

Factors that Fuel Post-9/11 GI Bill[®] Education Benefits Usage

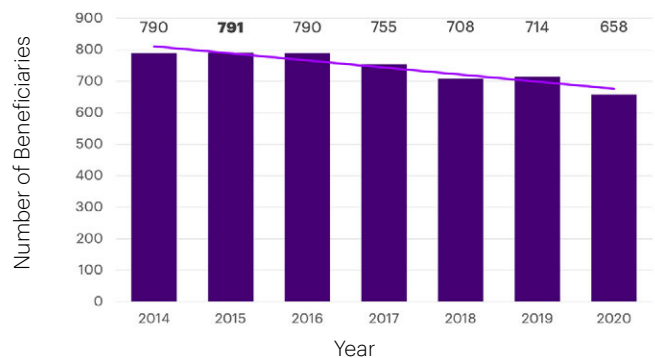
February 2022

Uncovering the reasons for declining Post-9/11 GI Bill® education benefits

Every year, approximately 200,000 individuals separate from the U.S. military and return to civilian life, adding to the approximately four million Veterans who have served from 2001 to present. A host of benefits are available to assist in that transition, including education, job training, and housing benefits extended through six U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefit programs. The Post-9/11 GI Bill¹ is the most popular of VA's educational programs, with 76% of all education claims being attributed to the program. The educational credentials covered under the program are wide-ranging, and include academic degrees, vocational programs, professional certificate programs, and industry examinations.

Despite an expansion of benefits and the promise of higher earnings linked to a post-secondary credential, education benefits utilization extended by the Post-9/11 GI Bill has declined by 17% over the last six years.¹

Beneficiaries who Received Post-9/11 GI Bill Education Benefits by fiscal year (in thousands)



To better understand this decline, Accenture surveyed 1,507 individuals from October-November, 2021 who interact with the VA education benefits process. Unlike most other research on the topic, the nationwide electronic survey included all those who are eligible (or will be eligible) to use the education benefit, including current Service members, recent Veterans (separated or retired within the last ten years), and designated family members to whom the benefit has been transferred. Our findings illuminate a number of factors, that together may impact an individual's choice to further their education through the VA benefits process.

A summary of our findings

We identified four major factors which influence the decision to pursue use of VA's Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits:

- 1 | Demographic characteristics
- 2 | Changing mindsets toward education
- 3 | Increased skills transfer for civilian jobs
- 4 | Significant barriers to obtaining support

While most VA education programs have seen a recent decline in usage, the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA) program has seen a notable increase of usage at an average of 12% annually since FY16. As we explore in this paper, addressing the four dimensions above could increase usage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. As a result, long-term financial benefits for military-affiliated beneficiaries could be improved, contributing to a stronger economic future for the United States.

1. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides for an education benefit of tuition and fees for 36 months of full-time education, Monthly Housing Allowance, and a books and supplies stipend. In FY20, over 650,000 students received education benefits through the program, with \$10.5B paid out in benefits. This benefit became effective in August 2009 and was later expanded through legislation including the Isakson and Roe Act and the Colmery Act.



Finding 1:

Demographic Characteristics

The demographics of the country, the military, and eligible beneficiaries are changing. Uniquely, the Post-9/11 GI Bill Veteran cohort has many distinguishing characteristics both from the general population and from other Veteran cohorts.

As the youngest Veteran group, the Post-9/11 GI Bill cohort are more likely to be employed, more likely to have a service-related disability, earn more than their peers, have higher levels of education, represent higher levels of racial and ethnic minorities, and include more women.ⁱⁱ Together these characteristics change the pool of eligible claimants who may be interested in using or transferring their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Despite such changes, **traditional demographics (age, level of education) as well as military service history continue to be significant predictors of whether individuals will use the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits or not.** Interestingly, factors that have a weak correlation or no correlation include gender, first generation college students versus those who have parents with college degrees, individuals with dependents, and disability status. Directionally, these insights can help to guide where to focus greater efforts on building awareness and developing greater support for Service members and Veterans to take advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit.

	Use the Benefit (At least 20% more likely to claim or transfer the benefit)	Won't Use the Benefit (At least 20% less likely to claim or transfer the benefit)
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: Younger 18-34 • Highest education level entering and exiting the military: high school diploma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: Older 45+ • Highest education level entering and exiting the military: Bachelor's or Masters degrees
Military Service history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlisted • Army • Serve(d) for shorter: less than 3 Years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officers • Air Force • Serve(d) for longer: 9+ year



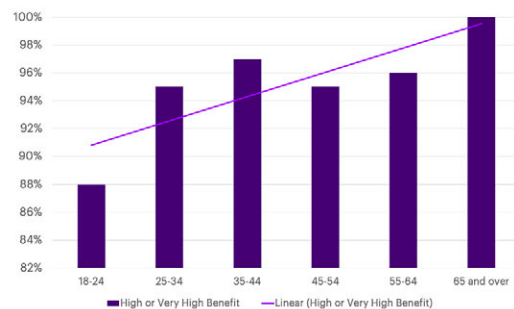
Finding 2:

Changing Mindsets Towards Education

Our research also sheds light on multiple ways that mindsets towards education are changing. For instance, despite 95% of respondents agreeing that pursuing education after military separation delivers a high benefit, **younger generations rate education as significantly less important than older generations of eligible beneficiaries.** Additionally, younger generations were shown to know less about the Post-9/11 GI Bill than their older peers.

Another interesting shift is the rate that Service members are planning to share their benefits with family. Joining the military to obtain Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits can be a powerful draw for Service members and their families. Overall, we found that 7% of respondents joined the military first and foremost to obtain an education benefit which they could transfer to a family member (an equal number identified obtaining the benefit for themselves).

Importance of Education by Age Groups

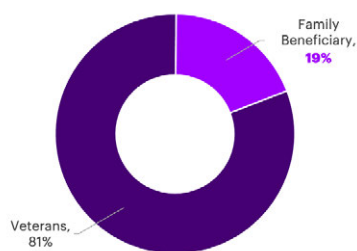


How beneficial is it to pursue education after separating from the military?

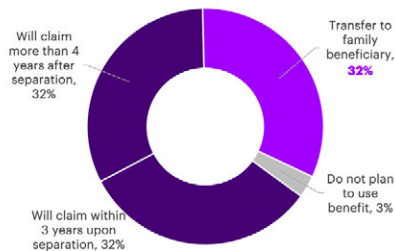
However, our findings point to a much higher rate of transfers presently happening and forecasting into the near future. In FY20, for example, 81% of the beneficiaries were Service members or Veterans, and 19% were family members who received a full or partial transfer of eligibility (14% children and 5% spouses).ⁱⁱⁱ This data could indicate a lag in the number of present-day claimants, rather than a net decline, as identified child beneficiaries have until age 26 to claim the benefit.

Increasing Transfers of Education Benefits

Current Claimants: FY20 Actuals



Projected Future Claimants: Indications for Benefit Use by Active Duty



“VA educational benefits were the sole reason I was able to pursue advanced education. Having ties to the military through my father helped us out tremendously through this process and gave me the education my parents were unable to receive.”

-Post-9/11 GI Bill Family Recipient Survey Respondent

Lastly, mindsets have also changed in recent years on what learning means and where it can be

done. Learners have more choice now than ever on how, when, and where they want to pursue post-secondary education. Accordingly, in recent years, there has been an explosion of educational providers serving lifelong learners, including for-profit colleges, private educational providers, and in-house company trainings. Non-degree credentials, such as professional certificates, vocational training, and industry-based certifications have become a rapidly expanding option for many. According to research by the Lumina Foundation, Veterans disproportionately hold non-degree certificates or certifications. Among adults without degrees, Veterans are far more likely than non-Veterans to have a non-degree certificate or certification (57% versus 35% for non-Veterans) and earn an average of \$10,000 in annual median income more as a result.^{iv} Identifying emerging opportunities in this space could help to attract more users. The Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) pilot program provides a strong example of responding to targeted Veterans’ needs with an innovative education offering.

Spotlight: Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC)

In 2019, VA launched a popular five-year pilot program, VET TEC, to pair Veterans with industry-leading training providers in the high-technology field. Covered through eligibility in the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VET TEC programs include tuition and housing for approved non-traditional digital bootcamps (software coding, cybersecurity, data analysis, etc.) that last between one week to several months. With ongoing congressional discussions about increasing funding and slots, and a large applicant pool with over 13,500 applications submitted, and 3,000 enrolled this year alone,^v highly popular, targeted education programs such as VET TEC could raise the demand and usage for benefits.

Related to the trend in lifelong learning, **what looks like a decline in education benefits usage in recent years could just be a deferral of benefits for those looking to reskill later in time.** The Post-9/11 GI Bill was expanded most recently through the 2017 Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act (Forever GI Bill), which notably eliminated the 15-year requirement for using the benefit. Individuals joining the workforce today will have multiple career transitions in a shifting digital economy.^{vi} Accordingly, such changes may be encouraging eligible candidates to defer their benefits usage to reskill later in life.



Finding 3:

Increased Skills Transfer for Civilian Jobs

Eligible Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries separate from the military with skills more easily transferable to civilian jobs compared to their Veteran predecessors. **Veterans are separating from the military and joining industries which may reward their military experience as much as a credential.**^{vii}

I completed my Master's degree and free correspondence courses with my benefits."

- Post-9/11 GI Bill Recipient Survey Respondent

Overall, Veterans pursue education credentials (degrees and professional certificates) at higher rates than their peers in the general population and are rewarded a premium in earnings for it.^{viii} Our research findings validate this: respondents still strongly perceive education as important for achieving career goals and **among those who previously claimed their education benefit, 87% reported it being beneficial to achieving their current position or income.** Nevertheless, education is not always a key to employment for Post-9/11 GI Bill Veterans. A recent Census report of Post-9/11 GI Bill Veterans, for instance, found that military experience brings an earnings premium regardless of education: Post-9/11 Veterans have a substantial earnings advantage at every educational level. Furthermore, their findings showed that the increase is highest for those with lower educational levels.^{ix}

For those who are currently active duty, the industry they wish to enter significantly affects whether they pursue additional education using their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. This is confirmed by external research which shows that different industries recognize military experience and past credentials at different rates.^x Specifically, our findings show that for Active-Duty Service members who will exercise the benefit, the top industries they pursue are: Government, IT, and Manufacturing. Those enlisted and pursuing careers in Science, Agriculture, or Accommodation are least likely to pursue additional education or job training. Similarly, active-duty officers pursue the benefit for additional training in Government, Education, and IT fields and use the benefit least for careers in Agriculture, Mining, and Entertainment. Depending on the career path that Service members wish to pursue, promoting the value of the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits in a more targeted manner could potentially aid in increasing uptake.

Top Industries where active duty will use their education benefit

ENLISTED	OFFICERS
1. Government, Public Administration 2. Information Technology, Computers 3. Manufacturing	1. Government, Public Administration 2. Education 3. Information Technology, Computers
...	...
17. Science or Research 18. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting 19. Accommodation, Hospitality, and Food Service	17. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting 18. Mining, Quarrying, Oil, Gas Extraction 19. Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation

Survey Question: Select the industry in which you plan to work





Finding 4:

Significant Barriers to Obtaining Educational Support

Many eligible GI Bill beneficiaries face significant financial and structural barriers, which may also explain declining benefits usage. Despite a strong program reputation and overall benefit expansion in recent years, our research shows that applicants need more targeted transitional support, specifically financial and application support, and greater flexibility during their academic years.

2x

Those who felt knowledgeable about their benefits at separation are twice as likely to take advantage of the benefit.

“In general, it was a little hard to receive my benefit. My unit did not have much knowledge on how to apply/receive benefits. Also, what educational institutions are considered VA approved - this specifically was a problem for me in multiple ways.”

- Post-9/11 GI Bill Recipient Survey Respondent

While the general reputation of claiming one’s Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefit is very high—97% of those eligible rate the experience as positive—significant challenges remain when it comes to program awareness and application support. For example, **19% of those who won’t claim or transfer the benefit said they wanted to claim the benefit, but the process was either unclear or too burdensome.** Awareness of the Post-9/11 GI Bill program eligibility, benefits, and deadlines was also found to be a strong predictor of whether or not an eligible beneficiary takes advantage of the benefit. In fact, those who feel knowledgeable about the educational benefits available to them upon separation are twice as likely to use the benefit.

Being able to afford a program—both the tuition and associated costs, along with the opportunity cost—is also of special concern to those eligible. For those who plan to claim the benefit for themselves for post-secondary education, 19% plan to get private or personal loans that need to be repaid. Attending four-year colleges is an area of special financial concern for the military-affiliated community as student debt

across the country rises. Recent Pew Research found that just over a quarter of undergraduate Veterans took out student loans to supplement their Veterans' education benefits.^{xi} Opportunity costs also seem to be an influential factor—**23% of respondents who decided not to claim or transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits attributed it to educational programs taking too long to complete.**

"I had an easy time enrolling in my VA Benefits. However, there [were] multiple times when the VA education center and the school have had miscommunication causing me to lose out on benefits money for that month."

- Post-9/11 GI Bill Recipient Survey Respondent

Lastly, our research found that once enrolled in an education program, claimants require more flexibility to complete their degree alongside other responsibilities. **The top stated barrier that hindered those pursuing education or job-related goals is an ability to juggle life, school, and work:** personal and family obligations (16%), health and disability issues (11%), inflexibility in class schedules for military obligations (11%), and lack of financial resources (11%) were all cited as the largest challenges. Similarly, 32% of respondents who didn't claim the benefit reported that the main cause was institutions having inflexible schedules. Such findings show that military-affiliated learners require more targeted support from institutions.

Spotlight: The University of California San Diego

The University of California San Diego stands out for its higher-than-average military-affiliated graduation rates. In part, they have achieved this by providing holistic services to Veterans. In addition to a dedicated social and study space, the Student Veterans Resource Center, the campus offers programming and benefits for student parents, counseling and psychological services, academic supports, and a dedicated benefits office.^{xii}

A Path Forward

Education and economic empowerment of Veterans are recognized as important functions of the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, even with military separation support and education benefits, transitioning to civilian life can be complicated by a multitude of factors, including visible and invisible barriers.

“I was great at being a student because of the amount of work I could do on my own in my own home. Yet, after obtaining my degree I found out working in the real world with PTSD may be much harder than I thought.”

- Post-9/11 GI Bill Recipient Survey Respondent

In order to increase education benefits usage among U.S. Veterans, there are clear areas which VA can begin to influence. Specifically, recognizing demographic characteristics, working with changing attitudes towards education, anticipating industry exit ramps, and dismantling barriers that are getting in the way of pursuing education are all potential avenues

for improving the chances that Veterans will pursue further education—whether immediately or for lifelong learning purposes at a later date. Taking such action stands not only to improve the financial wellbeing and career growth of our Veterans, but also, promises to contribute to the country’s economic competitiveness and innovation on a broader scale.



About Accenture Federal Services

Accenture Federal Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of Accenture LLP, is a U.S. company with offices in Arlington, Virginia. Accenture's federal business has served every cabinet-level department and 30 of the largest federal organizations. Accenture Federal Services transforms bold ideas into breakthrough outcomes for clients at defense, intelligence, public safety, civilian and military health organizations. Learn more at www.accenturefederal.com.

About Accenture Research

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data-driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients' industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients.

Copyright © 2022 Accenture.
All rights reserved.
Accenture and its logo are registered trademarks of Accenture.

Authors



Maggie Pollard

Strategy & Consulting Managing Director
@ Accenture Federal Services



Sarah Berger

Public Service Lead, Global Thought
Leadership @ Accenture Research

Contributors

Phillip Pollman @ Accenture Research
Victoria Anania @ Accenture Federal Services
Audra Ayotte @ Accenture Federal Services
Caroline Burr @ Accenture Federal Services
Kevin Mooney @ Accenture Federal Services

Citations

ⁱ https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2020_education.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-46.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2020_education.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/veterans-without-degrees.pdf>
[popular-tech-training-program-for-job-seeking-vets/](https://www.militarytimes.com/education/popular-tech-training-program-for-job-seeking-vets/)

^v <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2021/06/02/va-wants-more-money-to-expand-popular-tech-training-program-for-job-seeking-vets/>

^{vi} accenture.com/us-en/insights/public-service/serving-all-students

^{vii} <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-46.pdf>

^{viii} <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-46.pdf>

^{ix} <https://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-46.pdf>

^x <https://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-46.pdf>

^{xi} <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2021/09/13/veteran-student-loan-debt-draws-new-attention>

^{xii} <https://svrc.ucsd.edu>

Appendix 1:

Detailed Survey Methodology

Our research was scoped around those who are eligible to participate in claiming VA education benefits (n=1507). The electronic survey was fielded from October-November, 2021 and included screening questions for those eligible active duty, recent Veterans (separated within the last ten years), and family members for whom an education benefit had been transferred. A detailed view of respondent demographics can be viewed below:

Military Affiliation

Active Duty	650	43.1 %
Veterans	660	43.8 %
Designated Family Member	197	13.1 %

Gender

Male	1256	83.3 %
Female	249	16.5 %

Service Branch Affiliation

Army	1036	68.7 %
Navy	203	13.5 %
Air Force	107	7.1 %
Marine Corps	152	10.1 %
Coast Guard	9	0.6 %

Age

18-24	201	13.3 %
25-34	403	26.7 %
35-44	478	31.7 %
45-54	316	21.0 %
55 +	109	7.2 %

Level

Enlisted	927	61.5 %
Commissioned Officer	577	38.3 %

Race and Ethnicity

American Indian or Alaska Native	81	5.4 %
Black or African American	162	10.7 %
East Asian (Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, etc.)	18	1.5 %
Hispanic or Latino	101	6.7 %
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	18	1.2 %
South Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Nepali, etc.)	8	0.5 %
White	1148	76.2 %
Other	1	0.1 %
Prefer not to say	1	0.1 %

Education

Some high school but no diploma or GED yet	6	0.5 %
High school graduate/GED	239	18.2 %
Associate degree	183	14.0 %
Bachelor's degree	531	40.5 %
Master's degree or higher	351	26.8 %