

taken advantage of the education and training programs it funded, and another 2.4 million had signed up for VA-backed home loans.

“What that bill did for the country was to change the course of our history and the latter half of the 20th century,” Shinseki said. “When those veterans went back to their communities with their college degrees, they ended up being our leaders in religion, education, business, government—you name it.”

The Post-9/11 version “has the opportunity to create in the 21st century the same kind of impact for development, ... social change [and] leadership across a lot of institutions,” he said. The program will be administered and funded by VA, and represents a “huge investment” by the United States in its veterans, Shinseki said. This, he said, sends a strong, unmistakable message. “I think young veterans who come back and participate in [in this GI Bill] will begin to understand how much they are valued [and] how much their service is valued, just by the opportunity here,” he said.

“It has been a long time since we’ve had an education initiative that includes tuition fees [and a] housing allowance, [and] takes care of all of the requirements required to go to school,” Shinseki said of the program. This will enable veterans to focus on their studies, he said, without the distractions of figuring out how to pay for them.

### Closing the Gap

Although the plan seems relatively clear-cut for public colleges and universities, there are still uncertainties about the circumstances in which a veteran chooses to attend a private college or graduate program at a college in another state.

Under the new plan, the federal government will pay up to the amount of the highest-priced undergraduate program at an in-state public school, leaving many service mem-

bers a hefty tab if they choose a prestigious private school.

To help close the gap, colleges and universities have the option to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program. According to the VA, this program allows colleges and universities to enter into an agreement that will split costs the Post 9/11 GI Bill does not cover between the federal government

and the school, easing the burden on student veterans.

Even with such details still sketchy, many schools have already made the commitment to assist student veterans in sharing the financial burden. Columbia University, George Washington University, and St. Francis University all intend to participate in the plan.

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And despite pains from the recession, Amherst College, which has seen its endowment shrink by 25 percent and its administrative budget shrink by 15 percent, had no arguments with the program. "There was zero controversy about it," said Tom Parker, who oversees admission and financial aid at Amherst. "It was unanimous."

The University of Phoenix, a distance learning institution that enrolls a huge number of GI Bill beneficiaries each year, has also committed to participating.

But other schools are not so quick to decide. Shrinking endowments and an increase in financial aid applications is causing hesitation. Harvard, for instance, has not released whether or not they will be participating in the program, but said that most of its aid dollars have already been committed elsewhere.

### Lots of Interest

A whopping 97 percent of service members surveyed in August 2008 said they plan to take advantage of the new benefits provided in the Post-9/11 GI Bill, said Bill Carr, deputy undersecretary of defense for military personnel policy. "Enormous interest has been expressed in the transferability provision and how it would work, because so many in the force have families," Carr said. Statistics show that half of the military force is married, and two-thirds have families by the time they serve six years.

To qualify for transferability under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, service members must have served six years on active duty or in the Selected Reserve, and must commit to another four years. But Carr said the rules could be tweaked soon to allow mid- or late-career troops to qualify, even if they can't sign on for another four years of duty due to service restrictions.

### Still Work to Do

Complex issues and confusion about portions of the new GI Bill leave some wondering about changes even before the program official begins.

Starting May 1, 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs began accepting applications for the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The application form is available online. Once you submit your application, the VA will process your request and send you a letter detailing your eligibility and entitlements under the program. Payments for the Post-9/11 GI Bill will not be processed until August 1, 2009.

The form requires that individuals currently eligible for another education benefit make an irrevocable election from their existing program to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Typically individuals who are eligible for more than one benefit may use a combined total of 48 months of entitlement. Therefore, for those individuals eligible for the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) program, please be advised that if you have entitlement remaining under the MGIB, the number of months of Post-9/11 GI Bill entitlement you will be eligible for will be equal to the number of months remaining under MGIB. However, if you exhaust all of your MGIB entitlement, then you may be entitled to a maximum of 12 additional months of entitlement under the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Visit [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov) for the latest information and forms for the new GI Bill.

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee acknowledged that there are flaws in the new bill although it is the biggest improvement in veterans' education benefits to take effect since World War II.

Committee Chairman Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., said he recognizes the problems, but he wants to hold off on any changes. "I don't want to be accused of causing problems that screw things up," he said. "There will be major changes, but they will be made in the second year."

Among the proposed changes is a revision that allows veterans studying through distance learning to receive a living stipend like those who physically attend classes. A revision of basic rates is also being considered to compensate for veterans in states that heavily subsidize tuition.

VA officials are hesitant about change, however, having warned lawmakers about the complexity of the new program. Separate calculations, payments directly to institutions, and living allowances based on the military housing allowance by school location are all among the reasons the VA has cited for possible delay of benefits.

Regardless of the changes now or in the future, Fischer said he is thankful for the new program. "Some older veterans just didn't have these opportunities," said Fischer. "I joined to serve my country, first and foremost, but the payments for schooling are an invaluable benefit that I will take advantage of however they are offered."

Others, however, are not so sure about the program and its functionality. Mike Brown, a Vietnam veteran, often speaks out for the rights and benefits of veterans, both past and present.

"Although I think the new benefits have come a long way from when I served in Vietnam," said Brown, "I still don't think that we are where we need to be. There are flaws in the programs and in the system and our country owes it to these veterans [to] fix them."

Brown noted problems in the delay of education benefits and the complexity of the application process. He is frustrated that more schools don't have special personnel to guide veterans as they try to navigate the system.

Everyone agrees, however, that education programs for veterans are moving in the right direction. And even with a need to alter the new plan and the anticipation of evolutionary programs in the future, veterans are beginning to gain access to an education that they have earned many, many times over. ●

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