

**Improving Military Veteran Students' Academic
Progress Towards Earning a College Degree by
Using the MGIB Education Benefits**

A White Paper

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Abstract

Most military veterans who reside in a central U.S. city have not entirely used their Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) education benefits to advance their careers. There is limited research on veterans' views of the effect of certain barriers, identified from prior research, on academic persistence. The problem of the lack of specific information about the barriers that prevent military veterans residing in a central U.S. city, from fully using the benefits of the MGIB, was addressed in this study. Clark and Caffarella's transition theory was used in this case study to explore the perceptions of eight military veterans on reason they dropped out of college or never used the MGIB to attend college. The research questions focused on military veterans' views of strengths and weaknesses of the G.I. Bill while they were in active duty, at the time they made the decision to not use it or respectively how the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs processed their eligibility. Thematic analysis findings from the data collected with face-to-face semi-structured interviews revealed five themes that described military veterans' views of the barriers they faced during their duty from their supervisors, perceptions of the MGIB during active duty, applying for college, having a family prevented the use of the benefits, expired MGIB benefits, and having a job that prevented the use of the MGIB. The resulting project consisted of a white paper that proposed recommendations of how military veterans could successfully improve their academic progress towards earning a college degree. The project contributes to positive social change by informing future military recruits, active-duty military personnel, military veterans, and military veteran organizations of potential strategies to help military veterans effectively use the MGIB benefits to earn a college degree.

The goal of this paper is to:

- * Provide an overview of military veteran students' perspectives of using or not completely using the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) education benefit.
- * Inform stakeholders, such as military recruiters, military active-duty personnel, military veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs, military veteran organizations, colleges and universities who host veteran organizations, of the findings of the study.
- * Encourage stakeholders to understand the problems or barriers that can be expected when they use the MGIB education benefit.

Introduction

While the military uses the education portion of the MGIB as a significant recruiting tool to entice recruits to enlist, many military veterans, who were participants in this study, are not fully using the education benefits available to them. Though the MGIB education benefit is commonly called a bill, it is a law that was signed by former President Franklin D. Roosevelt. To this day, not all military veterans use this portion of the bill to obtain a college degree.

However, little published research addresses why military veterans do not participate in the education section of the MGIB. The purpose of this study was to determine military veterans' views of the barriers to using the MGIB to earn a college degree. Previous studies have identified barriers that prevent some military veterans from taking full advantage of the education section of the MGIB (e.g., Flatt & Rhodes, 2019). These barriers include the lack of information about available MGIB options (e.g., Bryan, 2016); problems some military veteran students have with using their MGIB education benefits while continuing postsecondary (e.g., Alschuler & Yarab, 2018); experiences with the VA determining their benefits eligibility (e.g., Blansett, 2019); and interactions with students and faculty at some postsecondary institutions (e.g., Gordon et al., 2016).

The Problem

Some military veterans in a central U.S. city have not entirely used the education benefits of the MGIB education benefit to advance their careers (e.g., Wentling, 2018). While the MGIB education benefits have proved to be a significant recruiting incentive, some veterans did not take full advantage of its benefits to complete their education.

The Research Study

The goal of this study was to identify barriers that active-duty military personnel and military veteran former students experienced, which caused them to not use or partially use their MGIB education benefits.

I aimed to identify reasons why some military veterans decided from the start of pursuing their education to not use all their MGIB education benefits. The research questions focused on military veterans' views of the MGIB education benefit as they were on active-duty and as a veteran. To

address the problem and purpose of this study, I developed three research questions. The first one focused on military veterans' views of the MGIB education benefit while they were on active duty. The second focused on military veterans' views of the bill while they were having a general interaction with the VA. The third question focused on the veterans' views of the bill as they were attending college as a student. To address the purpose of this study, I used a case-study research design.

Participants

The participants in the study included military veterans who have an honorable discharge from active duty, eligible to use their MGIB education benefit and did or did not completely use this benefit. They are qualified for their VA disability benefits and did or did not use this benefit towards their MGIB. I used a snowball sampling technique to recruit a sampling size of eight veterans. Some of the veterans were able to assist me in locating more veterans who met the study criteria. The location of this study was a military veteran organization in a central U.S. city.

I was the main instrument of data collection as I used a voice recorder, pencil, and paper in case the voice recorder malfunctioned, and asked the participants 11 interview questions which also included probing questions. I developed the interview questions with the help of my doctoral committee. To begin the data analysis, I created an excel spreadsheet where I annotated each participant's responses to each interview question.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instrument that I used for this study was a qualitative interview. Eight military veteran participants were interviewed. They provided their experiences of using the MGIB education benefit.

The data analysis that I used was a thematic analysis. After I conducted the interviews, I used the Nvivo® software to search for themes from the interviews. I defined themes as abstract entities that brought meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations (e.g., DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). I then finalized and named five themes for my analysis.

Research Findings

From the analysis of the data, I identified five major themes.

Theme 1: Perceptions of MGIB during Active Duty

Some of the stakeholders felt great that the MGIB education benefit was available if they needed the bill. Some military supervisors motivated their subordinates to use their MGIB education benefit. Other supervisors were completely against their subordinates using the MGIB as some did not care about their subordinates' education or that their subordinates were smarter than them.

Theme 2: Applying for College

Some veterans felt that the VA took too long to respond in getting the veterans' eligibility for their MGIB education benefit. Some veterans could not get qualified to use their MGIB education benefits.

For some veterans, not all their military credits could be used for school or some veterans did not finish college. Over 50% of veterans felt they would never know how much more of the bill would be available before their benefits would expire. Most of these veterans had no problems filing for their MGIB education benefit or for their military disability with the VA. Over 50% of these veterans felt they did not lose any skills but was able to use the computer and was able to type.

Theme 3: Having a Family Prevented Participants from Using the Benefits

For many of these veterans, life changed, and therefore, felt it best to stop using the MGIB education benefit and have a family instead. Some veterans procrastinated in using the bill due to having a family. Some veterans felt that they need a job or a better job to provide for their family.

Theme 4: Expired MGIB Prevented Using Benefits

By the time that most of these veterans had settled into a new job and needed to use the new bill, the bill had expired.

Theme 5: Having a Job Prevented Using Benefits

Over 50% of these veterans felt that they did not need to pursue school if they had a job. A job provided everything for a life and a family. A job took care of the daily finances which later prevented school.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the qualitative study demonstrated that there were problems associated with using the MGIB education benefit. Some military veterans found they had difficulty using the bill while they were on active duty, having a general interaction with the VA as a veteran, and as a college student. Each veteran had their own experiences with the bill based on their own life experiences.

Proposed Recommendations

Based on the findings of my research study, I have several recommendations for the major stakeholders associated with the MGIB program.

It is recommended that if the subordinates continue to feel that their relationship with their supervisor seems incompatible, it is possible that these subordinates can be transferred to another supervisor within the same unit. Potential students need to identify a school that fits their needs and provides a good educational value. It is recommended that military subordinates should work

hard to know and understand their supervisor's strengths and weaknesses to work with them more effectively (e.g., Shufelt & Longenecker, 2017). These subordinates should always show respect for their supervisors, even if their supervisors might not deserve it. Subordinates should educate themselves more of the MGIB education benefit to maximize its full potential (e.g., Tichacek, 2017). It would be best for military veterans to hold financial literacy and resume workshops to help active-duty personnel work more closely with their supervisors and their subordinates to understand how to better prepare for the job market and how to prepare for higher education institutions expectations.

It is recommended that veterans work closely with the VA to get the best possible care that they can receive (e.g., Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of American [IAVA], 2020). Some veterans needed to change occupations entirely to better fit their life. It is recommended that public-private partnerships ensure that transitioning service members and veterans be aware of and have access to resources that facilitate success into their civilian life (e.g., IAVA, 2020).

It is recommended that postsecondary education institutions need to develop programs that provide skill development opportunities to generate long-term, high-wage employment and opportunities for veterans whose MGIB education benefit has expired.

Most schools need to have consistent standards for granting military credit and credit transfer (e.g., Disabled American Veterans [DAV], 2020). The VA needs to improve the MGIB education benefit and career counseling to better assist veterans (e.g., DAV, 2020). It is also recommended that higher education institutions should consider developing a strategy to improve recruitment and enrollment of student veteran applicants. Higher education institutions should facilitate and encourage collaboration between student veteran organizations and campus student clubs and organizations to share military veteran student experiences, expertise, and interests with the wider civilian student body. Postsecondary institutions should offer culturally competent academic advising, career services, and campus counseling to support student veterans without propagating stigmas or stereotypes (e.g., Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2019). Alumni relations and career services offices should collaborate to stay connected with student veteran alumni and encourage them to bring their employers and organizations to campus for recruiting events, informational interviews, and networking opportunities. Licensure and certification of some education and trade programs for service members, veterans and spouses should be supported.

Significance

The purpose of this study was to define military veterans' views of the barriers to using the MGIB education benefits towards earning a college degree. I determined the views of participating military veterans in a central U.S. city on the effect on their academic persistence of specific barriers involved in using the MGIB. The findings from this study can help active-duty military personnel and veterans to develop strategies for learning more about potential barriers they may encounter while pursuing a college degree. I expect the study results to help veterans find ways to overcome any barriers they may experience against using their earned benefits. Veterans who encounter these issues in the future can learn how to deal with them successfully to earning a college degree. This study supports positive social change by helping future military recruits,

active-duty military personnel, military veterans, and military veteran organizations to develop potential strategies to help veterans use the MGIB education benefits to earn a college degree will this.

Conclusion

Without partially using or completely using the MGIB education benefit, military veterans will never know exactly what problems may exist when using this benefit. Active duty and military veterans must know where to look to get the assistance they need to continue to educate themselves to determine how to successfully use these education benefits. These barriers will continue to exist if these individuals do not seek and find the help they deserve. The problem addressed in this study was the need to determine what are the barriers that prevent military veterans from completely using the MGIB education benefit to successfully graduate with a college degree. This white paper provides insights from other veterans as to what to expect when applying for and using the education benefit. The recommendations in this white paper have the potential to help military veterans to determine what to expect and how to deal with these barriers so that they can be successful in earning a college degree and continue with the professional careers.

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