

Commission on Evidence Based Policymaking
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The Need for Linking Federal Data: Case Study on the Post-9/11 GI Bill

Good morning.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is America's chief way of saying, "Thank you" to the men and women who sacrifice their bodies and their time to serve and protect our country. And it's not just a thanks. It's the ticket to the American Dream for young veterans, and it is America's insurance policy that our veterans have productive civilian lives and are not dependent on public assistance. After all, historians and economists frequently credit the original GI Bill with helping to create America's Middle Class following WWII.

So how's the Post-9/11 GI Bill working?

Here are important questions nobody in America knows the answers to:

1. What is the student veteran **graduation rate**?¹ What are the veteran student **loan debt** and **default** rates?
2. Which degrees, certificates and vocational/technical programs provide the best **Return On Investment for veterans**?
3. **For-profit colleges** dominate the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Are they delivering for veterans? A 2014 Senate Committee found that the schools receiving the most Post-9/11 GI Bill funds were for-profit colleges under law enforcement investigation for consumer fraud that delivered poor outcomes for students overall. But veteran-specific data was unknown.
4. Does the Post-9/11 GI Bill **produce higher incomes and less reliance on public assistance**? (By point of comparison, the original GI Bill, following WWII, reduced reliance on unemployment assistance from 20% to 12% of veterans and produced incredible economic gains.²)
5. **Nearly half of the Post-9/11 GI Bill goes unused**. Who are the veterans skipping the GI Bill? Are they reliant on public assistance? Did they already have a college degree? By historic contrast, only 20% of eligible veterans skipped the original GI Bill following WWII, and they were usually older³ and had been "working in jobs of a fairly high level" before the war.⁴

Why don't we know the answers to these questions? Because the federal data necessary to

answer these questions remains **siloed** across several agencies. (We do know it has been used by 1.7 million people, at a cost to taxpayers of \$61 billion since August of 2009.)

This will shock you: The U.S. Education Department (ED) does not know which students are veterans and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) does not track student outcomes. In addition, occupation and income data from Census and IRS is not linked to either VA or ED data.

Why do answers to these questions matter? For two reasons:

First, Veterans need to know so they can make an informed choice about where to use their GI Bill. Veterans today rely on VA’s GI Bill College Comparison Tool to choose a college. But the GI Bill Comparison Tool is full of entries that say “No Data.” It can’t tell veterans which educational path has served other veterans well or not well. In contrast, the Education Department provides its students with robust data on each college, including average salary after graduation, because its College Scorecard draws on data from several agencies, including IRS. Surely, we can give veterans a search engine at VA that’s at least as good as the one at ED. Could we do even better than Scorecard? Imagine if DOD data were drawn in, so that veterans could ask, “Which educational path is best for veterans like me, with my rank, service, and skills test scores?”

Second, Congress needs to know in order to improve regulation and ensure taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely.

Data should not remain siloed across the federal government. The Commission should work to build infrastructure for agencies to share data.

We are investigating the feasibility of a prototype for the infrastructure needed for agencies to share data about student outcomes – both for veterans and more broadly – to develop hypotheses about how to improve those outcomes and ways to test them. Data-linking among VA, Education, IRS, DOD, and Census – along with the National Student Clearinghouse – would enable answers to the questions I raised today about student veterans – as well as **new** questions that would arise. Because if data were linked, new patterns would emerge, new questions would arise, and new answers would be possible.

¹ Private efforts have tried to determine the student veteran graduation rate, but it is impossible without VA and ED actually sharing data. The largest private effort (by Student Veterans of America, known as the 2014 “Million Records Project” and its 2016 update “NVEST”) undertook to match VA data on Post-9/11 GI Bill use against data from the National Student Clearinghouse to try to determine the student veteran graduation rate for a subset of GI Bill users. But the Clearinghouse data is limited to degree-granting schools (and covers most, but not all veterans at degree-granting schools), so it provides only a limited answer. Most notably, Clearinghouse does not track students at certificate, non-degree programs, nor vocational/technical programs (both of which are covered under the GI Bill). VA

estimates that nearly half of the GI Bill is spent at non-degree schools, meaning that the Clearinghouse data and the “Million Records Project” are missing half of GI Bill students. Specifically, VA reports that among Post-9/11 GI Bill students starting their education in 2015: some 54,000 Post-9/11 GI Bill students were starting non-degree college programs, and 30,000 started vocational and technical programs, while 87,275 started undergraduate degree programs and 19,222 started graduate degree programs. Clearinghouse is also limited in its coverage of for-profit colleges, which dominate the Post-9/11 GI Bill. (Clearinghouse covers 87% of students at for-profit colleges.)

² Bradley Commission, *available at* http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/Bradley_Commission_Report1956.pdf (page 251).

³ The President’s Commission on Veterans’ Pensions, *Veterans Benefits in the United States* (April 1954), Omar Bradley, Chairman (known popularly as the “Bradley Commission”), *available at* http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/Bradley_Commission_Report1956.pdf (pages 251, 259). The Bradley Commission found that 83-86% of veterans in the two youngest groups (under 20 or between 20-24 years of age) used the GI Bill.

⁴ Bradley Commission (page 261). The Bradley Commission also reported that that many of the younger veterans “had held no regular job before entering service. In general, those who had held jobs were in relatively unskilled occupations” (page 258). In contrast, only 30% of pre-war managers and proprietors used the original GI Bill, as did only 39% of pre-war full-time employees (page 261).