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# Understanding the Cost and Quality of Military-Related Education Benefit Programs

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## Summary

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Since the passage of the original GI Bill following World War II (*Serviceman's Readjustment Act*, 1944), the military has provided veterans with a collection of financial aid benefits designed to help them attend college. While research has shown that these programs have helped many veterans acquire a college education (e.g., Bound and Turner, 2002; Stanley, 2003), less is known about the impact of more recent educational benefits for veterans. This is especially true of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which, in conjunction with a number of other assistance programs, has afforded veterans new educational opportunities. The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers tuition subsidies paid directly to institutions, a housing allowance tied to cost of living, and a book stipend, which in combination are usually more generous than preceding GI Bills. However, issues such as rising tuition costs; an increasing presence of low-quality, for-profit institutions that target veterans; and a potentially confusing array of benefit options could mitigate the impact of these programs on the recruitment, retention, and human capital development of service members.

This report contextualizes these issues and formulates a research agenda to address them. Specifically, this report addresses the following research questions:

- What are the key features of the military-related education benefit programs, including changes to these programs and historical utilization patterns of some of the key programs?
- What has been found in prior research on the impacts of these programs?
- What are the primary challenges policymakers face for improving the evaluation, implementation, and efficiency of the benefit programs?
- How can future research help overcome the challenges policymakers face?

### **Veterans' Educational Assistance Programs and Benefit Usage**

Currently, veterans can choose from a wide selection of education benefit programs, the two most significant of which are the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) and the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The former offers veterans a monthly stipend of \$1,426 paid directly to students for up to 36 months, and is available to veterans serving after 1985 who are on active duty for at least three years.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the largest expansion of benefits since the original GI Bill (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley, 2011), with tuition assistance offsetting the net in-state tuition cost of the institution a veteran attends for up to 36 months. In contrast to the MGIB, this assistance is paid directly to the institution. The housing allowance varies by state, equaling the Basic Housing Allowance for an E-5 military paygrade with dependents.

The MGIB and Post-9/11 GI Bills are complemented by several other programs, such as the Yellow Ribbon Program, which expands the generosity of benefits for more expensive participating schools, and the MGIB-Selected Reserve and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program, which extend benefits to reservists serving on active duty for extended periods of time.

Our analysis of personnel records of service members linked to benefit participation data revealed several noteworthy patterns:

- Nearly half of all veterans separating before 2000 have claimed benefits before the option to do so expires.
- Claim rates are highest for Marines, Hispanic veterans, and those with higher Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) scores.
- Take-up rates have been increasing over time, which suggests that an even greater fraction of service members are taking advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (although our data do not allow us to confirm this conjecture).

### **Prior Research on the Impact of Veterans' Educational Benefits**

Research has found that previous GI Bills had large effects on college enrollment.

- The World War II-era GI Bill increased college attainment by 32–40 percent (Bound and Turner, 2002; Stanley, 2003).
- Stanley (2003) finds a 33 percent increase in college completion for veterans of the Korean War.
- Angrist and Chen (2011) use the Vietnam draft lotteries to compare veterans with non-veterans and find similar schooling gains as for earlier GI Bills.

These large enrollment gains for earlier GI Bills may have been facilitated by low baseline rates in college attendance. Studies of more-recent benefits have found smaller effects and changes in the composition of service members.

- Simon, Negrusa, and Warner (2010) study the effects of the MGIB and find that an additional \$10,000 in benefits leads to an increase of five percentage points in benefit use.
- MGIB benefits encourage the enlistment of individuals more motivated to go to college, which leads to higher separation rates.

To date, there has been no rigorous impact analysis of the Post-9/11 GI Bill on service members' outcomes.

### **Challenges Facing Policymakers**

While research on the original GI Bill had important implications for policy, there is little research on the impact of the current educational assistance programs on veterans' outcomes. Several challenges for policymakers emphasize the need for improved data collection and evaluation of program impacts on the quality and quantity of education that veterans receive.

### **Concerns About Cost and Quality: The Rise of For-Profit College Attendance Among Veterans**

For-profit colleges have grown rapidly in recent years, which is potentially problematic for several reasons:

- For-profit colleges charge relatively high tuition, which might increase the cost of veteran educational benefits.
- Current financial aid regulations indirectly incentivize for-profit colleges to recruit veterans to apply.
- There are concerns about the quality of educational offerings that for-profit colleges provide; students in for-profit colleges are less likely to complete degree programs (Lynch, Engle, and Cruz, 2010; Elgin and Silver-Greenberg, 2009) and face greater unemployment and student loan burdens (Deming, Golden, and Katz, 2012).

### **Complexity of Educational Benefit Programs**

The complexity of benefit options and quality of outreach to inform veterans about these choices also present a challenge to policymakers.

- Certain benefit decisions are irrevocable, and there are instances in which the MGIB is more generous than the Post-9/11 GI Bill.
- Steele, Salcedo, and Coley (2011) find that 38 percent of survey respondents said understanding benefit eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill was a moderate to major challenge.
- We do not know the effectiveness of existing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) outreach programs that aim to assist veterans' decisionmaking.

### **Costs of the Post-9/11 GI Bill**

Veterans face high tuition costs, and there is no research about the effectiveness or efficiency of the Post-9/11 GI Bill's tuition assistance program.

### **Lack of Information and Data Needed to Address These Challenges**

Addressing these challenges will require data on benefit take-up and related costs, as well as the ability to track veterans' outcomes through their education and into the labor market. Currently, these types of data do not exist.

### **Recommendations for Future Work**

We recommend several priorities for future research:

- Extensive data collection to help track veterans' outcomes during school and through their transitions into the labor market
- Quantifying how tuition subsidies and other benefits affect recruitment, retention, education, and labor-market outcomes
- A rigorous research design to measure the extent to which benefits affect college choice decisions and how this affects program costs

- Measuring the consequences of benefit-choice complexity on veterans' choices, financial aid, and education
- Testing interventions to reduce this complexity and improve benefit choices.

We believe this research will help guide policies that ensure programs to assist veterans provide the maximum benefit given their cost.