

WHAT'S NEXT

Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

January 2025 · [Bushcenter.org](https://bushcenter.org)



**HELPING VETERANS ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL
WITH HIGHER EDUCATION RESOURCES**



GEORGE W. BUSH
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Read the full set of Bush Institute policy recommendations:



HELPING VETERANS ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL WITH HIGHER EDUCATION RESOURCES

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For many veterans and military-connected students, pursuing postsecondary education is a critical step in transitioning to civilian life, building new career pathways, and achieving personal and professional growth. Yet the transition from military service to academic life often presents unique challenges, including adapting to a different culture, managing the psychological impact of service, and accessing necessary health and wellness resources.

Gaps in holistic support can hinder a veteran’s ability to thrive academically and reintegrate successfully. Fortunately, there are existing federal resources available to enhance a veteran’s mental and career readiness, but such programs are underutilized because of limited awareness and insufficient coordination across federal and institutional levels.

[Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership](#) (VITAL), administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)’s [Veterans Health Administration](#) (VHA), and [VetSuccess on Campus](#) (VSOC), administered by the VA’s [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) (VBA), offer essential resources for veterans’ health and wellness that complement federal financial benefits.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The VHA should conduct a mixed-method evaluation of VITAL programs across the United States
- The VA should assess where VITAL and VSOC programs overlap to identify opportunities for more efficient service delivery
- The VHA should conduct a geographic analysis of VITAL programs to identify gaps in availability in regions with high student veteran populations
- The VA should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to ensure VA employees, student veterans, and educational institutions know about VITAL’s benefits
- The VBA and VHA should expand online access and campus partnerships in underserved states with high student veteran populations

More than 862,000 veterans used their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in 2023 to access higher education. Maximizing the likelihood of success for this population would generate a significant boost to U.S. economic growth through a stronger and more competitive labor market.

Federal departments and agencies and higher education institutions play crucial roles in supporting veterans as they transition from military service to academic life. Veterans can often find themselves entangled in a maze of fragmented services and resources that can lead them to feeling uncertain, frustrated, and anxious, which hinders their reintegration into civilian society.

VITAL staff can assist student veterans with any necessary academic accommodations. Unfortunately, VITAL operates at just 174 colleges and universities across 26 states. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia lack any VITAL program sites.

Separately, VSOC provides counselors to student veterans, service members, and their qualified dependents that help coordinate delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling. A VSOC counselor can also provide referrals for health services through VA medical centers, community-based outpatient clinics, or Vet Centers. Unfortunately, there are only 86 VSOC counselors supporting just 104 schools across the country.

A detailed program evaluation, streamlined delivery of services, and expanded awareness of and access to VITAL and VSOC would help ensure that veterans and military-connected students have sufficient access to resources needed for successful transitions. Such a comprehensive approach would improve educational outcomes, support mental health, and ultimately empower veterans to thrive beyond their service to country.

The VHA should conduct a mixed-method evaluation of VITAL programs across the United States

A mixed-method evaluation of VITAL programs would provide the VA with detailed quantitative data on things like enrollment and service usage rates along with qualitative insights from veterans' experiences. By combining these approaches, the VA can assess the program's effectiveness holistically, identifying patterns in participation and areas for targeted improvement.

Qualitative feedback from veterans could highlight specific needs, such as access to mental health resources or the relevance of VITAL's support to their academic goals, guiding adjustments that directly address veterans' challenges. Additionally, this evaluation would reveal regional variations in service delivery, helping prioritize underserved areas for future program expansion. Ultimately, this approach would allow the VA to create a responsive, veteran-centered support system that better evolves to meet the needs of veterans nationwide.

The VA should assess where VITAL and VSOC programs overlap to identify opportunities for more efficient service delivery

A comparative analysis of student veteran experiences at institutions that have both programs would inform a larger examination of the two programs. Such an assessment could streamline support services and reduce confusion for student veterans as they prepare for civilian life.

Overlap between VITAL and VSOC at certain institutions can create confusion and inefficiencies, as both programs offer related but distinct services. Without a comprehensive approach to integrate and coordinate these efforts, veterans and military-connected students may struggle to navigate the available resources, leading to frustration and delays in their academic and career goals. A focused effort to evaluate these programs, identify their gaps and overlap, and streamline service delivery can help ensure that veterans receive sufficient support for successful academic and career outcomes.

The VHA should conduct a geographic analysis of VITAL programs to identify gaps in availability in regions with high student veteran populations

With VITAL programs currently only in about half the states, many veterans in regions without these resources face barriers in accessing necessary support. Such lack of comprehensive coverage and coordination can lead to fragmented services and missed opportunities for the VA to support veterans' academic success.

A geographic analysis of VITAL programs could guide expansion efforts, including in rural or high-veteran-population states and online. Providing access to VITAL programs would create touchpoints for all student veterans to utilize services, promote academic progress, increase student veteran retention, and foster higher graduation rates.

The VA should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to ensure VA employees, student veterans, and educational institutions know about VITAL's benefits

A comprehensive awareness campaign for the VITAL program would bridge critical knowledge gaps, ensuring that VA employees, student veterans, and educational institutions fully understand and utilize its resources. By implementing a multichannel approach – including digital outreach, informational workshops, and campus events – the VA can increase VITAL's visibility and reach.

Training VA staff and educational institution representatives would equip them with the tools to effectively guide veterans through the program's mental health and career support options. Additionally, targeted outreach to student veterans via online platforms and veteran organizations would enhance direct engagement. Through this campaign, the VA can foster a supportive community around VITAL, increasing veterans' awareness of and access to the essential resources designed to support their successful academic and career transitions.

The VBA and VHA should expand online access and campus partnerships in underserved states with high student veteran populations

Expanding online access and campus partnerships for VSOC and VITAL in underserved states with significant student veteran populations would make resources accessible to more veterans in places with limited physical services. Online options could include mental health counseling, career support, and academic resources, removing geographic barriers for veterans attending schools without established VSOC or VITAL programs.

Additionally, partnering with more colleges in these regions would enable on-campus access to services for veterans who prefer in-person support. By prioritizing states with large veteran populations and limited VSOC and VITAL presence, the VA could ensure a more equitable distribution of resources, fostering academic success and well-being for veterans nationwide. This expansion would enable student veterans to thrive in higher education, regardless of their location.

Providing veterans and military-connected students with effective and efficient access to their education and health benefits will pave the way for successful transitions to civilian careers. Doing this requires the VA to address its administrative challenges through targeted policy actions. Detailed program evaluation, improved service delivery, and increased awareness of available resources would both meet veterans' needs and honor their service, resilience, and future contributions to their communities and the country.



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