

Wesley Wilson, Higher Ground Veterans Advocacy
Testimony
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Good morning, thank you for allowing me to provide comment here today. I am Wesley Wilson, and I am a current student veteran and represent High Ground Veterans Advocacy. At 17, I joined the Army to earn educational benefits after losing my father, a Navy veteran to suicide, and my mother in a head-on collision car accident. Today, I am proudly an alumnus of two of the most prestigious universities in the country—Fordham University and the Maxwell School at Syracuse. I have successfully navigated the military-to-civilian transition, have a great job, and feel miles away from the foster care hearing I attended 11 years ago. The kindness of others, student veteran support organizations, and the GI Bill have blessed me with the opportunity to advance personally and professionally.

Unfortunately, determining the education outcomes of students like me is near impossible because existing regulations do not require institutions to comprehensively report student veteran data. Under the Higher Education Authorization Act, participating aid-eligible institutions must report a plethora of [information](#)—from employment outcomes to student loan default and graduation rates disaggregated by race, gender, and aid status.

While ED collects some student veteran data, they generally do not distinguish student veterans from traditional [students](#)¹. The VA collects and publishes some outcome data, such as retention, persistence, and graduation rates. However, data is incomplete because reporting is [optional](#). For example, the VA has veteran-specific retention and persistence rates for only 222 schools—compared to the roughly [3,400](#) schools that reported the same metric for traditional students².

¹ Based on published Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System on March 2021.

² Based on GI Bill Comparison Tool Data as of June 19th, 2021

The lack of accurate student veteran performance data is clearly documented. In 2017, Student Veterans of America published [groundbreaking](#) research where they outlined the difficulties in “collecting analyzing and interpreting student veteran academic outcomes due to poor collection methods, narrow inclusion criteria, and errors in identifying student veterans.” In 2019, the [congressional](#) budget office published a report citing their struggles in differentiating GI Bill beneficiaries from active-duty military students. In January, [GAO](#) released a report declaring a need for more comprehensive performance data to evaluate programs designed to serve disadvantaged students—including veterans.

Student veterans continually bear the brunt of deceptive advertising and [fraud](#) from bad actor schools seeking to exploit them for their hard-earned GI Bill benefits. Regulations like the gainful [employment](#) rule helped curtail abuse by ensuring that student veterans are gainfully employed and financially able to repay their student loans after graduation. The rule required institutions to report outcome metrics such as student debt-to-income ratios and employment rates. It saved billions in taxpayer money wasted on poor-performing diploma mills producing useless degrees. Unfortunately, despite its overwhelming [support](#) by 34 of the largest veteran service organizations, the gainful employment rule was repealed in 2019.

Access to accurate student veteran performance data is the linchpin of protections like the gainful employment rule. Without it, advocates and researchers will be unable to ensure student veterans are not crippled with loan debt or identify bad actor schools; This is a crucial step because, similar to [62%](#) of student veterans, I am a first-generation college student. We do not have the privilege of calling our family for advice or help to navigate higher education because we are doing this for the first time.

Therefore, new regulations under the Higher Education Authorization act should require colleges and universities to differentiate GI Bill beneficiaries from the traditional student population in all data reporting. Should data collection overlaps exist, the Department of

Education should develop data-sharing agreements to better consolidate and publish publicly these data where researchers and advocates can access it easily.

The deliberate identification of veterans in data reporting will increase transparency in how the government spends taxpayer dollars, ensure adequate protections for student veterans, and hold accountable the organizations that receive billions every year in GI Bill funding. We can safeguard our student veterans, preserve the GI Bill's legacy, and assist more students in climbing the social ladder.

With a price tag of roughly [12 Billion](#) dollars a year, the Post 9/11 GI Bill is VA's most expensive educational program—accounting for nearly [20%](#) of all Federal Higher Education Spending. The American people deserve access to comprehensive student veteran outcome data, and the Department of Education is uniquely positioned to provide it.

Yesterday marked the 77th anniversary of the GI Bill. What role will the Department of Education play in the GI Bill's continued legacy? That choice is yours.

Thank you for allowing me to speak here today, and please let me know if I can be of service.