

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105326](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans who received technical training in the military may be well-suited to pursuing degrees in STEM. To help pay for these degrees, veterans can use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship. The scholarship provides up to 9 months of education benefits (not to exceed \$30,000) to veterans who apply and qualify. Two laws included provisions for GAO to review how these programs support veterans pursuing STEM degrees.

This report examines (1) the extent to which veterans pursue STEM degrees using VA education benefits, (2) challenges these veterans face in obtaining a STEM degree, and (3) how VA administers the Rogers STEM scholarship. GAO analyzed VA administrative data and interviewed officials from VA and veterans service organizations, as well as officials and student veterans at selected colleges. GAO randomly selected five colleges for interviews from a list of 20 colleges with the highest numbers of Rogers STEM scholarship recipients. GAO also reviewed relevant literature and VA documents and processes.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that VA provide clear information to veterans about their applications for the Rogers STEM scholarship and analyze and address, as needed, disparities in application denial rates. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105326](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov.

September 2022

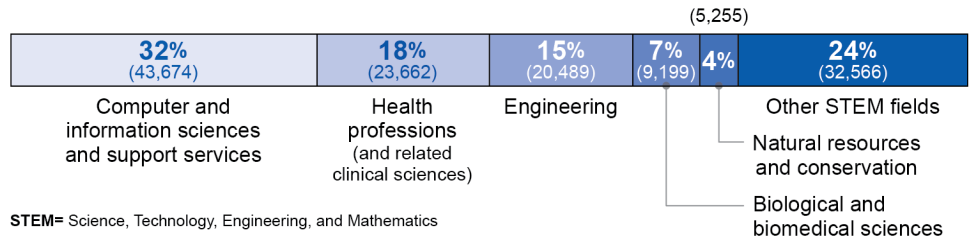
HIGHER EDUCATION

VA Could Improve Support for Veterans Pursuing STEM Degrees

What GAO Found

More than 130,000 veterans used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pursue a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) from school years 2019 through 2021. About 3,500 veterans also used the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship program to continue pursuing these degrees after exhausting their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The majority of these veterans were pursuing degrees in computer sciences, health professions, or engineering (see figure).

STEM Degree Programs for Veterans Using Post-9/11 GI Bill or Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, School Years 2018-19 through 2020-21



Student veterans pursuing STEM degrees can face several challenges obtaining a degree, according to GAO's interviews and literature search. Some of these challenges are not unique to student veterans, such as the rigor and sequence of STEM coursework and balancing academics with work and family responsibilities. Other challenges are more specific to veterans. While veterans bring strengths, such as discipline, some also have physical or mental conditions from their military service that can affect their academic progress, according to college officials GAO interviewed.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) does not clearly communicate with veterans about their Rogers STEM scholarship applications or collect and use data needed to understand application denial trends. Specifically:

- Some of VA's letters to veterans lack clear information about their applications and how to proceed. These letters can create confusion for veterans about how to obtain the scholarship, according to GAO's analysis of the letters and interviews with veterans. Without clearer communication, veterans may not fully understand the program, whether they are eligible for it, or how to apply for funds.
- GAO's analysis of VA data shows that the agency denied 63 percent of applications during the first 3 fiscal years of the program. This analysis also shows that VA denied African American or Black applicants and female applicants at higher rates than White and male applicants. However, VA does not collect the data it needs to understand why it denies more than half of all applicants. Further, VA has not yet conducted any analyses to understand the disparities in denial rates. Without additional data collection and analysis, VA is unable to take informed steps to better manage the program and address, as needed, these disparities.