

TITLE: Orders by Email: Experimental Evidence of Targeted Communications on Short-term Enrollment Effects for Active Post 9/11 GI Bill Beneficiaries

Background/ context:

The passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill represented the largest expansion to federal education benefits programs in the past two decades. The Post 9/11 GI Bill (PGIB) provides qualifying service members and Veterans with access to educational benefits to support their active-duty or post-service educational pursuits. Bachelor's degree-seeking beneficiaries must enroll full-time to ensure they can complete their programs of study prior to exhausting their allotted benefits. In FY 2018, nearly 31% of PGIB beneficiaries were enrolled less than full-time.

PGIB offers up to 36 months of educational benefits, regardless of enrollment intensity. This timeline is long enough to complete a bachelor's degree as long as beneficiaries are enrolled full time. PGIB has the potential to increase college completion in addition to access, but this requires that eligible veterans maximize the use of PGIB's education benefits. According to a recent National Veterans Education Success Tracker report, less than 13 percent of all veterans accessing education benefits were enrolled full-time or more and 11 percent enrolled less than half-time (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017).

The structure of the benefits can create barriers to beneficiary understanding about how to use the benefits to support persistence to degree completion. PGIB benefits are month-based (rather than credit-based) and the Veterans Experience Office has documented a number of challenges potential beneficiaries face when deciding on how to use their educational benefits. This intervention aimed to address potential confusion about the benefits and was designed specifically to improve enrollment intensity.

Research Objective: In a research partnership between the Office of Evaluation Sciences and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Education Services, the study team tested whether proactive communication to PGIB beneficiaries who were actively enrolled in a postsecondary institution could increase their enrollment intensity.

Setting and Subjects: The total analytic sample was roughly 100,908 beneficiaries eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for postsecondary education but who were not previously enrolled full-time in college, not on active duty, and who had at least four months of benefits remaining. Within our sample 85.5% were veterans. The remaining 14.5% were dependents (i.e. spouse or children) who were transferred benefits.

Intervention: The one-time proactive communication was sent via email at no material cost to VBA and with minimal agency staff time. This intervention email encouraged full-time enrollment, connected delayed completion to both labor market earnings and direct personal costs, and provided information on available federal financial grant aid. The intervention message also conveyed information about the month-based rather than credit-based benefit, and the use of loss aversion to encourage students to act immediately to avoid losing the remaining benefit.

Research Design: The research design for our main intent-to-treat effect was posted in a pre-analysis plan on the public oes.gsa.gov website and date-stamped November 14, 2018.

Beneficiaries who were actively enrolled degree-seeking, part-time students, and non-active-duty service members, were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: 1) no proactive communication; or 2) receive a proactive email encouraging an increased enrollment intensity. Randomization occurred within 216 blocks based on baseline characteristics.¹ Emails were sent to half of the sample beneficiaries during the first week of July 2018. The remaining beneficiaries were not provided any proactive communication encouraging benefit usage. The business as usual condition is to communicate benefit information with beneficiaries after they apply for a Certificate of Eligibility, which is required for all to access education benefits, but with no follow-up upon enrollment.

Data Collection and Analysis: This study relied on existing administrative data. At the beginning and end of each semester, VA Education Service collects postsecondary enrollment data on all beneficiaries who receive Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. Outcomes include: enrollment intensity, rate of pursuit, and likelihood of enrolling full-time.

Findings and Results: The ITT estimates show between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage-point increase in rate of pursuit—a relative increase of approximately 1.2 percent against the control group. This effect is consistent across model specifications, including the inclusion of school fixed effects. Although these proactive emails had a small and statistically significant effect on increasing enrollment intensity, there were limited effects on the likelihood of full-time enrollment.

Exploratory analyses show that the effects of the outreach were concentrated among beneficiaries eligible at more than 90 percent of the maximum PGIB benefit; at two-year and for-profit institutions where registration tends to occur on a rolling basis, with few obstacles to course changes; and among among beneficiaries who were early in their period of benefit eligibility and may not yet have established enrollment or course-taking patterns.

Conclusion

Implications from this study highlight the potential effect of proactive communication to reduce information barriers and provide insights for designing effective future large-scale proactive communications within higher education.

¹ We used the following blocks to randomize individual beneficiaries: 1) prior rate of pursuit (greater than half-time, half-time, less than half-time, or other); 2) institution level (2-year or 4-year); 3) institutional control (public, private, or for-profit); and 4) prior benefits used in 4-month increments.