



Using Proactive Communication to Increase College Enrollment for Post-9/11 GI Bill Beneficiaries

A general proactive email, encouraging increased postsecondary enrollment, influenced the enrollment intensity of Post-9/11 GI Bill users

Target a Priority Outcome Through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) in the Department of Veterans Affairs administers over \$11 billion in direct and indirect education benefits to over 750,000 active duty and separated military personnel.¹ VBA seeks to address potential information gaps on the availability and usage of earned education benefits through low-cost and proactive communications. In particular, VBA is interested in encouraging higher levels of enrollment and degree completion for those using their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for postsecondary education.

Translate Evidence-Based Insights

Highlighted in prior work by the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) on the educational journey of Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries, a lack of information about how educational benefits can be used has been a barrier to increasing the number of credits for which postsecondary students enroll.² Unlike most postsecondary financial aid programs, which provide financial benefits based on the number of credits enrolled, education benefits through the Post 9/11 GI Bill are month-based.

Prior evidence from randomized evaluations, across multiple postsecondary settings, suggest that proactive outreach can increase postsecondary access, enrollment, and degree attainment.³ Using a sample of active benefit users who were not previously enrolled full-time in college⁴, VBA sent emails that provided encouragement to enroll full-time along with additional information about the cost of higher

education and ways to access additional financial support.

Embed Tests The evidence-based insight was tested with an individual-level randomized control trial. A total sample of 100,908 beneficiaries were randomized to the treatment condition (i.e. receiving an email) within block based on baseline characteristics.⁵ Emails were sent to 50,444 beneficiaries during the first week of July 2018. The remaining 50,464 beneficiaries were not provided any proactive communication encouraging benefit usage. The business as usual condition is to only communicate benefit information with beneficiaries once they apply for a Certificate of Eligibility, which is required for all to access education benefits.

Analyze Using Existing Data Data from VBA's Education Services were used to compare postsecondary enrollment intensity between the two groups for the fall academic term. Postsecondary institutions enrolling beneficiaries are required to submit enrollment information each term to process benefit payment. The data included not only information on college enrollment intensity, but also a variety of information about the Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries' benefit levels. Analysis of these data provided a more precise estimate of the effectiveness of the proactive communication and estimates of differential effects by various characteristics.⁶

In order to allocate benefits payments, VBA uses an institution-reported rate of pursuit indicator. This indicator is a continuous measure of enrollment

¹ Education benefits are also available to qualifying dependents.

² <https://innovation.ed.gov/files/2016/08/journeysofveteransmap.pdf>

³ For example, see Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2015). Summer nudging: Can personalized text messages and peer mentor outreach increase college going among low-income high school graduates? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 115, 144-160.

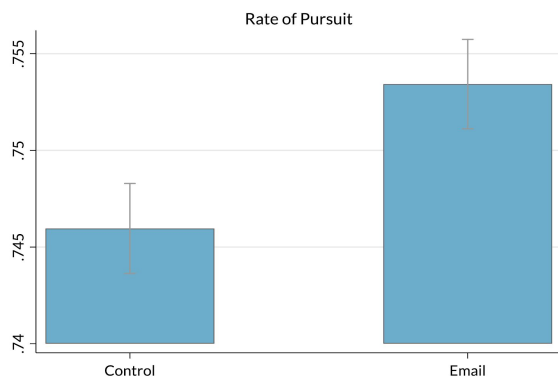
⁴ Within our sample 85.5% were veterans. The remaining 14.5% were dependents (i.e. spouse or children) who were transferred benefits.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Unless noted otherwise, all of the analysis reported in this abstract was prespecified in an analysis plan, which can be found at <https://oes.gsa.gov>.

relative to full-time enrollment where beneficiaries who are enrolled full-time or greater are coded as a 1, and all others are coded in proportion to full-time enrollment. For example, a beneficiary attending an institution on the semester system and enrolled in 10 credits would have a rate of pursuit indicator for that semester of 0.833 (10 credits/12 required credits). Consequently, beneficiaries enrolled in 15 credits would still be coded as a 1, even though their actual rate of pursuit is 1.25. We compare both the continuous rate of pursuit and likelihood of full-time enrollment, for those receiving the email was compared to the average enrollment intensity for beneficiaries not receiving an email.

Results The results suggest that there was a small and statistically significant increase in the enrollment intensity for those receiving the proactive email, but no significant difference in likelihood of full-time enrollment. Specifically, the rate of pursuit (average enrollment) of those receiving the proactive communication was 0.753 compared to 0.746 for those who did not ($p = .000$, 95% CI [.004, .011]). This represents a 1% increase in relative enrollment.



The percentage of beneficiaries with full-time enrollment was 36.8% for those who were sent the email and 36.5% for those who were not ($p = .433$, 95% CI [-0.40, 0.80]).

When we examine the effect of the intervention on those who received and opened the email, the enrollment effects were larger. Specifically, those not receiving an email had an average rate of pursuit of 0.746, those who were assigned to receive an email but did not access the email had a

rate of pursuit 0.744 and those assigned to receive an email and opened/accessed the email had an average rate of pursuit of 0.769 ($p = .000$, 95% CI [.011, .029]). For those accessing the email, the changes in enrollment intensity represents a 3.1% increase as compared to those not receiving an email. This suggests that the effect of the proactive communication was larger for those who received and read the email.

Build Evidence This collaboration adds to the growing body of evidence on the positive effect of proactive communications to increase postsecondary enrollment intensity. Beneficiaries not enrolled full-time who were sent an email enrolled in more credits during the fall term; however, at a small scale. The timing of the email -- in early July -- may have dampened potential effects of the communication. This is due to the fact that many selective postsecondary institutions require students to register for the fall semester prior to the beginning of the summer term. Beneficiaries at these institutions could still increase their enrollment; however, it would require beneficiaries to go through a formalized add/drop process. Future work will build on this to further support postsecondary enrollment and college degree completion for Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries.