

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD provides education and training to foreign military personnel at DOD sites. On December 6, 2019, an international military student killed three U.S. service members and injured eight others while attending training at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida. The attack raised questions about personnel safety at DOD sites hosting students for training.

The William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's implementation of security vetting for international military students and accompanying family members. GAO's report assesses the extent to which (1) DOD has developed vetting procedures for international military students and addressed any implementation challenges; and (2) State and DOD have shared information related to students' training at DOD sites in the U.S.

GAO reviewed documentation; analyzed vetting result data for October 1, 2019, through March 31, 2023; and interviewed DOD and State officials and stakeholders from six unified combatant commands and three U.S. embassies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including for DOD to assess vetting implementation and take action to mitigate any factors affecting implementation as identified in its assessment, and for DOD and State to clarify roles and responsibilities for sharing information. DOD and State generally concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106421](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or MaurerD@gao.gov or Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or KenneyC@gao.gov.

INTERNATIONAL MILITARY STUDENTS

DOD and State Should Assess Vetting Implementation and Strengthen Information Sharing

What GAO Found

Starting in fiscal year 2020, DOD developed and phased in procedures to vet international military students attending training at Department of Defense (DOD) installations and facilities in the U.S. With few exceptions, DOD vets these students prior to travel to the U.S. for training and periodically during the students' stay. According to training management system data, from October 1, 2019, through March 31, 2023, DOD vetted over 29,000 cases, including students and any accompanying family members. DOD identified findings in 103 cases: four were classified as "high" risk, 18 were "moderate", and 81 were "low." DOD denied access to nine students for various security-related reasons.

International Military Student Cases by Risk Level and Adjudication Result for October 1, 2019, through March 31, 2023

Risk level	Cases	Approved for training	Denied	Pending	Adjudication not performed ^a
High risk	4	0	4	0	0
Moderate risk	18	7	3	4	4
Low risk	81	47	2	14	18
No findings	29,202	29,202	0	0	0
Total	29,305	29,256	9	18	22

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. | [GAO-24-106421](#)

Note: Vetting of international military students began with basic screening in December 2019 and DOD continued to phase in initial security vetting through March 2022.

^aDepartment of Defense (DOD) officials stated they did not adjudicate 22 of the moderate and low risk cases for reasons such as training cancellation or the student completed training during the establishment of vetting procedures and has since departed the U.S.

DOD has taken some steps to improve implementation of vetting procedures for international military students. However, DOD has not assessed implementation to identify opportunities for improvement. For example, stakeholders told GAO of factors in vetting implementation that could be improved, such as limitations with in-country data collection and a time-consuming process for sharing information between stakeholders. DOD circulated a draft progress report on program metrics, such as the number of students who underwent vetting for fiscal year 2022. However, DOD has not finalized the report, and it is unclear if it will include an assessment of any opportunities for improvement in the vetting procedures. Without an assessment, DOD will not have a full understanding of factors that hinder vetting implementation. DOD also cannot determine whether or how it should take action to improve vetting implementation.

The Department of State and DOD share information to support international military student vetting in a variety of ways, such as sharing database access and confirming vetting. However, State and DOD have not ensured that roles and responsibilities are fully clarified in guidance or written agreements. If DOD and State take actions to clarify roles and responsibilities for sharing information on issues related to international military students, the agencies can better coordinate on program management, including communicating relevant policy updates and sharing additional data and analysis regarding vetting.