



Student Veterans of America
1625 K St. NW STE 320
Washington DC 20006
www.studentveterans.org

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Exploring Student Veterans' Post-Secondary Completion Rates with Two National Surveys

Chris Andrew Cate, Ph.D.
Director of Research, Student Veterans of America

INTRODUCTION

Over the previous seven months, media outlets have reported that the student veteran first-year post-secondary dropout rate is 88% (Briggs, 2012; Woods, 2012). This suggests that as a group student veterans post-secondary retention rates are poor, approximately one-in-ten (12%). Many organizations, including Student Veterans of America (SVA), have questioned this statistic, in part because there is no current, national level database that collects and analyzes student veterans' enrollment and academic outcomes, such as retention and graduation rates. National data on student veterans is difficult to find, simply because no federal department has been tasked with the collection and analysis of data regarding student veterans or their academic outcomes. This is a problem for policy makers and stakeholders who rely on research to make informed decisions.

Neither the original law that created the initial GI Bill program after World War II nor any of its later versions, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to collect data on student veterans. The VA's main responsibility is managing student veterans' tuition payments to their schools, and it is unrealistic to require the VA to collect, analyze, and report data on student veterans' academic outcomes when they are understaffed and under-equipped to do so. Yet despite these barriers, with the start of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009, the VA started collecting data on student veterans' academic outcomes directly from the schools receiving funds.

The Department of Education collects data on students from nearly every college and university in the United States; however, data collection on student veterans is difficult for numerous reasons. Some schools lack the ability to accurately identify and track student veterans, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms may exclude Active Duty service members who are separating from the military or Demobilized National Guard and Reservists. Both groups are technically not Active Duty service members nor are they veterans, which are the only two questions on the FAFSA that inquire about a student's military status.

Despite the lack of data and analysis, specifically on student veterans' enrollment and academic outcomes, there have been national studies and national databases that contain information on veteran post-secondary program completion and highest educational attainment that may produce a more accurate estimation of student veteran post-secondary completion rates. Using these databases, this is the first in a series of research briefs to explore and analyze student veterans' post-secondary program completion rates.

STUDIES

There is currently no national database that is solely dedicated to the collection and analysis of student veteran academic outcomes. However, there are two sources that contain information on both a person's veteran status and the person's education level. Both of these



studies are included and reported on in this research brief.

2010 National Survey of Veterans

The data source for the first study was the 2010 National Survey of Veterans (NSV; Westat, 2012). As required by law, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) is required to collect information on beneficiaries' knowledge and use of benefit programs to improve its programs. The VA contracted with Westat to survey American military veterans and other beneficiary groups, such as demobilized National Guard and Reservists and Active Duty Service Members, to help identify the needs of American Veterans and allocate resources in ways that will ensure these needs can be met.

The 2010 NSV used six surveys to collect data on various VA benefits, such as medical benefits, employment benefits, and education benefits, from several of its beneficiary groups, including veterans. Among the data collected and analyzed by the 2010 NSV survey is data on veterans' knowledge and use of VA education benefits. The data included veterans' knowledge of education benefits available to them, the frequency of usage of education benefits among beneficiary groups, reasons for not using available education benefits, and completion of education goals.

Westat used two data collection methods to obtain their data for the 2010 NSV. The first method used a large sample of addresses obtained from the United States Post office. This sample was mailed a screener survey to discover if one of three targeted beneficiary groups resided at the address. If a household member was identified as belonging to one of the beneficiary groups, then the appropriate extended survey was mailed to the household. The second method used a list-based sample method which utilized verified addresses from the Department of Defense (DOD) and the VA databases to identify and send surveys to this group. The respondents had the option to complete paper surveys and mail the completed surveys back to Westat, complete the survey over the phone by calling a

toll free number at Westat, or complete the survey on the web. The data collection period for the main NSV study started on October 16, 2009, and lasted approximately five months, ending on March 19, 2010. Please refer to the full report for more details on the methodology used for the report (Westat, 2010).

American Community Survey

The data source for the second study was the American Community Survey (ACS; U.S. Census Bureau) from the United States Census Department. The ACS is an ongoing annual survey providing current information for communities' investment planning and services. Information from the survey generates data that helps determine how more than 400 billion dollars in federal and state funds are distributed to communities each year. The ACS collects information on a wide range of demographics including age, sex, income and benefits, education, and veteran status.

For data collection of Housing Units (HU) the ACS uses a three stage process: mail, telephone, and personal visit. The first phase includes a questionnaire mailed to the sample address, with a request to the household to complete the questionnaire and return it by mail. If no response by mail is received, the next stage is a follow up telephone interview conducted by the Census Bureau, when a telephone number is available. If the Census Bureau is unable to reach an occupant by phone, or the occupant refuses to participate, the address may be selected for personal interviewing.

The Census Bureau releases estimates after three time frames: 1-year, 3-years, and 5-years. The 1-year estimate includes data collected from areas with a population of 65,000 or more and contains the most current results of the three estimates. The 3-year estimate has a larger sample size from population areas with more than 20,000 people, better reliability, but data that is less current compared with the 1-year estimate. The 5-year estimate includes data collected from all areas, is the most reliable, but contains the least current data.



This brief will use the 2011 5-year estimates. The 5-year estimates use 60 months of collected data from both large and small population centers. It is the largest sample size compared to the 1-year and 3-year estimates.

The decision to use the 5-year estimates was based on the greater precision and more reliable results associated with this database. However, the drawback to using the 5-year estimates is that it is the least current. For the purposes of this brief it was decided that precision and reliability was more valuable than the degree to which the data was current. Future briefs may utilize the 1-year or 3-year estimates.

RESULTS

2010 National Survey of Veterans

The majority of the sample in the 2010 NSV was male (92%), 55 years of age or older (64%), and White (95%). Just under half (47%) of the sample reported serving in the Army, 23 percent reported serving in the Navy, 20 percent in the Air Force, and 10 percent in the Marine Corps. Approximately 15 percent of the sample reported that they were National Guard or Reservists mobilized or activated. Eleven

percent of the sample reported serving after September 2001. Full demographic analysis was reported in the final report (Westat, 2010).

The 2010 NSV asks many questions about the knowledge, use, and experiences of using VA educational benefits. However, one specific question asks about outcomes and was the focus of this brief. Question G2b of the 2010 NSV asked, “Did you complete your training, or receive the primary degree or certificate for which you were enrolled and receiving VA education benefits?” of the participants. Approximately two-thirds (68%) of veterans replied yes to this question suggesting a large majority did complete their training, or received the primary degree or certificate for which they were enrolled and receiving VA Educational benefits.

American Community Survey

The ACS asked its participants for their veteran status and the highest level of education they attained broken down into four categories: less than high school graduate, high school graduate, some college or associate’s degree, and Bachelor’s degree or higher. A frequency table (See Table 1) was produced reporting each education attainment category separated

Table 1: Veteran and Nonveteran Highest Education Attained American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2007 – 2011)¹

	Estimate	Margin of Error (+/-)	Percentage ²
Veteran	21,886,370	31,208	
Less than high school graduate	1,876,626	9,482	8.57%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	6,579,374	17,383	30.06%
Some college or associate's degree	7,776,156	19,352	35.53%
Bachelor's degree or higher	5,654,214	22,648	25.83%
Nonveteran	179,459,191	30,259	
Less than high school graduate	27,639,204	123,097	15.40%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	51,175,329	164,611	28.52%
Some college or associate's degree	49,566,367	55,194	27.62%
Bachelor's degree or higher	51,078,291	233,769	28.46%
Total	201,345,561	13,073	

¹ Age 25 years or older

² Calculated by author
(U.S. Census Bureau)



by veteran status and the margin of error for each education attainment category, which was less than 1% for all categories. The reported percentage was calculated by the brief's author by dividing the educational attainment category by the total sub-sample.

Results from the 5-year (2007-2011) estimates of the ACS showed similar results to the 2010 NSV. In the ACS, 61.36% of veterans reported their highest educational attainment was some college or higher, with approximately a third (35.53%) reporting some college or associate's degree and 25.83% reporting a Bachelor's degree or higher as their highest level of education attained. In contrast, 56.08% of the nonveteran sample reported their highest educational attainment was some college or higher. The nonveteran sample did report a higher percentage (28.46%) of Bachelor's degree or higher; however the veteran sample reported a higher percentage of both high school graduate (30.06%) and some college or associate's degree (35.53%).

DISCUSSION

Results from both the 2010 NSV and the ACS provide evidence that veterans complete post-secondary educational or vocational programs at higher rates than recently reported in the media. Both the 2010 NSV and the ACS suggest that a majority of student veterans complete their post-secondary programs, which is much higher than the 12% previously reported.

Furthermore, the ACS allows for a comparison in post-secondary outcomes between veterans and non-veterans. While student veterans' attainment of Bachelor's degree is lower than non-veterans, a larger percentage of student veterans reported "Some college or Associate's Degree" as the highest level of educational attainment. It is important to note that only people 25 years or older were part of the ACS data, and student veterans typically begin their post-secondary programs at a later age than traditional students. It is possible that student veterans who responded at having only

"some college" are in the process of earning a Bachelor degree and the proportion of student veterans' with a Bachelor degree will increase over time.

As discussed previously, these surveys were not primarily designed to measure student veterans' post-secondary completion rates, and caution should be exercised in generalizing these results to the current student veteran population. The completion rate reported in the 2010 NSV included all eras of service, from World War II to present. It is possible that completion rates differ between service eras, and the results are not representative of current student veterans. In addition, the 2010 NSV was largely conducted prior to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill; therefore it does not include any potential effects the Post-9/11 GI Bill may have on student veteran completion rates.

The ACS combines "some college" and "Associate's degree" into one category making it difficult to account for the number of student veterans still enrolled in post-secondary educational programs versus those that withdrew from post-secondary educational programs. In addition, the GI Bill can also be used by student veterans to attend vocational or on-the-job training programs; however, it is not clear if student veterans would equate these programs with "some college" or choose "high school diploma only." Again, the weaknesses listed above pertain to generalizing the results to all student veterans not in the 2010 NSV and ACS's methodology.

IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the 2010 National Survey of Veterans and the American Community Survey suggest that student veterans' post-secondary completion rates are far better than previously reported in the media. The policy implications of these results are far reaching and positive for veterans. The results suggest that the potential return on investment of the GI Bill is quite high, with over half of veterans completing their training or receiving



their primary degree or certificate or completing some college classes.

However, there is still room for improvement. While both the 2010 NSV and ACS report potentially high student veteran post-secondary completion rates, there remains a potentially large proportion of student veterans, approximately 30% - 40%, not completing their post-secondary programs. Research into potential causes for student veterans' withdrawal from college should be explored, so that student veteran post-secondary completion rates can be raised. Conversely, research should also focus on factors that lead to successful post-secondary completion by student veterans, as those results may be transferrable to other non-traditional post-secondary school populations.

Finally, these two sources offer a better measure of student veterans' post-secondary completion rates than previously available. However, these surveys are not a substitute for a current national database designed to collect and analyze student veterans' enrollment and academic outcomes. A few weeks ago, Secretary Shinseki from the Department of Veterans Affairs announced a partnership between the VA, Student Veterans of America, and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to begin working on developing such a database (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013; Sander, 2013). This database as described will allow for highly accurate, current data of student veterans' academic outcomes, such as enrollment and completion, and aid policy makers and stakeholders in making well-informed, data driven decisions regarding veteran issues in higher education.

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Preview: The next research brief will examine in more detail the 2010 National Survey of Veterans, such as a breakdown in the post-secondary completion rates of veterans by service era.