

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans who received technical training in the military may be well suited to pursue degrees in STEM. The Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship provides up to \$30,000 to assist veterans with continuing qualifying STEM programs after they exhaust their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 includes a provision for GAO to provide an interim and final assessment of the Rogers STEM scholarship program. This final assessment (1) reports the number of veterans that pursued and obtained STEM degrees using the Rogers STEM scholarship, and (2) evaluates how consistently VA processes Rogers STEM scholarship applications. GAO analyzed VA administrative data from August 2019 to June 2023, the most recently available data at the time of GAO's analysis. GAO also held four discussion groups with VA staff who process scholarship applications and reviewed relevant VA documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to VA, including developing additional information to aid VA staff who review scholarship applications and improving the information available to school officials. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

HIGHER EDUCATION

VA Should Provide Additional Information to Its Staff and Schools on the Rogers STEM Scholarship

What GAO Found

More than 7,000 veterans have used the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship since the program began in August 2019. The scholarship provides financial assistance to eligible veterans pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The vast majority of veterans (99 percent) used the scholarship towards an undergraduate STEM degree, and about 2,000 veterans graduated while using the scholarship.

GAO found that the Department of Veterans Affairs has tools—such as staff training and guidance—to help ensure consistent Rogers STEM scholarship application processing, and more information for its staff and schools would bolster these efforts. Some STEM majors are easy to identify (e.g., engineering or mathematics). VA staff judgement becomes part of the application award process in the small number of applications where a veteran's major is not easily identifiable as STEM.

Using VA data, GAO identified more than 100 instances where VA potentially made erroneous scholarship award decisions because the major approved for the scholarship did not appear to be STEM. VA confirmed that in 56 instances it appeared the agency approved scholarships for veterans pursuing ineligible majors, such as applied management and construction management. These 56 instances reflect VA's approval of up to \$1.7 million in scholarship funds for veterans to use toward majors not in STEM fields.

Through data analysis, review of VA documents, and interviews with VA staff, GAO identified two areas where VA could provide additional information to help ensure consistent scholarship award decisions. Specifically:

- **Information for VA staff.** VA does not have a complete list of eligible majors for its staff to use when processing applications and deciding whether to award the scholarship. VA also does not have formal procedures to ensure its staff raise questions or further examine applications with majors that appear to be non-STEM.
- **Information for schools.** School officials provide key information during the application process, however, the resources that VA provides to schools do not fully describe the school's role. As a result, schools do not always provide the information needed and VA may deny the scholarship to an otherwise eligible veteran, according to VA staff.

Providing this additional information to VA staff and schools can help ensure consistent scholarship award decisions.