

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

What GAO Recommends

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

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

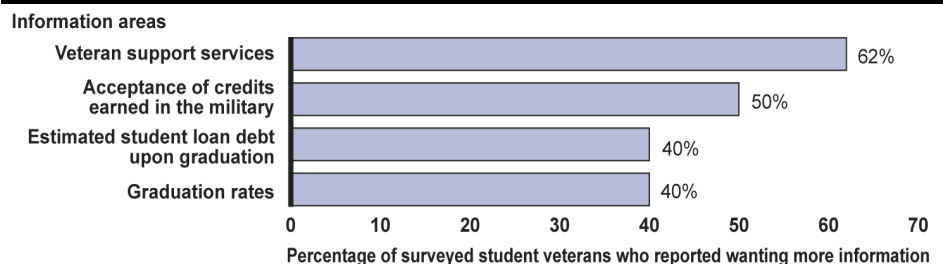
VA EDUCATION BENEFITS

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

What GAO Found

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

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



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

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