

Highlights of [GAO-11-300](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2009, the Department of Defense's (DOD) Military Tuition Assistance (TA) Program provided \$517 million in tuition assistance to approximately 377,000 service members. GAO was asked to report on (1) DOD's oversight of schools receiving TA funds, and (2) the extent to which DOD coordinates with accrediting agencies and the U.S. Department of Education (Education) in its oversight activities. GAO conducted site visits to selected military education centers and interviewed officials from DOD, its contractors, Education, accrediting agencies and their association, and postsecondary institutions.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD (1) improve accountability for recommendations made by third-party quality reviews, (2) develop a centralized process to track complaints against schools, (3) conduct a systemic review of its oversight processes, (4) take actions to ensure TA funds are used only for accreditor-approved courses and programs, and (5) require and verify state authorization for all schools. DOD agreed with our recommendations. Also, DOD and Education provided technical comments on the draft report. We incorporated each agency's comments as appropriate.

View [GAO-11-300](#) or key components. For more information, contact George Scott at (202) 512-7215 or [scottg@gao.gov](mailto:scottg@gao.gov).

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# DOD EDUCATION BENEFITS

## Increased Oversight of Tuition Assistance Program Is Needed

### What GAO Found

DOD is taking steps to enhance its oversight of schools receiving TA funds, but areas for improvement remain. Specifically, DOD could benefit from a systematic risk-based oversight approach, increased accountability in its education quality review process, and a centralized system to track complaints. DOD does not systematically target its oversight efforts based on factors that may indicate an increased risk for problems, such as complaints against schools or the number of service members enrolled at a school. Instead, DOD's oversight policies and procedures vary by a school's level of program participation, and schools that operate on base are subject to the highest level of oversight. DOD plans to implement more uniform oversight policies and procedures, but they are not expected to take effect until 2012. In addition, the process DOD used to review the academic courses and services provided by schools and military education centers was narrow in scope and lacked accountability. The review was limited to schools offering traditional classroom instruction at installations and did not include distance education courses, which account for 71 percent of courses taken in fiscal year 2009. The contract for these quality reviews expired on December 31, 2010, and DOD plans to resume its reviews on October 1, 2011, when a new contractor is selected. DOD is developing an expanded quality review process and plans to select schools based, in part, on the amount of TA funds received. With regard to accountability, DOD's review process provided recommendations that could improve educational programming, but there is no DOD-wide process to ensure that these recommendations have been addressed. Furthermore, DOD lacks a system to track complaints about schools and their outcomes. As a result, it may be difficult for DOD and its services to accurately identify and address any servicewide problems and trends.

DOD's limited coordination with accreditors and Education may hinder its oversight efforts. DOD verifies whether a school is accredited; however, it does not gather some key information from accreditors when conducting its oversight activities, such as whether schools are in jeopardy of losing their accreditation. Accreditors can place schools on warning or probation status for issues such as providing inaccurate information to the public and poor institutional governance. Schools can experience various problems within the 3- to 10-year accreditation renewal period, and these problems can negatively affect students, including service members. Additionally, DOD does not require schools to have new programs and other changes approved by accrediting agencies in order to receive TA funds. Currently, students enrolled in unapproved programs or locations are ineligible to receive federal student aid from Education, but can receive TA funds. DOD's coordination with Education has generally been limited to accreditation issues and Education's online resources about schools and financial aid. DOD does not utilize information from Education's school-monitoring activities to inform its oversight efforts. Education's findings from program reviews and financial audits of schools provide insights about schools' financial condition, level of compliance, and governance. Collectively, this information could provide DOD with information that can be used to better target schools for review or inform other oversight decisions.