process limits student veterans' ability to prepare for these challenges and evaluate and make informed financial decisions. Student veterans in some of our focus groups said they did not have advance warning about these delays in any correspondence from VA or their schools. VA officials confirmed that they do not provide any advance information to students about how long to expect for claims to be processed. VA officials said that

³¹ Before the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010, tuition and fees were assessed annually on a statewide basis not to exceed the maximum in-state tuition and fees for a public school. The act amended tuition and fees provisions to cover public schools, and capped payments for academic year 2011 at \$17,500 a year for private and foreign schools. § 102(a), 124 Stat. 2011 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3313(c)(1)(A)(ii)(II)(aa)).

**Examples of Comments from
Participants in GAO Focus Groups**

"More efficient communication is a key. [Regarding the VA Call Center] We should not have to wait—I mean—45 minutes, 2 hour, 3 hours, 'call you back in 2 weeks.' That's crazy."

—Student veteran

"When I called [the VA call center], and I called for like three days straight... it was like a voice message thing that said 'now is not a good time to call, please call back later.'"

—Student veteran

information about payment amounts and timeframes varies depending on when and where a student decides to enroll and the department does not provide estimates when it initially processes eligibility certification paperwork. The lack of estimated benefit payment timelines, however, has negative consequences on student veterans' ability to budget for their housing expenses. VA does provide some information on its break pay policy in the certification and award letters that VA sends to student veterans,³² as well as some information on the GI Bill website,³³ but students in one of our focus groups told us they were surprised the first time they received a smaller housing allowance payment. They did not know why the payment was smaller until they either called the VA call center or found out about the break pay policy from classmates or school officials. Some students, because of the delays in receiving their initial housing allowance checks and book stipends, told us they did not know what their regular benefit amount should be because they were getting a different amount every month.

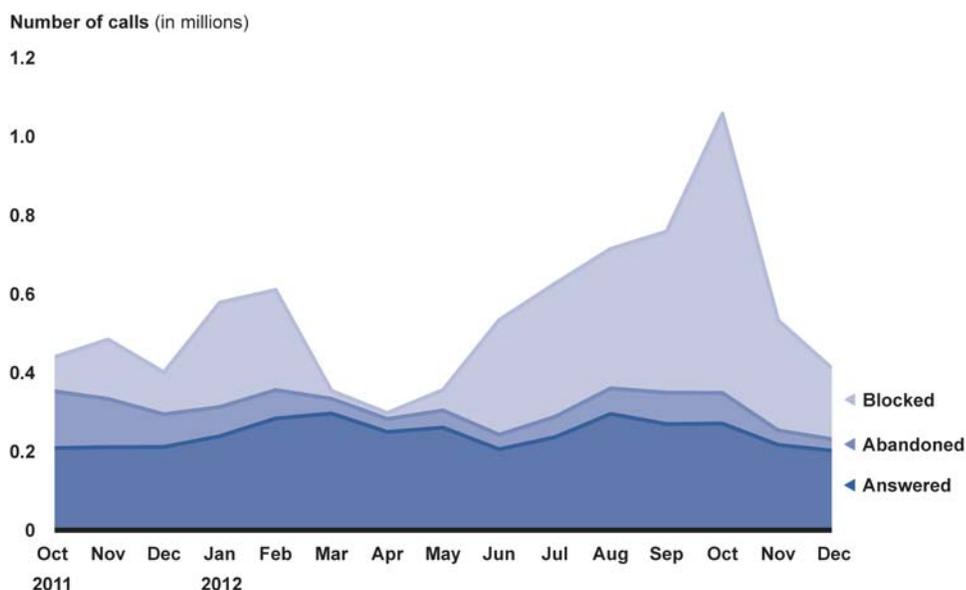
Student veterans also faced multiple challenges when they attempted to contact VA with questions about their benefits or payment status. Student veterans we spoke with reported waiting an hour or more to speak with a representative whenever they called VA's toll-free call center (1-888-GIBILL-1). When we attempted to call the toll-free number between October and December 2012, 19 of 51 calls could not be processed due to high call volume, 27 were given an estimated wait time of 33 to 50 minutes, and the remaining 5 calls reached a message saying that they were connected, but may wait 20 minutes or more to speak to an operator. VA officials pointed to an increase in education benefit claims as one driver of greater call volume: call volume increased 142 percent from October 2011 to October 2012 at the same time as the number of claims submitted by veterans and schools increased. VA data on its

³² The award letters that VA sends to student veterans mention that beneficiaries will receive prorated payments for months in which semesters begin or end, but the letters do not say that other breaks, such as spring break, may also trigger smaller payments, if those breaks are more than seven days long.

³³ The GI Bill website (gibill.va.gov) includes a paragraph describing the end of break pay on its main page for the Post-9/11 GI Bill (as of April 8, 2013). However, there is no mention of break pay policy on the page describing the housing allowance policy, or on a link that directs veterans to "determine your [monthly housing allowance] for most circumstances" (as of April 8, 2013). Additionally, the "search frequently asked questions" function on the website does not address break pay or varied monthly housing payments (as of February 25, 2013).

education call center show that, for fiscal year 2012, 38 percent of 6.1 million incoming calls to the system were blocked (meaning that the system did not have the capacity to process them) (see fig. 4). Among the calls that entered the system, 22 percent were abandoned, meaning that the caller hung up before reaching a representative.

Figure 4: GI Bill Call Center Volume (October 2011-December 2012)



Source: GAO analysis of VA data.

We have previously issued recommendations to VA to address problems with call center operations, and VA has taken some steps in response. In our 2011 report, we assessed call center performance and noted concerns including long wait times and questions about the accuracy and consistency of information call center agents provided to students and schools.³⁴ To address these concerns, we recommended that VA establish performance measures for the VA call center. VA officials said they have since developed draft performance measures for their call center and are in the process of finalizing them. In addition, VA officials said they have implemented several new initiatives to improve call center

³⁴ See [GAO-11-356R](#) and GAO, *VA Education Benefits: Actions Taken, but Outreach and Oversight Could Be Improved*, [GAO-11-256](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2011).

operations. For example, callers now have the option of having a call center operator call them back once they are available rather than waiting on hold. Additionally, callers can be routed to an automated system to get the amount of their most recent benefit check.

Despite VA's recent effort to improve call center operations, the call center still has difficulty handling the large volume of calls it receives from student veterans. As illustrated in figure 4, the recent high rates of blocked calls are likely due to the large increase in call volume from June 2012 through October 2012, the same time VA was processing fall semester benefits. The high call volume may be a symptom of the lack of benefit information available to veterans. Since VA does not provide information in advance to student veterans about payment delays or amounts, veterans must contact the call center to get answers to their basic questions. In our focus groups, student veterans said they attempted to contact VA's call center for information on the status of their benefits processing and to ask about missing or late benefit payments. Since veterans may not know how long it typically takes VA to process benefits, they may be more likely to contact the call center at the beginning of the academic term to inquire about their benefits. In commenting on a draft of this report, VA reported improvements in call center performance, with average caller wait times falling to less than 2 minutes in April 2013. However, it remains to be seen whether these improvements can be maintained when call volumes increase during the peak fall benefit processing period.

VA Provides Limited Support to Veterans on Campus and Schools are Generally Building Services for Veterans Without Guidance from VA

VA has begun some efforts to improve support services for student veterans, though these are currently limited to a small number of campuses. Begun in 2008, VetSuccess on Campus is a pilot program that places VA counselors on a school campus to provide opportunities for direct interaction with student veterans and school staff. The VA counselors work in tandem with the school's existing resources for veterans to provide counseling to student veterans and connect them to existing support services from VA, the school, and community organizations.³⁵ Two of the schools that we visited have VetSuccess counselors on campus, and school officials at those schools noted that the presence of VetSuccess counselors provided an opportunity for the universities to increase their outreach efforts to student veterans on campus. Currently, VA has established VetSuccess counselors at 32 institutions, and the agency plans to dedicate an additional 129 full-time equivalent counselors to VetSuccess on Campus to expand to more schools in fiscal years 2013 and 2014.³⁶ A Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment official said that VA would like to eventually serve all schools with 500 or more student veterans enrolled. Despite this expansion, VetSuccess counselors will still only be available at a small fraction of the over 5,800 institutions that enroll student veterans.

In addition to VetSuccess on Campus, VA has made some other services available to student veterans. VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program offers educational-vocational counseling to veterans who are eligible for VA education benefits.³⁷ This counseling includes psychological testing and a discussion of employment and education goals. Additionally, student veterans are eligible to apply for financial assistance to pay for academic tutoring,³⁸ and student veterans may work at their schools in VA work study jobs while receiving GI Bill

³⁵ The VetSuccess on Campus program is operated through VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment division, but the counselors' services are generally available to all student veterans.

³⁶ VetSuccess dedicates approximately one full-time counselor to each participating school, but some schools have multiple counselors, and some counselors work with multiple schools.

³⁷ 38 U.S.C. § 3104(a)(1) and (2).

³⁸ 38 U.S.C. §§ 3314 and 3492.

benefits, as long as the students are working in direct support of the school's veteran services.³⁹

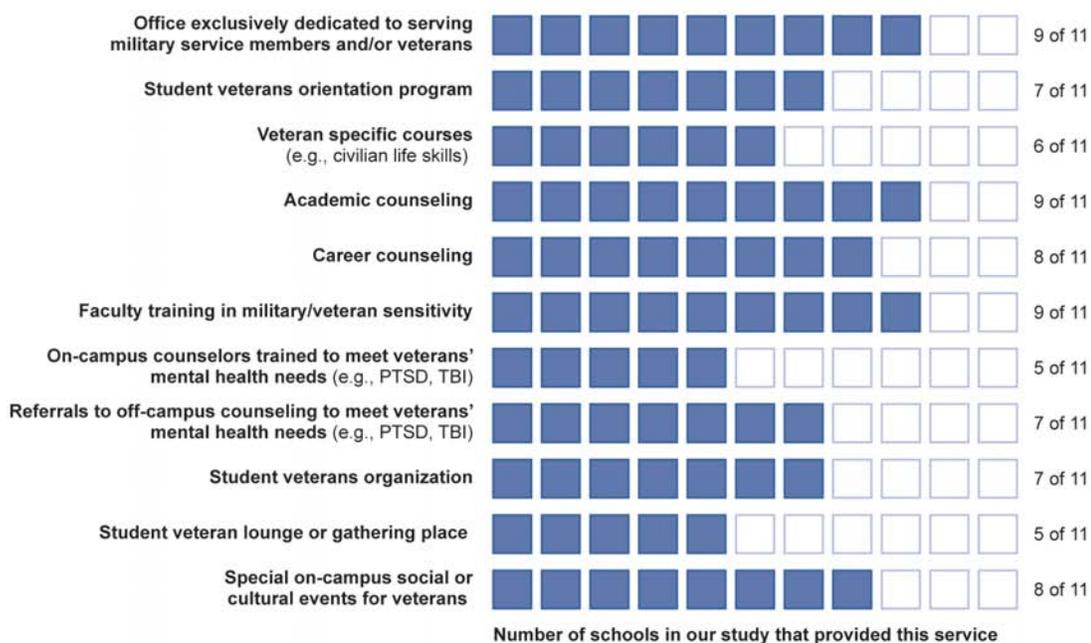
Many of the schools we visited are also taking steps to improve the support services they provide to student veterans; though these efforts varied in size and scope. According to school officials, and as illustrated in figure 5, most of the schools we visited have created a range of veteran-specific services including providing additional dedicated staff positions or even full offices that provide counseling, academic advising, or other assistance to student veterans.⁴⁰ Additionally, officials from several schools we visited said they support student veteran organizations on campus, offer a dedicated lounge space or networking opportunities for student veterans to offer peer-to-peer support, hold events on campus to raise the visibility of student veterans, or help student veterans assimilate into the larger university community through new student orientation for student veterans. Officials at schools that have experience providing veteran support said that it is important to customize services to meet veterans' needs because veterans may face challenges accessing general campus support services, such as spending limited time on campus. Feelings of isolation and cultural differences can also make veterans reluctant to seek out available support services. Many officials at the schools we visited told us that student veterans are used to self-reliance, and may not seek out or accept assistance from general campus resources for their needs, whether academic, health-related, or financial. Veterans in some of our focus groups said they prefer to seek out other student veterans as a source of strength and support. To address these concerns, school officials we met with told us they needed to tailor some support services, such as engaging student veteran groups in promoting services or creating some peer-to-peer support mechanisms, to make them more appealing to veterans. These customized support services might entail newly-created services or resources, such as veteran-specific academic or psychological counseling, or they may tailor their outreach to student veterans to show how veterans can benefit from existing campus services. Schools that did not offer a service specific to veterans often

³⁹ 38 U.S.C. §§ 3104(4) and 3485.

⁴⁰ All schools are required to designate at least one person who is responsible for signing enrollment certifications and other documents relating to VA benefits. 38 C.F.R. § 21.4266(a)(2) (2012).

told us that they have general services, such as academic or career counseling, that are available to all students, including veterans.

Figure 5: Examples of Support Services Selected Schools Are Providing Specifically for Veterans



Source: GAO analysis of information provided by 11 selected schools.

Schools are generally building their own on-campus support services and resources for veterans without any guidance or assistance from VA. VA's strategic plan recognizes that leveraging these types of partnerships to reach veterans is critical in order for the agency to achieve its programmatic goals and fulfill its mission to serve veterans. VA partially depends upon individual schools to provide veterans with the support services they need to pursue and achieve their educational goals; however, VA has not sought opportunities to provide schools with information that could help schools improve on-campus services for student veterans. As we have previously reported, schools are concerned about the challenges of supporting emerging student populations, such as veterans with disabilities.⁴¹ In these cases, the federal government can

⁴¹ GAO, *Higher Education and Disability: Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve Its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students*, [GAO-10-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2009).

play an important role in disseminating information about best practices that have wide applicability across schools. VA officials said they have generally relied on higher education associations such as the American Council on Education to fill this knowledge gap by providing schools with information and resources for building student support services.⁴² However, these organizations may not reach schools outside their traditional membership base.⁴³ Another potential resource for schools is a new VA proposal, still being developed, that VA officials said would provide grants to selected large schools, or those with large student veteran enrollments, to demonstrate and share results of their student veteran support services. VA officials said this proposal, which grew out of a White House task force, is still working its way through the agency's approval process, and the scope and timeframe for this effort have not yet been approved and finalized. If it is implemented, this initiative could provide additional information on veteran support services, but by focusing solely on schools with large veteran populations, it may not address the needs of smaller institutions and those with smaller student veteran enrollments, which collectively serve many student veterans.⁴⁴ Smaller schools may not have the resources like larger schools to create dedicated staff positions or offices, and therefore may require different approaches to strategically respond to the increasing number of student veterans on campus and effectively meet veterans' needs. However, these institutions could still benefit from additional guidance and best practices for leveraging community partnerships and connecting veterans with existing resources. Because student veterans could benefit from a range of resources and services including those offered by their schools, by VA, and by other organizations, many schools would be well-served by hearing about various promising practices employed by different types of

⁴² The American Council on Education is one example of a higher education association that has developed guidance for schools building veteran support services. Its Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions highlights a variety of best practices and profiles student veterans programs from across the country. Also see American Council on Education, *From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members* (Washington, D.C.: July 2012).

⁴³ Although the American Council on Education represents over 1,800 institutions, there were more than 5,800 schools that enrolled Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in 2011.

⁴⁴ Almost 40 percent of beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in fiscal year 2011 attended schools that enrolled fewer than 250 veterans. These schools with small veteran populations accounted for 91 percent of the schools that enrolled Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries in fiscal year 2011.

schools. Without this type of knowledge sharing, VA is forgoing an opportunity to leverage the resources of individual schools to better meet the needs of the student veteran population.

Veterans' Academic Success is Unclear, and VA Lacks a Plan For Using New Data Collection Efforts to Improve Its Education Programs

Little is Known about Veterans' Postsecondary Outcomes

Although VA has been providing education benefits since 1944, there is not currently a robust source of national data on student veterans' postsecondary outcomes. Existing studies from VA and Education on student veteran outcomes are generally limited to prior generations of veterans and do not capture the increase in beneficiaries under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.⁴⁵ In addition, it is challenging to evaluate postsecondary outcomes for any type of student since there is no single measure that fully captures educational achievement or success. Researchers have traditionally used measures such as graduation rates and employment outcomes to assess educational outcomes. However, the traditional graduation rate used by Education focuses only on first-time, full-time students and therefore excludes veterans that may have taken college

⁴⁵ The Bureau of Labor Statistics also reports data on veterans' educational attainment and employment rates, but these data include all veterans rather than just those who enrolled in postsecondary education after they left the military. These data indicate that 74 percent of veterans who served at any time since September 2001 have taken at least some college courses, compared to 57 percent of nonveterans age 25 years and older. These data also show that in February 2013 the monthly unemployment rate for veterans who have served at any time since September 2001 was 9.4 percent compared to 7.9 percent for nonveterans 18 years and over.

courses prior to or while they were in the military.⁴⁶ Other measures of student outcomes used by schools and researchers, such as completion rates, are applicable to all types of students and can shed some light on student veteran outcomes; however, available information is incomplete.⁴⁷

VA's existing study of student veterans suggests that degree completion rates may vary among VA's various educational benefit programs, but although this study will be expanded to include the Post-9/11 GI Bill, data is not yet available on VA's largest benefit program. VA has contracted with the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit central repository for student enrollment and degree data, to conduct annual studies since 2010 comparing degree completion rates for veterans receiving VA education benefits with other students.⁴⁸ The most recent 2011 report indicates, that for the sample of veterans identified in the National Student Clearinghouse database, Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty beneficiaries have lower completion rates than comparable students, while Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve beneficiaries have higher completion rates.⁴⁹ These differences in completion rates among VA's education benefit programs may be attributable to the fact that each program targets different types of veterans. For instance, completion rates for the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve program may be different than the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty program due to

⁴⁶ Education's standard graduation rate measure is calculated using the number of students entering the institution as full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in a particular year (cohort), by race/ethnicity and gender; the number completing their program within 150 percent of normal time to completion; and the number that transfer to other institutions if transfer is part of the institution's mission.

⁴⁷ Completion rates are defined in this report as the percentage of students who received a degree, diploma, or certificate within a certain time period. This can include students that are not first-time, full-time students.

⁴⁸ The National Student Clearinghouse, established by the higher education community in 1993, serves as a central repository and single point of contact for the collection and exchange of enrollment, degree, diploma, and certificate records on behalf of participating postsecondary and secondary institutions. VA's National Student Clearinghouse studies currently include data on participants in the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty, Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve, and Reserve Educational Assistance Program. In January 2013, VA announced that it was working with the National Student Clearinghouse and Student Veterans of America, a coalition of student veterans groups, to begin researching completion rates for Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries.

⁴⁹ For the comparison groups, the National Student Clearinghouse used a random sample of students with age ranges that mirrored those of the beneficiaries in each of VA's education benefit programs.

demographic differences between service members on active duty or in the reserves. The existence of these variations makes it difficult to estimate probable completion rates for beneficiaries of other programs like the Post-9/11 GI Bill that were not captured in the study. In addition, VA officials said they have not published these studies because they are concerned that the results from this sample of veterans are not generalizable to the entire veterans' population. This is because some schools do not voluntarily submit student data to the National Student Clearinghouse database. Although the institutions that participate in the National Student Clearinghouse represent over 90 percent of the national enrollment, many for-profit schools do not participate.

The most recent data from Education indicate that more than a third of veterans who initially enrolled in the 2003-2004 academic year had completed a degree within 6 years, but this survey included a relatively small number of veterans and pre-dates the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Although it was not designed to specifically track student veterans, the survey—Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study—included some veterans in the sample of first-time students it tracked from academic year 2003-2004 through 2009.⁵⁰ In addition to the estimated 41 percent (the 95 percent confidence interval is from 26-55 percent) of the student veteran population who attained a degree or certificate, an estimated 20 percent (confidence interval is from 10-30 percent) were still enrolled 6 years after they started postsecondary education, while the remaining 40 percent (confidence interval is from 28-51 percent) had left school without attaining a degree.⁵¹ When compared to similar nonveteran students, veterans were statistically less likely to have left school without a degree, although the percentage of veterans

⁵⁰ The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study is conducted by Education and follows students who first begin their postsecondary education. These students are asked questions about their experiences during, and transitions through, postsecondary education and into the labor force.

⁵¹ Percentages do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. All estimates from Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study are subject to sampling error. Because Education followed a probability procedure based on random selections, the sample is only one of a large number of samples that might have been drawn. Since each sample could have provided different estimates, confidence in the precision of any particular sample's results is expressed as a 95 percent confidence interval. This is the interval that would contain the actual population value for 95 percent of the samples that could have been drawn. The margin of error associated with the confidence intervals of the survey estimates is no more than plus or minus 15 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence.

that attained a degree or were still enrolled in school was not significantly different from nonveterans.⁵² Education also includes student veterans in other surveys it conducts, such as the annual Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System surveys, but these studies do not collect separate student veteran outcome data.⁵³

VA Is Coordinating with Other Federal Agencies to Develop Student Outcome Measures and Implementing Multiple Efforts to Collect New Data on Student Veterans

VA has initiated several recent efforts to collect new outcome information on student veterans, which will eventually shed light on the extent to which veterans are achieving successful postsecondary outcomes. A key part of these efforts is VA's ongoing coordination with Education and DOD to develop outcome measures for service members and veterans, including those participating in the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This coordination was initiated as a result of the April 2012 Executive Order mentioned earlier, "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members." The Executive Order required VA, Education, and DOD to develop common student outcome measures that would permit comparisons across various service member, veteran, and other federal education programs, as well as allow comparisons across individual institutions and types of institution. Officials from VA and Education said they have convened a working group to develop these common measures and expect to release their proposal this summer.

⁵² We compared completion rates for self-reported veterans to the rates for nonveteran, independent students. Veterans are considered independent students for Title IV aid purposes. Independent students also include, for example, those who are married, supporting children, or at least 24 years of age. Among nonveterans, an estimated 33 percent attained a degree or certificate, 15 percent were still enrolled 6 years after they started postsecondary education, and 53 percent had left school without a degree. The difference between the percentage of veterans and nonveterans that left school without a degree is statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

⁵³ The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System is the federal government's core postsecondary data collection program. Every college, university, and career and technical institution that participates in federal student financial aid programs is required to complete this group of annual surveys on a variety of topics including enrollments, graduation rates, staffing, finances, and financial aid. 20 U.S.C. § 1094(a)(17). Education is also planning to incorporate additional information on veterans into these surveys starting in 2014, but this will likely focus more on veterans' enrollment characteristics (e.g., number of undergraduates and graduate student veterans enrolled, number of undergraduates receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits) and school policies and services (e.g., course credit for military training, existence of a student veteran organization) rather than outcomes.

VA is using multiple approaches to collect student outcome data over both the short- and long-term. Since there is no single best way to measure student outcomes, VA's multifaceted approach should provide the agency with a more complete picture of the student veteran population. For example, VA recently started an initiative to begin documenting the number of beneficiaries who complete an academic program. Beginning in 2011, VA officials said they requested that schools begin voluntarily reporting back to VA whenever a current beneficiary completes a degree or certificate program.⁵⁴ VA officials said they will use these data to track completions for cohorts of veterans based on when they left the military.⁵⁵ They expect initial data to be available by 2015, after veterans that started using their benefits in academic year 2011-2012 have begun exhausting their 36 months of benefits.⁵⁶ Although this new voluntary reporting mechanism will not capture all student veterans, including those who complete degrees after exhausting their benefits, the initiative will provide VA with real-time data on degree completions for veterans that are currently receiving education benefits.⁵⁷

VA is also developing a long-term study that will track student veteran outcomes over the next 20 years. Although VA has already begun one component of the study—tracking beneficiaries receiving Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment services—officials expect the survey of

⁵⁴ VA officials said they lack statutory authority to require all school to report completion data to VA.

⁵⁵ In addition to reporting completions to VA, some postsecondary institutions are also using other measures to track veteran outcomes for their own internal use. Four of the 11 schools in our study were already using alternative measures such as student veteran retention rates and grade point average to track student veterans' progress and outcomes.

⁵⁶ Although it generally takes full-time students 4 years to complete a bachelor's degree (36 months of classes spread over four, 9-month academic years), students can complete an associate degree in 2 years or even a bachelor's degree in 3 years if they are continuously enrolled or have prior academic credits. However, veterans are eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for 15 years after they leave the military. 38 U.S.C. § 3321.

⁵⁷ VA is also statutorily required to start reporting to congress annually on appropriate student outcome measures, such as the number of beneficiaries that complete a degree or certificate program. Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-154, § 402(a), 126 Stat. 1165, 1188-89 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3325).

Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries to start in 2013.⁵⁸ The Post-9/11 GI Bill study will follow three cohorts of veterans who started receiving benefits in fiscal years 2010, 2012, and 2014 and survey them annually about their educational progress, employment status, and use of other federal benefit programs. The survey will also ask respondents to assess the effect that their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits had on their ability to gain employment. VA officials said these studies will allow them to examine a broad range of outcome measures such as graduation rates, income growth, and home ownership. Since the first cohort of veterans began receiving benefits in 2010, it will be a year until initial outcome data is available on survey participants. Beneficiaries have 36 months of benefits if they are eligible for the full benefit (equivalent to four academic years), so VA officials said initial data will not be available on their educational outcomes until 2014. VA plans to use the first few years of the study to develop a solid base of demographic data that they can build on with outcome data over the 20-year study period. Although VA officials cautioned that the study findings may not be generalizable beyond the three cohorts of beneficiaries surveyed, this study could allow VA to analyze the long-term impact of education benefits on veterans' economic wellbeing.

VA Does Not Have a Plan for Using New Student Veteran Outcomes Data to Improve Its Education Programs

VA has not developed a plan for using emerging data on student veteran outcomes to improve its education benefit programs. VA's new efforts to collect additional data on student veteran outcomes present an opportunity for VA to better understand the extent to which it is meeting its broad goals for the education programs: producing a better-educated and more productive workforce.⁵⁹ VA officials said the new data they are collecting on student veteran outcomes could eventually help veterans make informed educational decisions; however, VA officials said they have not yet determined exactly how they will use the new data they are

⁵⁸ The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment component of the longitudinal study, which commenced in fiscal year 2010, was mandated by the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 (Pub. L. No. 110-389, § 334, 122 Stat. 4145, 4172-73 (codified at 38 U.S.C. § 3122)), and the second annual report, which focused on initial participant characteristics and changes in participant status, was issued in July 2012. The Post-9/11 GI Bill component of the study was not included in the mandate. As of January 2013, the proposal for the Post-9/11 GI Bill component of the study was still being reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget.

⁵⁹ VA, *Fiscal Year 2013 Budget Submission* (Washington, D.C.: 2012).

collecting or decided if they will publicly release the data in a format that is useful for student veterans or policy makers. VA is already making a significant investment of time and resources to collect these new data on student veterans, with the longitudinal study scheduled to last for 20 years at an initial cost of \$1.7 million over the first 3 years for the Post-9/11 GI Bill component of the study. However, without plans on how to use the new data, VA will forgo an opportunity to ensure it is collecting the most appropriate data, improve management of education benefit programs, help veterans make informed academic choices, and facilitate student veterans' academic success.⁶⁰ Used effectively, these data could also provide VA with a tool for assessing the impact of its education benefit programs and the extent to which these programs help VA achieve its mission of caring for veterans as they transition to civilian life, pursue their academic goals, and join a well-educated and competitive workforce.

VA's current strategic planning and performance measures focus on benefit processing and other administrative processes, such as claims processing time and accuracy, but not on student veteran outcomes. VA officials said they focus on process measures because their primary role is to provide veterans with education benefits, not to be responsible for veterans' individual academic performance and goals, which may not include degree attainment. In 2012, VA began to move beyond a focus on process measures by administering a satisfaction survey on education benefits to veterans.⁶¹ Nonetheless, without a plan for using emerging outcome data, VA has limited ability to assess outcomes achieved by student veterans, determine the extent to which the federal investment has helped student veterans achieve academic success, and target management attention and resources to mitigate challenges student veterans face in achieving their educational goals.

To facilitate the use of outcome information, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has provided guidance to help agencies implement

⁶⁰ We have previously reported that data on student outcomes can also shed light on the quality of education provided by institutions. See [GAO-12-143](#).

⁶¹ The new "Voice of the Veterans" client satisfaction survey will capture information on veterans' satisfaction with VA's various benefit programs, including how well their benefits are helping support their educational needs. VA expects to receive about 3,000 survey responses. VA officials said this survey will provide them with information on how well it is meeting veterans' needs.

performance management systems that articulate clear statements of what the agency wants to achieve to advance its mission and address relevant national problems, needs, challenges, and opportunities.⁶² The importance of developing and monitoring programmatic outcomes has also been acknowledged in government-wide legislation. For example, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 introduced planning and reporting requirements that seek to shift the focus of federal management and decision making from a focus with the number of program tasks or activities completed or services provided to a more direct consideration of the results of programs.⁶³ The act was an effort to improve federal program effectiveness, accountability, and service delivery. In addition, managing outcomes is essential to the proper stewardship of federal funds. As we have previously reported, it is critical for federal agencies to demonstrate the impact of their work and ensure the efficient use of their resources.⁶⁴

In contrast to VA's process-oriented performance measures, Education uses several student outcome-based performance measures to help strategically manage its federal student aid and other postsecondary education programs. Education's strategic plan for 2011-2014 sets national student outcome goals for increasing postsecondary attainment, such as increasing the number and percentage of students who complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years and the number and percentage of students who complete an associate's degree or certificate within 3 years. According to Education officials, knowing the extent to which students are achieving stated outcome goals helps the department manage its programs at the macro level and provides a high level view of how its various programs are performing in combination with each other. For example, information on student outcomes helps Education broadly assess its full array of programs.

⁶² OMB Circular No. A-11 (pp. 545 and 547).

⁶³ Pub. L. No. 111-352, §§ 2-4 and 10, 124 Stat. 3866, 3866-73 and 3880-81 (2011). The act amended the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285.

⁶⁴ GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* [GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 1, 1999).

Conclusions

Student veterans continue to face long delays and other administrative challenges almost 4 years into the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. These veterans have honorably served their country, and they should be able to expect that the federal government will efficiently provide them with the benefits they earned. However, payment delays have created an undue financial challenge for student veterans and hindered their ability to pursue their academic goals. VA has recently reported reductions in processing delays, but it is important to monitor VA's efforts to ensure such progress is sustained.

The negative consequences of VA's payment delays are compounded by the lack of benefit information available to student veterans about payment timelines and policies. If veterans must continue to navigate their transition into higher education without sufficient information about VA benefits or other available federal financial aid, they may not be able to effectively budget for payment delays and variations in their housing allowance during school breaks. VA's payment delays also limit the financial options available to student veterans by making it difficult for some veterans to access other federal sources of financial aid in a timely manner. Without timely access to other federal sources of grants and loans, veterans may continue to take on unnecessary credit card and personal loan debt to cover their living expenses while they await their benefit payments from VA. Such financial stress may make it more difficult for student veterans to achieve their educational goals.

Although VA has placed counselors on some campuses and is developing plans to support veteran services at a few, mostly large institutions, the vast majority of schools that enroll veterans do not receive guidance or assistance from VA about developing support services. Some of these schools are beginning to build their own on-campus support services for veterans, but schools are concerned about the challenges of supporting this emerging student population. Some higher education associations are already developing guidance to help schools build support services for veterans, but these efforts could benefit from VA's direct lines of communication to every school that enrolls veterans. If VA continues to provide only limited support for schools that are attempting to build or enhance their own support infrastructure, it will forgo an opportunity to leverage the resources of individual schools to better meet the needs of the student veteran population.

It is critical for VA to not only collect outcome data but also plan how it will use such data to improve management of its education benefit programs. Without a plan for effectively using new outcome data, it will be difficult for

VA to identify challenges that impact student veterans' academic pursuits, ensure schools' accountability, help veterans make informed decisions about their academic programs and institutions, and inform policy makers about the value veterans are receiving for the government's substantial investment.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To improve VA's administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and other education benefit programs and help veterans achieve their education goals, we recommend that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs take the following actions:

- Develop materials or processes to inform student veterans about education benefits before they enroll in school, including expected payment timelines, housing allowance policies, and other financial resources such as the availability of grants and loans provided by Education. For example, VA could provide veterans with current information on expected processing times when they submit their original applications for VA education benefits, and more clearly highlight in online and printed resources VA's housing allowance policies and the availability of federal grants and loans to help veterans financially prepare for school breaks.
- Work with postsecondary schools to identify the types of information that would help facilitate more timely access to other sources of federal financial aid during the VA benefit processing period.
- Leverage the experience and best practices of those schools and organizations that are currently providing support services to student veterans, for example, by hosting an online forum or raising awareness of existing resources from higher education associations and veteran service organizations.
- Develop a plan for using new sources of data on student veteran outcomes as they become available to improve program management and help student veterans achieve their academic goals.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education for review and comment. VA generally agreed with our conclusions, concurred with our recommendations, and stated that it has taken action or developed plans to address certain issues we identified in the report. VA's comments also included targeted dates for when it expects to complete the specified actions to address each of our

recommendations, ranging from as early as May 31, 2013 to no later than September 30, 2013. In concurring with our recommendation to work with schools to facilitate earlier access to other sources of federal financial aid, VA noted that it has taken actions to better inform veterans about college costs and available financial aid options. Although these efforts will likely help students make better informed decisions, VA should still take steps to work with schools to identify the types of information that would help schools facilitate more timely access of other federal grants and loans to veterans while they are awaiting their benefits from VA. In regards to our findings, VA expressed concerns with a statement in our report about the information it provides to veterans about benefit policies and processes. We have revised this sentence to clarify that we are referring specifically to information on benefit processing times and housing allowance policies during school breaks. In response to our findings about benefit payment delays and long education call center wait times during the fall 2012 enrollment period, VA acknowledged these issues but stated that our report should have more fully highlighted its recent progress in each of these areas. We included the information about fall 2012 benefit payment delays and call center wait times in our report because one of our research objectives was to examine the challenges students face pursuing their education, and payment delays and call center wait times were a major challenge student veterans cited during the focus groups we conducted from July 2012 to January 2013. VA's comments also included new information on claims processing timeliness and education call center wait times from April 2013 (updating the February 2013 data we had previously included in the report) as well as new information about its programs and initiatives. We have incorporated the updated information on claims processing timeliness and call center wait times into our report, and encourage VA to build on its current initiatives to improve its program management and address the key challenges veterans face pursuing higher education.

VA's comments have been reprinted in appendix IV.

Education did not provide any comments on our report.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Veterans Affairs; the Secretary of Education; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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

Melissa Emrey-Arras

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

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of our report were to examine: (1) What challenges, if any, do veterans face in pursuing higher education; (2) How does VA support student veterans on campus? and (3) To what extent are veterans achieving successful academic outcomes and how does VA use data on student outcomes to improve its education benefit programs? While our scope included all of VA's active education benefit programs, we focused on the Post-9/11 GI Bill program because it is the largest of these programs. We limited our scope to institutions of higher learning, defined as institutions offering postsecondary academic instruction leading to an associate's or higher degree. We did not include other types of training programs approved under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, such as on-the-job training and flight training.

Student Veteran Challenges and Services

For our first two objectives, we selected 11 institutions at which students were receiving VA education benefits for interviews with school officials and focus groups with student veterans. We selected this non-generalizable sample of schools to capture diverse perspectives on the various challenges student veterans may face by including a mix of program lengths and sectors (public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit), traditional classroom-based and online schools; institutions with student veteran populations ranging from less than 200 to nearly 40,000; schools with and without VA counselors on campus; and schools in different parts of the country. We also included some schools that were recommended by higher education associations and veteran service organizations because they provide strong veteran support services (see table 2 for the list of institutions included in the study).

Table 2: Institutions Included in Study for Interviews with Officials and Student Focus Groups

School Name	Location	Institutional Sector	Program Length
American Military University	Charles Town, WV ^a	private, for-profit	4-year
George Mason University	Fairfax, VA	public	4-year
George Washington University	Washington, DC	private, not-for-profit	4-year
Northern Virginia Community College	Annandale, VA	public	2-year
Our Lady of the Lake University	San Antonio, TX	private, not-for-profit	4-year
Palo Alto College	San Antonio, TX	public	2-year
Saint Leo University	Saint Leo, FL ^b	private, not-for-profit	4-year
Southwest Florida College	Fort Myers, FL	private, for-profit	Primarily 2-year
University of Phoenix	Phoenix, AZ ^c	private, for-profit	4-year
University of South Florida	Tampa, FL	public	4-year
The University of Texas at San Antonio	San Antonio, TX	public	4-year

Source: GAO analysis of institutional data.

^aAlthough headquartered in West Virginia, American Military University offers its courses exclusively online.

^bSaint Leo University is headquartered in Florida, but also operates education centers at several military installations in various states.

^cWe interviewed school officials from the University of Phoenix headquarters in Phoenix, but veterans attend classes in multiple physical locations, or online.

We conducted eleven focus group sessions with a total of 64 student veterans at the schools in our sample to learn about the various challenges veterans face pursuing their education. These sessions involved structured small-group discussions with between 3 and 10 participants. We worked with officials at each of the institutions to recruit a diverse group of student veterans for the focus groups. We asked these school officials to send an email to all of the student veterans on campus inviting them to participate. We allowed each student veteran who showed up for the focus groups to participate. The participants were all receiving benefits through various VA education benefit programs, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill, and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment programs. We conducted each focus group in person, except those with students from American Military University and University of Phoenix, which we conducted online using video conferencing.

Focus groups are not designed to provide generalizable or statistically reliable results; they are instead intended to generate in-depth information about the reasons for the focus group participants' attitudes on specific topics and to offer insight into their concerns.

Each focus group covered several major topics, including challenges experienced by student veterans, services provided by schools or VA to address those challenges, and suggestions for how services could be improved. We followed a protocol for each discussion to ensure consistent coverage of key topics among all 11 focus groups. We pilot tested the protocol to ensure it covered relevant topics and asked clear questions. A GAO moderator led each discussion to keep participants focused on the specified issues within discussion time frames. With participants' consent, we recorded each discussion and documented the perspectives raised by student veterans in each focus group.¹ We summarized the information collected and identified common themes. Because our questions were open-ended and designed to allow participants to discuss any challenges they may have experienced, we cannot determine whether the absence of a particular concern or challenge by a group of student veterans is an indication that they did not experience the concern or that they did not raise it when asked broadly about the topic. We use the following terms to characterize how frequently an idea was raised by participants in our 11 focus groups.

- *All* represents all 11 groups;
- *Most* represents 6 to 10 groups;
- *Some* represents 3 to 5 groups;
- *One or two* represents that number of groups.

To inform our early work and to supplement the testimonial evidence from our interviews and site visits, we reviewed relevant literature to determine what student veteran challenges have been explored by researchers and practitioners in recent years. We identified 52 peer-reviewed articles published since 2002 and reviewed them to identify challenges addressed, in four categories: nontraditional student challenges, health and disability challenges, social and cultural challenges, and administrative challenges.

We reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations as well as various policies, procedures, and other program documents related to VA's

¹Information that could identify any participant was left out of written documentation of each focus group to protect participants' privacy.

administration of its education benefit programs. We reviewed VA's performance metrics for claims processing and for VA's education call center. We assessed the reliability of this data by reviewing information about the data and the systems that produced them and by interviewing knowledgeable agency officials. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. We also interviewed key officials from VA as well as officials from relevant higher education associations including the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges, postsecondary institutions including University of Maryland-College Park and Purdue University, and veteran service organizations including Student Veterans of America and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. We contacted associations of higher education and veteran service organizations known for their involvement with student veteran issues.

Student Veteran Outcomes

To address our third objective, we reviewed existing data collected by VA, Education, and other federal sources. These included VA's contracted study with the nonprofit National Student Clearinghouse, Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, and the Current Population Survey sponsored jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. We interviewed officials from VA and Education about the potential uses and limitations of using these surveys for analyzing student veterans' outcomes. We assessed the reliability of this data by reviewing existing information about the data and the studies that produced them and interviewing knowledgeable agency officials. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

We reviewed documents from VA about their plans for collecting additional data on student veterans. These included methodological documents and information collection proposals submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). We also interviewed officials from VA and Education about their data collection and their efforts to implement relevant sections of Executive Order 13607, "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members." We also interviewed officials from each of the 11 schools in our sample about their efforts to collect outcome data on student veterans.

In addition, we analyzed VA's strategic plan, performance and accountability report, and budgetary documents to identify relevant performance measures for the education benefit programs. We reviewed

existing guidance on federal performance measures, including the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, OMB Circular No. A-11, and prior GAO reports. We also interviewed officials from VA and Education about the selection of performance measures for their education benefit programs and related program management efforts.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2012 to May 2013 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.

Appendix II: Title IV Programs Administered By Education

Title IV Student Aid Program	Program Details	Annual Amounts
Pell Grants	Grant amounts are based on the student's enrollment status and the difference between the expected family contribution and cost of attendance, up to the maximum Pell Grant allowed under the Higher Education Act.	For the 2013 – 2014 school years, undergraduates can receive from \$555 to \$5,550.
Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants	Schools administer grants to undergraduate students with exceptional financial need, with a priority given to students who receive Pell Grants. Schools are generally required to provide at least 25 percent of the grant funds.	Undergraduates can receive up to \$4,000 per year (up to \$4,400 for students participating in an approved study-abroad program). The minimum award amount is \$100.
Federal Work-Study	Schools administer federal funds and make part-time employment available to undergraduate, graduate and professional students with federally defined financial need. Participating schools or nonprofit employers generally contribute at least 25 percent of the student's earnings (50 percent in the case of for-profit employers).	No specific limits. Net earnings may not exceed the student's financial need.
Federal Perkins Loans	Loans are made to undergraduate, graduate and professional students with priority given to those with exceptional financial need. Schools administer funds for the low-interest (5 percent) loans, comprised of federal capital contributions and school matching funds (at least one-third of federal contributions). Repayment is made to the school.	Undergraduates can borrow up to \$5,500 annually, up to a total of \$11,000 for undergraduates who have not completed two academic years and \$27,500 for undergraduates who have completed two academic years. Graduate or professional students can borrow up to \$8,000 annually, up to a total of \$60,000, including loans borrowed as an undergraduate.
Federal Direct Stafford Loans	Loans are made to undergraduates ^a on the basis of financial need. The federal government pays the interest on loans while the student is in school at least half-time, ^b and during subsequent periods if needed.	Eligible students can borrow between \$3,500—the maximum available in their first year—and \$5,500 annually, up to a total of \$23,000.
Federal Direct Unsubsidized Stafford Loans	Loans are made to undergraduate, graduate and professional students not qualified for Federal Direct Stafford Loans, but students are responsible for interest throughout the life of the loan. There is a 6-month grace period when students are not required to begin repaying the principal on their loans once they are no longer in school at least half-time. Annual and aggregate borrowing limits are reduced for each student by the amount of any Federal Direct Stafford Loans they may have.	Undergraduate students and graduate or professional students can borrow between \$5,500 and \$20,500 annually, depending on their year of schooling and dependent status (including any Federal Direct Stafford Loans received for the same period). Aggregate limits are \$31,000 for undergraduate dependent students, \$57,500 for undergraduate independent students, and \$138,500 for graduate or professional school students. Students completing coursework in certain health professions can borrow an additional amount between \$12,500 and \$26,667 annually, up to an aggregate amount of \$224,000. ^c

Appendix II: Title IV Programs Administered By Education

Title IV Student Aid Program	Program Details	Annual Amounts
Direct Federals (PLUS) Loans	Loans are made to parents of dependent undergraduates and to graduate and professional students with repayment beginning 6-months after students are no longer in school at least half-time. Borrowers are subject to a credit check for adverse credit history and may be denied a loan. Borrowers are responsible for paying all interest on the loan.	There are no fixed annual or aggregate loan limits for PLUS loans. Parents, graduate students, and professional students can borrow up to the cost of attendance minus any financial aid the student receives.

Source: GAO analysis of applicable federal laws, regulations, and Education guidance.

^aThe Budget Control Act of 2011 terminated loans to graduate and professional school students under this program. Pub. L. No. 112-25, § 502, 125 Stat. 240, 266.

^bThe Budget Control Act of 2011 severely restricted authority previously used to permit loans under the program not to accrue interest during the 6-month grace period when students are not required to begin repaying the principle on their loans once they are no longer in school at least half-time. § 503, 125 Stat. 267-68.

^cThis aggregate is reached through additional loans in the amount of up to \$80,000. 42 U.S.C. § 292b(a).

Appendix III: Status of Prior GAO Recommendations on VA's Education Benefit Programs

Recommendations for Executive Action	Status
<p>Veterans' Education Benefits: Enhanced Guidance and Collaboration Could Improve Administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill Program. GAO-11-356R, Washington, D.C. May 5, 2011.</p>	
<p>To improve VA's administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill program and address ongoing challenges, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take steps to provide for schools to receive more critical program information such as a student's eligibility for benefits or how payments have been calculated, for example, to enable certifying officials, financial aid officials, and business office administrators to effectively administer the program and deliver benefits. 	<p><i>Closed – Implemented</i></p> <p>VA distributed an official handbook for school certifying officials that provides guidance on standard benefit program reporting processes.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with the Department of Education and the higher education community, leveraging their experiences in administering aid. These collaborations should include assessing the applicability and viability of adopting processes and actions taken by the Department of Education, where practical, such as returning overpayments of program funds or reconciling benefit payments. 	<p><i>Closed - Implemented</i></p> <p>VA met with Education officials to discuss the processes used by each agency to deliver and recoup funds issued for educational assistance. VA determined that statutory and technical differences prevent VA from adopting any of Education's processes.</p>
<p>GAO, VA Education Benefits: Actions Taken, but Outreach and Oversight Could Be Improved, GAO-11-256, (Washington, D.C.: Feb 28, 2011)</p>	
<p>To improve VA's outreach and support for eligible service members and veterans, communication with school officials, and oversight of its education benefit programs, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase efforts to make school certifying officials aware of available training opportunities, including VA's online training module, and consider providing information for school certifying officials on working with servicemembers and veterans with disabilities. 	<p><i>Closed – Implemented</i></p> <p>VA has updated its website to provide additional resources for school officials, including information on training and conferences.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide more timely, accessible, and comprehensive education program policy information. This could include developing and maintaining an online policy manual for the Post-9/11 GI Bill and providing e-mail updates to school certifying officials nationwide. 	<p><i>Closed – Implemented</i></p> <p>VA distributed an official handbook for school certifying officials that provides guidance on standard benefit program reporting processes.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish performance measures for the quality of information provided by VA's toll-free hotline and for the timeliness and quality of its Right Now Web service. 	<p><i>Open</i></p> <p>VA is in the process of finalizing performance standards for its call center and web service.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop outcome-oriented performance measures for outreach to service members and veterans who are seeking VA education benefits. This could include measures of VA's success in reaching out to target populations, including service members and veterans with disabilities, and in addressing areas where more information about education benefits may be needed. 	<p><i>Open</i></p> <p>VA is deploying an early communication tool to inform service members about their eligibility for education benefits and will develop performance measures to determine its effectiveness.</p>

**Appendix III: Status of Prior GAO
Recommendations on VA's Education Benefit
Programs**

Recommendations for Executive Action	Status
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake a systematic review of VA's and State Approving Agencies' (SAA) oversight of schools, focusing on opportunities to improve resource allocation, adopt risk-based approaches, consider cost-effective ways to oversee foreign schools, and evaluate the results of its oversight activities on a routine basis. 	<p><i>Closed – Implemented</i></p> <p>VA submitted recommended legislative changes to the SAAs' activities that Congress enacted as part of Public Law 111-377. These changes, allow VA to rely on accreditations already in place by the Department of Education, freeing up SAA staff to assist VA staff with outreach, training, and oversight of schools.</p>

Source: GAO.

Note: The status of GAO recommendations are classified as:

Open-Actions to satisfy the intent of the recommendation have not been taken or are being planned, or actions that partially satisfy the intent of the recommendation have been taken

Closed-implemented-Actions that satisfy the intent of the recommendation have been taken

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Washington DC 20420

May 9, 2013

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

Dear Ms. Emrey-Arras:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report, "**VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students**" (GAO-13-338) and generally agrees with GAO's conclusions and concurs with GAO's four recommendations to the Department.

The enclosure specifically addresses GAO's recommendations and provides general comments and an action plan for each recommendation. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jose D. Riojas".

Jose D. Riojas
Interim Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***“VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and
Provide More Timely Information to Students”***
(GAO-13-338)

General Comments:

The GAO draft report provides recommendations that coincide with the day-to-day operations of the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Education Service and are already being carried out. For example, the report recommends VA work to identify information that would assist Veterans in obtaining financial aid from multiple sources and that VA assist schools in providing support services to Veterans by disseminating best practices. VA's current mission includes activities that meet these recommendations.

Page 9 of the draft report mentions two instances where Veterans were not aware that they were eligible to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. VA recently added a statement to the certificates of eligibility informing students about other Federal funding that may be available. However, the school's financial aid offices are primarily responsible for providing information to students about opportunities for other educational funding.

The report spends considerable time focusing on delayed payments to Veterans and difficulty reaching someone at the Education Call Center but little time acknowledging the progress VA has made in both of these areas. VA acknowledged its difficulty handling the overwhelming fall 2012 enrollment season prior to implementing automation in the Long-Term Solution. The average processing time for original and supplemental education claims is now 19 days and 6 days respectively, and the average wait time at the Education Call Center is less than 2 minutes. VA is on track to meet the fiscal year 2013 goals for processing timeliness.

The statement on page 15 of the report that “VA offers little information about its benefit policies and processes” is not accurate. VA's GI Bill Web site (www.gibill.va.gov) has comprehensive information and Frequently Asked Questions about all VA education benefit programs.

Finally, the vast majority of the work being put forth in GAO's four recommendations in this report is already completed or significantly underway.

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***“VA EDUCATION BENEFITS: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and
Provide More Timely Information to Students”***
(GAO-13-338)

GAO Recommendation: To improve VA’s administration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and other education benefit programs and help veterans achieve their education goals, we recommend that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs take the following actions:

Recommendation 1: Develop materials or processes to educate student veterans about education benefits before they enroll in school including expected payment timelines, housing allowance policies, and other financial resources such as the availability of grants and loans provided by Education. For example, VA could provide veterans with current information on expected processing times when they submit their original applications for VA education benefits, and more clearly highlight in online and printed resources VA’s housing allowance policies and the availability of federal grants and loans to help veterans financially prepare for school breaks.

VA Response: Concur. The Veterans Benefits Administration’s (VBA) Education Service, in conjunction with the VBA-Department of Defense Program Office, participated in redesigning the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum that is now mandatory for Servicemembers to attend. Servicemembers attend an in-person briefing that includes a full day spent with a trainer dedicated to education benefits and use of an interactive online tool to learn about their benefits.

The GI Bill Web site already provides detailed information about housing allowances (http://www.gibill.va.gov/resources/benefits_resources/rates/CH33/Ch33rates080112.htm#MHA), as well as provides Frequently Asked Questions via the prominent “Submit a Question” button on the main page of the Web site. Keyword searches, such as “housing,” can be used to find information about how that particular payment is made.

Since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Education Service has participated in over 100 sessions to provide training and information and answer questions from participants. Education Service conducts quarterly interactive Webinar training sessions with school certifying officials, military spouses, and advocates. Education Service also participates in national events held for Congressional, military, Veteran, and higher education personnel, providing opportunities for personalized contact and ensuring Veterans’ needs are met.

Education Service has an ongoing partnership with the Department of Education and participate in Twitter Town Halls targeted at Veterans, Servicemembers, and dependents to discuss VA education benefits and the alternative financial support Federal student aid provides.

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Comments to
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In all of VBA's outreach efforts (VBA's Web site, social media, attendance at events, and in discussions with school officials, TAP briefer partners, and stakeholders), VBA emphasizes the need for students to apply for benefits as soon as possible. Education Service regularly asks school certifying officials to submit enrollment certifications before the start of the term to start the payment process.

VA provides public facing information regarding the accuracy and timeliness of education claims processing on the ASPIRE dashboard at <http://www.vba.va.gov/reports/aspiremap.asp>. The dashboard provides education processing timeliness and accuracy information on a national level and by regional processing office. VBA will add a link to the ASPIRE dashboard on the GI Bill Web site so that individuals can easily find information on processing timeliness. Target Completion Date: May 31, 2013.

Recommendation 2: Work with postsecondary schools to identify the types of information that would help facilitate more timely access to other sources of federal financial aid during the VA benefit processing period.

VA Response: Concur. Executive Order 13607, Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Servicemembers, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members (Principles of Excellence), directed VA and other entities to take additional steps to ensure that recipients of Federal funding have the information they need to make informed decisions concerning their benefits. In response to the Executive Order, VA worked with the State Approving Agencies and institutions to provide information on the Principles of Excellence, which includes information on the financial aid process.

Approximately 6,212 schools have agreed to comply with the Principles of Excellence. Upon agreeing to comply with the Principles of Excellence, schools are required to prepare a "shopping sheet" for Veterans, Servicemembers, and families who are eligible to receive Federal military and VA education benefits. The "shopping sheet" makes information about college costs and financial aid packages more transparent and comparable for students and parents.

Additionally, VBA's "Choosing a School" Web page offers students assistance to make informed education choices. Students can use the interactive "College Navigator" (http://www.gibill.va.gov/resources/education_resources/college_navigator.html) to search by institution type, location, program availability, certificate level, tuition cost, test score requirements, online/weekend availability, credit for life experience, and compare

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the results. It also links to Federal student aid information, career information in the Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook, and to the College Affordability and Transparency Center, where students can browse lists of schools by tuition cost and net price.

Education Service will continue to promote compliance with the Principles of Excellence and information sharing on the quarterly school certifying official Webinars. The Webinars allow schools to ask questions, provide input, as well as share best practices for supporting Veteran students, including how to help Veterans get the information needed in a timely manner. Target Completion Date: September 30, 2013.

Recommendation 3: Leverage the experience and best practices of those schools and organizations that are currently providing support services to student veterans, for example by hosting an online forum or raising awareness of existing resources from higher education associations and veteran service organizations.

VA Response: Concur. Education Service already works directly with school partners to provide information about school programs and other resources. The quarterly school certifying official Webinar gives schools a chance to meet with VBA, review education programs, learn about current topics and events affecting students, and any changes to the GI Bill and processing procedures. There is also a “Question and Answer” portion and a “Best Practices Discussion” to enhance the flow of information between VA and our partners.

Further, the “School Resources” button on the main page of the GI Bill Web site offers information, training curriculum, a VA Campus Toolkit to help schools provide a Veteran-friendly environment, and a Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions. These are designed to help institutions of higher education build effective programs for Veteran students and share information designed to help institutions of higher education build effective programs and share information. Both toolkits are the result of collaboration with the Veterans Service Organizations, Student Veterans of America, and the American Council on Education.

Education Service will continue to hold quarterly school certifying official Webinars to raise awareness of existing resources and discuss best practices. Webinars were recently held in January and April 2013. Target Completion Date: September 30, 2013.

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Recommendation 4: Develop a plan for using new sources of data on student veteran outcomes as they become available to improve program management and help student veterans achieve their academic goals.

VA Response: Concur. VBA, as part of its day-to-day operations, is already developing outcome measures in coordination with other Government agencies to improve program management. Upon development of the outcome measures, VA will gather, measure, and analyze the data to help improve program management. However, VBA notes that VA's latitude under title 38 United States Code to directly impact student outcomes is limited as school approval is not dependent on student outcomes. Target Completion Date for Development of Outcome Measures: August 31, 2013.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, individuals making key contributions to this report were Tranchau Nguyen, Assistant Director; Jacques Arsenault; William Colvin; and Mark Ward. In addition, key support was provided by James Bennett, Deborah Bland, Holly Dye, Brenda Farrell, Justin Fisher, Kirsten Lauber, David Lewis, Michelle A. Sager, Michael Silver, Michelle StPierre, Andrew Stavisky, and Craig Winslow.

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