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STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON

**“The Value of Education for Veterans at Public, Private, and For-Profit Colleges and Universities”**

June 20, 2013



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the largest and only national association of military veterans in higher education, Student Veterans of America's (SVA) mission is to provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and after graduation. SVA was a key contributor in the effort to provide veterans and servicemembers with greater consumer protections and consumer education. SVA has also been a strong proponent of tracking student veteran outcomes to better define the success of veterans in higher education and to dispel, or substantiate, notions of low veteran graduation rates.

A key component of Executive Order 13607 is the call to track student veteran academic success rates utilizing existing administration data. However, current weaknesses in Federal databases and national surveys to track and define student veteran academic outcomes have resulted in several conflicting reports regarding student veteran postsecondary completion rates. Some media reports have claimed that the student veteran drop-out rate may be as high as 88%; in contrast, national surveys conducted by the government suggest completion rates may be as high as 68%. The wide range of completion and drop-out rates has led to confusion regarding student veterans' postsecondary academic success. This does not aid policymakers and stakeholders who make decisions that have a direct effect on student veterans.

To gain a better understanding of student veteran postsecondary completion rates, SVA brokered a partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs and The National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization with enrollment data on over 95% of America's student population<sup>1</sup>, to create and develop a Student Veteran Attainment Database. SVA expects to initially report on the completion rate of approximately one million veterans that have used various forms of the GI Bill between 2002 and 2010 by the end of 2013.

The attainment database is a vital first step to accurately identify, track, and measure student veteran postsecondary completion rates. In addition, it will provide a path to future research such as student veteran persistence and identifying critical times where student veterans are more likely to withdraw from college; identify programs and policies that promote student veteran persistence and completion; and help colleges and universities struggling to support student veterans.

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<sup>1</sup> *National Student Clearinghouse*. "Clearinghouse Facts," Accessed June 14, 2013.  
[http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/about/clearinghouse\\_facts.php](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/about/clearinghouse_facts.php)



Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to participate in this hearing to discuss the President's Executive Order 13607, otherwise known as the Principles of Excellence and Public Law 112-249. We are particularly grateful for this opportunity to provide the subcommittee with new developments on tracking student veteran outcomes to better define student veteran success.

Student Veterans of America (SVA) is the largest and only national association of military veterans in higher education. Our mission is to provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and after graduation. We currently have over 800 chapters, or student veteran organizations, at colleges and universities in all 50 states that assist veterans in their transition to and through higher education. SVA chapters are organized at four-year and two-year public, private, nonprofit, and for-profit institutions of higher learning providing us with a distinct perspective on veterans earning postsecondary credentials.

SVA has been involved in the efforts to improve consumer information and consumer protections for student veterans since late 2011 and more formally in early 2012. In January of last year, SVA was a key contributor and signatory of a coalition letter, authored by the VFW, calling for executive and congressional action to inform and protect veterans in higher education<sup>2</sup>. The letter culminated with the issuance of Executive Order 13607 and the passage of H.R. 4057, a bill introduced by Rep. Gus Bilirakis and now Public Law 112-249.

A key component of 13607 is the call to track student veteran academic success rates. According to Executive Order 13607 Section 3c, the Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education are to track student outcomes, to the extent practicable, utilizing existing administration data<sup>3</sup>. The tracking of student veteran outcomes is critical to identifying the academic success of veterans and those programs and services that lead to higher success rates. This allows Congress to better allocate resources to programs and services of value.

However, both the executive and congressional action do not go far enough with regard to tracking veteran and servicemember outcomes. Given that data on veteran and servicemember outcomes has never been tracked, we remain concerned that existing administrative data remains flawed, or minimal, at best.

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<sup>2</sup> *VFW Hill Blog*. "VFW Builds Coalition to Support Student-Veteran Success," February 12, 2012. <http://thefvw.blogspot.com/2012/02/vfw-builds-coalition-to-support-student.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama. "Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members," Executive Order 13607, 27 April 2012, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-05-02/pdf/2012-10715.pdf>



National level data on student veterans has been difficult to find, analyze, and interpret due to poor collection methods, narrow inclusion criteria, and mistakes in correctly identifying student veterans. Most traditional federally maintained postsecondary databases exclude a portion of the student veteran population while including other military populations in their databases, making accurate tracking of student veteran academic outcomes difficult.

Through the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), the Department of Education has established the traditional method of tracking postsecondary student outcomes. The NCES maintains several databases that contain information on postsecondary students collected from institutes of higher education and financial aid records. However, many of the NCES databases have serious flaws in tracking student veteran outcomes, mostly due to issues with properly identifying student veterans.

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is the database most frequently used to track postsecondary student outcomes. IPEDS is a collection of interrelated annual surveys sent to every college, university, and technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs. These schools are required to report data on enrollments, program completions, graduation rates, and institutional data. However, IPEDS only collects data on first-time, full-time students entering in the fall term. IPEDS excludes all students who transfer schools, start at community colleges then transfer to a 4-year university, temporarily withdraw from school for personal or military-related reasons, attend part-time at some point in their academic career, and students whose degree goals are Associate level degrees, job training, or vocational certificates.

A second NCES database that contains information on student veterans, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), is also problematic. The NPSAS is a comprehensive research dataset on postsecondary student demographics, financial aid, and enrollment. The primary weakness with the NPSAS lies in its method of identifying student veteran populations. NPSAS primarily uses the Federal Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) in classifying samples as active duty servicemembers or veterans, with student interviews and institutional records to supplement data. The FAFSA contains two questions about military service. The first asks if the applicant is currently serving on Active Duty in the U.S. Armed Forces. The second question asks if the applicant is a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces.

These questions are too narrow, excluding or misidentifying a portion of military servicemembers or veterans who served. For example, a deactivated reservist can be activated and deployed for duty, return home, deactivated and still remain a reservist while attending school. They are eligible for some Department of Veteran Affairs education benefits but would not be classified as “currently serving on Active Duty” or as a veteran and therefore would be excluded from NPSAS based on their responses on the FAFSA. A second example is a servicemember in the Individual Ready Reserve who enrolls in college while in the process of separating from the military after serving on Active Duty. This group would be misidentified and excluded using the questions on the FAFSA; they may not identify as veterans, nor are they serving on Active Duty. In addition, because GI Bill benefits are administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs and are not included in Title IV funding under the Higher Education Act (HEA) student veterans are not required to complete and submit a FAFSA to receive GI Bill



benefits. As a result, student veterans who do not complete and submit a FAFSA are excluded from the NPSAS database.

Finally, the Department of Education databases to track student veterans are further complicated by their use of a broad definition of veterans' education benefits. Under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, veterans' education benefits include Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarships, Department of Defense Tuition Assistance Program funds, and Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program benefits, as well as GI Bill benefits, making it difficult to separate student veterans from other groups using funding under this section<sup>4</sup>.

In contrast to the Department of Education, the Department of Veterans Affairs is able to identify nearly every student veteran, but has only recently been instructed, through Executive Order 13607, to track and collect information on student veteran outcomes. The Department of Veterans Affairs has a responsibility to disburse student veterans' tuition payments to schools after enrollment has been verified. In order to meet this responsibility, the Department of Veterans Affairs only collects information on what institutions the student attends, and how much remaining benefits the student has left to use. It is difficult to accurately translate this data into student veteran academic outcomes. Examples of shortfalls may include student veterans who have used all of their education benefits but have not completed their postsecondary education or vocational program, while student veterans who have not used all of their education benefits may have completed or reached their postsecondary education and vocational goal. However, as previously stated, Executive Order 13607 directs the Department of Veterans Affairs, in concert with other government agencies, to begin collecting data on student veterans' academic outcomes to the greatest extent possible under current law.

Aside from Federal databases, results and datasets from national surveys, specifically the 2010 National Survey of Veterans (NSV) and the American Community Survey (ACS), have been used to track student veteran outcomes. Both surveys contain information of the participants' veteran status and education; however, both also have flaws that make their results difficult for policymakers and stakeholders to use for discussion and decision-making.

The 2010 NSV is a survey conducted by Westat for the Department of Veterans Affairs to collect information on beneficiaries' knowledge and use of benefit programs. Among several other topics the survey includes completion of education goals, reasons for not using available education benefits, veterans' knowledge of education benefits available to them, and the frequency of usage of education benefits among beneficiary groups. Westat used the Department of Veterans Affairs database, the Department of Defense database, and a randomized residential address list from the U.S. Postal Office to obtain a nationwide representative sample. A flaw of the 2010 NSV is the lack of detailed survey questions regarding education or vocation completion. A single question on the survey asks respondents if they have completed the program for which they have used VA Education benefits. This is a broad

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<sup>4</sup> *Higher Education Technical Corrections*. Pub. L. No. 111-39, 111th Cong., 1st Sess. (July 1, 2009)  
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ39/pdf/PLAW-111publ39.pdf>



question that can be interpreted in various ways and may have a high risk of misinterpretation, such as participants replying no if they finished their program after having used all of their benefits.

The 2010 NSV potentially offers a better estimate of postsecondary completion rates for all student veterans than the Department of Education and the Department of Veterans Affairs databases; however, the results become weaker when conducting detailed analyses, such as investigating completion rates of student veterans who separated from the military after 2001. The sample size for this group is quite smaller, resulting in weaker conclusions. A second weakness is the survey's reliance on self-reported data that can result in participants misrepresenting their achievements, both intentionally and unintentionally. Another flaw is that the NSV is typically conducted every ten years, making the results less relevant and difficult to interpret over time.

A second national survey is the American Community Survey (ACS) from the United States Census Department. The ACS collects information on a wide range of demographics, including age, sex, income and benefits, education, and veteran status using mail, telephone, and personal interview for data collection. A strongpoint of the ACS is its use of a large, national sample size making the results representative and generalizable.

However, the ACS also has several flaws in tracking student veteran outcomes. First, when asking participants to describe the highest level of education they have attained, the ACS combines "some college" and "Associate degree" into one category, making results difficult to interpret. Without follow-up questions regarding current enrollment, it is difficult to account for the number of student veterans still enrolled in postsecondary educational programs versus those that withdrew. Additionally, ACS does not include a survey question regarding vocational or on-the-job training programs that veterans may use their educational benefits towards. It is unclear if student veterans would equate these programs as "some college" or choose "high school diploma only." The lack of data on veterans' military service in the ACS is another weakness. Without this data it is not possible to ascertain when a student veteran separated from the military and started their postsecondary studies, thus making it difficult to conduct detailed analysis on student veteran outcomes.

Compared with the Department of Education alone, the Department of Veterans Affairs database, the 2010 NSV, and the ACS offer a better identification of the student veteran population leading to a better estimate of student veterans' academic outcomes. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs database, the 2010 NSV and the ACS were not primarily designed to measure or track postsecondary academic outcomes like the Department of Education databases. All of these databases and surveys have flaws making it difficult to accurately track and measure student veteran postsecondary outcomes at the national level.



The flaws summarized in this testimony contribute to confusing results and misleading perceptions of student veteran success. The 2010 NSV reports student veteran postsecondary completion rate at 68%<sup>5</sup>; the ACS reports 56% of veterans' have completed at least some college or higher;<sup>6</sup> the NCES reports the six-year completion rate for student veterans starting in 2003 was 36% with a margin of error of 11.5%<sup>7</sup>. It is evident that the current systems for tracking student veteran postsecondary outcomes are inefficient and inadequate. It fosters confusion, contradiction, and lacks clarity.

To accurately measure and track student veteran academic outcomes, a database would have to be constructed that addresses the flaws found in the current databases and surveys. The database would first have to be able to accurately identify current student veterans, excluding veteran dependents and Active Duty service members enrolled in postsecondary programs. Second, it would need to be able to track student veterans' enrollment at the individual level, so that student veterans are not excluded due to transferring schools or taking a break from college. Third, it would need to be routinely updated so that the data remains relevant and informative to policymakers and stakeholders.

These criteria form the foundation for the Student Veteran Attainment database, a database created out of a partnership between the Student Veterans of America, Department of Veterans Affairs, and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) that aims to, for the first time in history, accurately track and measure student veteran academic outcomes at the national level.

The initial design of the Student Veteran Attainment database utilizes the veteran education beneficiary information from the Department of Veterans Affairs to identify student veterans. The NSC collects individual student enrollment data from institutions of higher education, providing accurate enrollment and completion data at the individual student level even if a student transfers schools or stops-out. By cross referencing veteran education benefit eligibility with individual postsecondary education enrollment history housed in the NCS, the Student Veteran Attainment database will liberate existing data on student veteran completion rates.

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<sup>5</sup> Westat. *National Survey of Veterans, Active Duty Service Members, Demobilized National Guard and Reserve Members, Family Members, and Surviving Spouses. Final Report*, Rockville, MD: Westat, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SurveysAndStudies/NVSSurveyFinalWeightedReport.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. "Table B21003: Veteran status by educational attainment for the civilian population 25 years and over. 2007–2011 American community survey 5-year estimate," Accessed June 13, 2013. [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_11\\_5YR\\_B21003&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_5YR_B21003&prodType=table)

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Six-year attainment rate at any institution among all first-time beginning students," 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up, April, 2009. Accessed June 13, 2013. [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/xls/F09\\_VETERAN\\_PROUT6B.xlsx](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/xls/F09_VETERAN_PROUT6B.xlsx)



This preliminary database is focused on developing an accurate method to capture student veteran degree attainment and completion rates. In addition, the partnership and database has the potential to expand to include research into student veteran persistence rates. The analysis of student veteran persistence creates new areas of investigation, such as time of withdrawals and duration of stop-outs, which could lead to focused programs and services aimed at increasing student veteran postsecondary persistence.

Last year an MSNBC online news article reported 88% of student veterans do not complete their postsecondary education goals<sup>8</sup>, a “statistic” that was later repeated in a Huffington Post article<sup>9</sup>. This rate has not been substantiated or replicated in other research, and the report’s source has never been found despite the best efforts of SVA and other researchers. Currently, policymakers and stakeholders are making decisions affecting student veterans with flawed data that does not give a clear picture of student veterans’ postsecondary success. This harms institutions of higher education that are dedicated to serving student veterans, it harms the Veteran Service Organizations that work to support student veterans, and most unfairly, it harms the student veterans themselves.

Establishing an accurate database to track student veteran academic outcomes is the first step we need to take, not the last. Accurate data will allow student veterans to use their limited resources in more effective ways, increasing completion rates and making the return on investment of the GI Bill rise in parallel. Once we have an accurate national rate of postsecondary completion established, then we can explore programs and services that increase those rates, we can help colleges and universities better serve those veterans, and we can better support student veterans as they work to earn their degrees.

Thank you Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the subcommittee for allowing Student Veterans of America to present our views on efforts focused on supporting veterans, military servicemembers, and their families.

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<sup>8</sup> Briggs, Bill, “Thousands of veterans failing in latest battlefield: college,” *MSNBC*, July 2, 2012. Accessed June 13, 2013. [http://usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/07/02/12509343-thousands-of-veterans-failing-in-latest-battlefield-college?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/07/02/12509343-thousands-of-veterans-failing-in-latest-battlefield-college?lite)

<sup>9</sup> Wood, David. “Veterans’ college drop-out rate soars.” *Huffington Post*, Oct 25, 2012. Accessed June 13, 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/25/veterans-college-drop-out\\_n\\_2016926.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/25/veterans-college-drop-out_n_2016926.html)





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