

## **Do Veterans Graduate?**

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By [Paul Fain](#)

New ORLANDO, Fla. -- Relatively little is known about the academic performance of student veterans, a growing and politically important segment of American higher education. But graduation and retention rate data may be on the way, thanks to a new agreement between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse.

Roughly 2 million veterans are eligible for federal educational benefits aimed at them or their families. But Washington's severe budget problems mean that even the Post-9/11 GI Bill may not be immune from budget cuts. As a result, veterans and their advocates are looking to demonstrate that those benefits are paying dividends.

That quest is complicated by policy battles over for-profit institutions, some of which enroll large numbers of veterans. Completion rates for student veterans at for-profits could influence that debate, and [policies aimed](#) at protecting this group of students have a chance of actually getting passed. For example, Congress last month [approved a bill](#) that would require colleges to be more open about how they serve veterans.

Graduation data on veterans is spotty at best. And most colleges do a [poor job](#) of tracking student veterans, although many are improving on that front.

The clearinghouse is seeking to help fill in the gaps. The nonprofit group is well-suited to the task, and has emerged as a go-to source on [graduation rates](#). It conducts verification and research services for its 3,300 member colleges, which gives it access to data on 94 percent of students at all types of institutions, except for those that do not participate in federal financial aid. The group's research center calls its database "near-census national coverage."

Last week the clearinghouse and the VA hammered out an agreement for how to get targeted completion data for veterans who have attended college under the GI Bill. Created in 2008, the benefit replaced the Montgomery GI Bill for military veterans who served after September 11, 2001. It covers in-state tuition at public universities and up

to \$18,077 in annual tuition fees at private and for-profit institutions, as well as stipends for living expenses and books.

Gen. Eric Shinseki, the VA's secretary, announced the partnership here on Friday. He was speaking at the annual meeting of Student Veterans of America, a group that brokered the agreement. Shinseki said 2,600 institutions had begun voluntarily reporting completion data to the VA. But he said more data was needed to bolster the case for the GI Bill's return on investment.

An official with the primary for-profit association said she supports the push for more information on completion.

"Good data will help all of us develop programs that will better serve our military and veteran students," said Sally Stroup, executive vice president of government relations and general counsel for the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, in a written statement.

Graduation rates have been a touchy subject for veterans groups of late. The Huffington Post and MSNBC last year ran articles citing an unsubstantiated 88-percent dropout rate among student veterans. That figure was apparently lifted from a Colorado workforce agency's website and is based on nonexistent data.

Student Veterans of America tried to [knock down](#) the erroneous number, in part to ensure that it isn't used to justify funding cuts to the GI Bill. The group's leaders said last weekend that they hope accurate figures will help veterans defend their hard-earned educational benefits. Conventional wisdom holds that veterans, like other adult student groups, often outperform traditional-aged students. Colleges seem to agree, as many institutions are scrambling to attract veterans

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/08/new-effort-collect-student-veterans-graduation-rates#ixzz2HP1vkJY4>