# Center for American Progress

# 5 Policies for Improving Data Use to Accelerate Veteran Employment

By Aneesh Chopra and Ethan Gurwitz    September 2014

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# Contents

# Introduction and summary

When veterans leave the service and reenter the civilian workforce, they are coming from a job that required significant training and tremendous responsibility. As new employees, this wealth of experience and unique set of skills theoretically should allow them to add value and increase productivity for an employer at a rate far faster than their nonveteran counterparts. Unfortunately, veterans' unemployment, particularly for those under the age of 35, remains stubbornly high. In 2013, the average unemployment rate for veterans between the ages of 25 to 34, who joined the military after September 11, 2001, was 9.5 percent, around 2.2 percentage points higher than their nonveteran counterparts.[1] Moreover, as of August 2014, nearly 15 percent of young veterans ages 20 to 24 were unemployed—a rate 4.2 percentage points higher than their nonveteran counterparts.[2] Given their meaningful labor-market experience, why aren't veterans, and younger veterans in particular, performing better in the labor market?

Certainly, one reason is the challenge of translating military experience and talents into credentials that employers can easily discern. According to a 2012 survey by the Center for a New American Security, or CNAS, more than 60 percent of employers said they had difficulty interpreting veterans' skills.[3] As CNAS notes, employers without a military background found it difficult to understand the experiences and skill sets of veterans and determine how military skills matched their business needs. In addition to issues of skill translation, the study also examined additional reasons for veteran unemployment, including negative stereotypes associated with returning veterans, skills mismatches where veterans simply do not have the skills for civilian positions in question, concerns about future deployments, and difficulty finding veterans to employ. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, or GAO, more than 1 million service members are expected to leave the active military over the next five years and enter the workforce, a number that may only increase depending on the size of the post-war drawdowns.[4] Now is the time to deliver a stronger and more effective workforce system for our veterans.

One way to better the veteran-to-civilian-employee transition is through the improved access and use of labor-market information, or LMI. Over the past five years, the Obama administration has made great strides in opening data to the public, improving the functionality of that data, and ultimately, using data to spur innovation, savings, and reforms. We have seen the birth of an ecosystem of public and private app developers building better services powered by open data, especially in the health care and clean energy markets.[5] In addition to these efforts, this summer, Vice President Joe Biden released a landmark report on job training that highlighted new tools, initiatives, and leaders in workforce development.[6] At the same time, Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, with a specific focus on LMI.[7] Building on this momentum, this report lays out five policies for better utilizing data to accelerate veteran employment in jobs that best leverage their skills.

1. **Increase public access to more government data sets.** These data sets can help local workforce planners better identify the skills of unemployed veterans and match those skills with veteran-friendly employers and local industry demand.

2. **Launch a "JobsData.gov" platform.** We recommend extending the Data.gov platform, a central depository for government data sets. The federal government should create a data community focused solely on labor-market information. As proposed, the JobsData.gov portal would focus in particular on veterans' data and allow for easy interoperability with state data sets as well as easy access for third-party web and app developers.

3. **Modernize O\*NET.** The federal government needs to improve how data is collected for the Occupational Information Network, or O\*NET, the current primary database for information on occupations, skills, and related variables. Reforming data-collection techniques will ensure that information on various occupations in the United States is always relevant, correct, and updated in real time.

4. **Convene the private sector to standardize skills data.** Federal agencies should establish a more uniform standard for presenting online job postings and resumes so that the skills associated with each are more clearly distinguishable and machine readable.

5. **Accelerate learning pathways.** Increase access to new competency-based learning models, which will allow veterans to quickly identify and master the additional competencies they may need for civilian employment and, more importantly, build on the skills they already have. Such action undertaken by the federal government would accelerate the time it takes for veterans to find employment, take into account the skills they already have, and ultimately reduce some of the existing barriers to employment.

When re-entering the civilian workforce, veterans need employment opportunities where they can quickly put their skills, training, and experience to use and be highly productive from day one. As President Barack Obama said in an August 2014 speech to the American Legion National Convention, "if you're a medic in a warzone, you shouldn't have to go take nursing 101 to work in a hospital here in the United States."[8] The above recommendations, which are detailed below, are steps that policymakers, entrepreneurs, and various workforce stakeholders can take to better understand the skill profile of unemployed veterans in their community, match their skills with high-growth jobs that offer a ladder to higher wages, and ultimately decrease the period between unemployment and full productivity for those who have served us so courageously.

# Policy recommendations

## Increase public access to more government data sets

Over the past five years—spurred by the memorandum on transparency and open government President Obama issued on his first full day in office, the subsequent Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, open government directive, and later, the presidential executive order on making open and machine-readable data the new default for government information—all federal government agencies have begun working to make their data more transparent and accessible.[9] To date, each federal agency has established an open-government plan and has been working to inventory their respective data sets.[10] The Department of Labor, or DOL, for instance, currently makes 319 data sets available through Data.gov and has steadily released more assets since its initial open-government plan.[11] Similarly, the Department of Defense, or DOD, currently has more than 300 data sets available at Data.gov and provides a machine-readable listing of all publicly releasable data sets on its website.[12] The Department of Veterans Affairs, or VA, has published more than 600 data sets.[13]

We applaud these efforts and eagerly anticipate the completion of agencies' respective inventory processes, but we also believe federal and state governments can do more to have an impact on veterans' unemployment. In particular, the DOD, VA, and DOL could expand the availability of data sets in three areas: curating a real-time inventory of veteran-friendly job postings; aggregating the military skills profile for unemployed veterans who are participating in their respective state Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers, or UCX, program, among others; and finally, publishing information that helps translate those military skills to civilian credentials.

First, the government at the federal and state level should build on efforts to curate a real-time inventory of veteran-friendly job postings to better organize the myriad efforts across the public and private sector, including governor-led programs, to promote veteran employment.[14] For companies that want to actively hire veterans,

the Obama administration has worked with the workforce-technology industry to simplify how employers associate job postings with veteran-friendly hiring commitments. The recently relaunched Veterans Job Bank, a web-based jobs site, then promotes those job postings that are linked to so-called "featured employers," thus helping connect unemployed veterans with veteran-friendly businesses.[15] Federal and local governments should continue to expand the number of employers designated as veteran-friendly and ensure that the real-time job-posting data are readily available for third-party developers via Data.gov.

Second, federal and state governments should publish information on the skills veterans have acquired while in the military. Currently, the DOD maintains Military Occupational Classification, or MOC, data—also called Military Occupational Specialty, or MOS, data—which provide a detailed account of veterans' skills and training.[16] DOD should work with states to match the MOC/MOS data with veterans who are receiving unemployment compensation, including those enrolled in the UCX claimants program, among other similar programs.[17] The coupling of these data sets would appear as aggregate "counts" of unemployed veterans with a particular skill or cluster of skills for the specific county in which the veteran has filed a claim.[18] For example, a community college administrator would be able to know the number of unemployed veterans in his or her county who were military health care specialists. Furthermore, the use of aggregate counts would allow the agency to suppress data for counties where the overall aggregate count fails to reach a certain threshold. A county with too few counts would likely make it easy to identify the individual respondent or veteran. By suppressing results from counties that fall below a specific count threshold, it both ensures a statistically reliable sample while protecting privacy so that individuals cannot be determined.[19] This methodology is deployed across statistical agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau.[20]

Finally, to translate veterans' unique talents into civilian taxonomies, the government should publish data that help map military skills to civilian credentials. Opening up the data that powers the Army's and the Navy's Credentialing Opportunities On-Line websites—also known as Army COOL and Navy COOL—or a commensurate program would assist veterans in discerning how their military skills match up with civilian certifications and licenses.[21]

The net effect of releasing these data sets would allow public and private stakeholders to take advantage of a more accessible, detailed, and hyper-local account of the local employers who have made a veteran hiring commitment as well as the general training and experience of unemployed veterans in a respective county. For example, let's say a veteran is an Army combat medic listed by the code MOS 68W. The code tells us the veteran is trained in practicing emergency medicine. According to Dr. Elizabeth Carter, executive director for the Virginia Board of Health Professions, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing has compared the curriculum for this military position with the curriculum of a civilian licensed practical nurse, or LPN, and has determined that Army medics perform 60 percent of the necessary skills required of an LPN.[22] Armed with this data, a local workforce development intermediary would be able to know the number of unemployed veterans in their county that have earned a majority of the medical training required to serve as an LPN based on the their military experience.[23] The local hospital seeking to hire nurses could then work with local workforce system stakeholders to design a new conditional employment program or an internship while the veteran completes a newly offered fast-track program at a local community college. Such a skills-matching system, as was broadly alluded to in a recent report released by the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, would allow policymakers and the workforce system to formulate more targeted responses to meet local labor-market opportunities, while respecting individual privacy.[24]

At present, six states are working with the National Governors Association's, or NGA's, Veterans' Licensing and Certification Policy Academy and the DOL to create systems that assist returning veterans with re-entering the civilian workforce.[25] These initiatives are working to better pair military skills defined through MOC or MOS with applicable civilian careers. In Virginia, for example, a pilot initiative is underway to help transitioning veterans earn civilian health credentials that are tied more closely to their military work experience.[26] This effort includes steps to streamline licensing for nurses, physical therapy assistants, and emergency medical technicians, or EMTs.[27] In addition, the various state initiatives are working to incorporate veteran skills data paired with UCX data, to better assess unemployed veteran claimants in each MOS and ultimately improve how states allocate limited workforce planning resources for improving credential attainment and veteran employment.[28]

## Launch a "JobsData.gov" platform

### Pooling data for a labor-market platform

As a corollary to the release of new data sets, the federal government is well equipped to do more to coordinate with other agencies' labor-market and skills-related data assets, especially as it relates to veterans. Specifically, we are calling for the federal government to build upon its existing Data.gov platform to facilitate the organization of federal labor-market information in one place and establish a method to allow states to participate voluntarily. This proposed "JobsData.gov" platform would aggregate data assets from various agencies including DOL, DOD, and the VA in order to improve the functionality of the data for citizens and the private sector. A platform of this sort would allow developers to easily access and utilize government data to develop tools to lower veteran unemployment and raise veteran skills acquisition.

An important feature of this proposed platform would be its ability to incorporate state databases, which are often the source of some of the best LMI. As the Data Quality Campaign, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that seeks to improve a variety of outcomes via effective data use, has noted, states are the only entities that promote uniform and effective data usage from various districts and sectors.[29] To date, 44 states have systems that link K-12 and postsecondary data and 19 states have systems that link K-12 and workforce data.[30] Properly designed, a federal LMI portal would allow states to quickly export federal government data and/or contribute to a broader federal platform, thereby becoming laboratories for new workforce tools and labor-market strategies.

More specifically, states should be encouraged to work with the DOD to incorporate veteran skills and training data, held by the DOD personnel systems, as a new data asset within states' robust longitudinal data systems. Under current DOD policy, soldiers are offered the ability to opt-in—by checking "yes" in block 20 of their DD Form 214 discharge papers—for data sharing with state veteran agencies; doing so allows the DOD to share military personnel records with states.[31] Clarifying the use of this data for possible incorporation into statewide longitudinal data systems is worth further exploration.

An effective case study for such a system is the HealthData.gov platform. Currently, HealthData.gov consists of around 900 data sets, with more to come.[32] According to David Forrest, lead project manager for HealthData.gov, in addition to its work to combine and "federalize" health data catalogs of various agencies, HealthData.gov is also doing the same with state data.[33] New York state health care data are now included in HealthData.gov, and additional states are able to easily opt-in and include their respective records in the portal.[34]

### Encouraging developer use of labor-market data

While improving access to data is important, we also need to ensure these data are web and app-developer friendly. Similar to app builders integrating their products with any mobile platform, a JobsData.gov platform should ensure that any portal can easily integrate other web applications and allow for third-party developers to improve the overall platform and its existing applications. Similarly, the proposed platform should ensure data sets are consistent and compatible as a way to ease functionality.

Such a technology integration effort would build upon existing initiatives cited in Vice President Biden's report on job training. The report emphasized the importance of various initiatives such as data jams and datapaloozas that act as gatherings of tech experts and encourage developers to build better tools for job seekers.[35] Data jams and datapaloozas bring together developers and innovators to think about how to better use government data and design new applications. These sorts of initiatives help create ecosystems where entrepreneurs and innovators engage with government agencies to contemplate how open data can be used to improve the public's experience with current government services or to create whole new services and applications.[36]

Consider the example of the Veterans Talent Open Data Collaboration (www.veteranstalent.io).[37] In response to a February 2014 meeting that included the Obama administration's Chief Technology Officer Todd Park and representatives from the U.S. Departments of Commerce, Labor, Defense, and Veterans Affairs, stakeholders in the public and private sector shared labor-market data, and in combination with government data, developed a so-called "proof of concept map" showing what a state-by-state tracking system linking veteran skills to available jobs would look like.[38] Examples of what this voluntary collaboration produced are below (see Figures 1 and 2):

## FIGURE 1

### Statewide count of young, job-searching veterans with experience designing and implementing computer and information networks

Distribution of Monster.com resumes of veterans under age 35 with the Standard Occupational Classification Code 15-1140: Database and Systems Administrators and Network Architects

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 0–4 | | 50–99 |
| 5–19 | | 100+ |
| 20–49 | | No data |
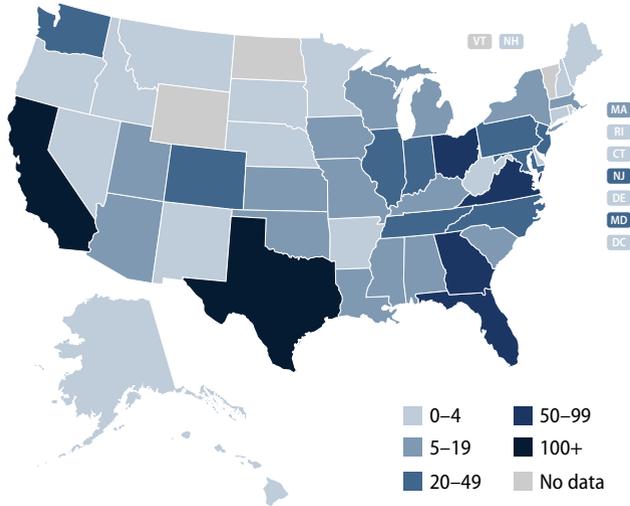
Source: Reproduced from analysis performed by Hunch Analytics and Mic using data from Monster.com as part of the Veterans Talent: An Open Data Collaboration, available at www.VeteransTalent.io. Hunch Analytics and Mic surveyed 627,771 Monster.com resumes.

## FIGURE 2

### Statewide count of veteran-friendly job openings requiring a licensed practical nurse certification

Distribution of job openings that require a licensed practical nurse certification retrieved from the National Resource Directory and the National Labor Exchange

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 0–4 | | 50–99 |
| 5–19 | | 100+ |
| 20–49 | | |
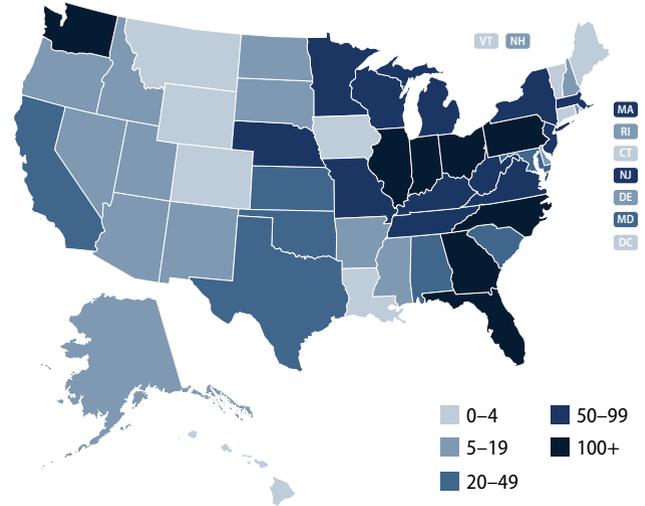
Source: Reproduced from analysis performed by Hunch Analytics and Mic using data from National Resource Directory and National Labor Exchange job openings as part of the Veterans Talent: An Open Data Collaboration, available at www.VeteransTalent.io. Hunch Analytics and Mic surveyed 586,159 veteran-friendly job postings.

Over the past few years, the federal government has taken huge strides to foster the development this data ecosystem. The federal government has built out Data.gov and has allowed developers to access a growing catalog of government *application programming interface,* or API, platforms that allow third-party software developers to seamlessly integrate their products with government services, improve the usability of existing government applications, or build new applications using government data.[39] This reform effort has trickled down to the agency level where various entities are facilitating their own initiatives to make their data developer-friendly. The DOL, for example, designed developer.dol.gov and established a centralized API to provide easy access to more than 200 public data sets from multiple departments.[40] The DOL has also committed to creating an API to facilitate data sharing across federal agencies.[41]

Providing API access to developers will pay huge dividends for government innovation. The reboot of the FederalRegister.gov website in 2011 offers an example of the promise. In an effort to spur reform, the Office of the Federal Register, or OFR, and the U.S. Government Printing Office, or GPO, provided access to their source code.[42] A competition held by the Sunlight Foundation, a nonprofit seeking to increase government transparency, led three outside developers to create an open-source application using this bulk access.[43] The OFR and GPO adopted the website as the unofficial, online edition of the daily Federal Register, the official daily publication for the actions of the federal government.[44] Just a year later, the Federal Register created an API for access to all federal registrar data.[45] The Federal Register connected its API to its search engine, allowing users to formulate their requests with acute specificity.[46] This policy has led to the creation of numerous new websites and applications that use granular Federal Register data.[47]

## Modernize O*NET

In addition to improving access, there is a need to modernize how labor-market data are collected. Many of the data sets the government relies on are cumbersome, outdated, and narrow in scope. In particular need of reform is the Occupational Information Network, or O*NET, the current primary database for information on occupations, skills, and related variables.

O*NET relies on a two-staged survey design to collect occupational information: a random sample of businesses and a random sample of workers within those businesses.[48] From those surveys, occupational analysts derive abilities and skills information. Since it began in 2001, O*NET has continuously collected information on occupations. As of December 2011, with a business response rate of 76 percent and an employee response rate of 65 percent, O*NET had sampled just about 124,600 businesses and 161,500 employees.[49] On average, O*NET updates only around 100 occupation codes annually. As of July 2014, it has updated just 940 occupations.[50] O*NET does cull web-based information—it looks at tools, technology, and job titles associated with occupations from online job postings, professional association websites, as well as the DOL's CareerOneStop website, also known as America's Career InfoNet—but this data-collection effort is just a supplement to their survey work.[51]

O*NET highlights the existing limitations of today's survey data as well as the need to modernize these practices. O*NET should better engage the private sector through the establishment of a collaborative crowdsourcing platform. This effort, in combination with survey results and supplemented with data from various public- and private-sector job boards would make O*NET's current survey far more robust and allow the system to expand its coverage of the skills and competencies required for all U.S. occupations and industries.

O*NET should also better incorporate military skills data into its platform. Currently, it does not collect any data on military professions.[52] Doing so would enable this system to be more effective at helping veterans transition into the workforce. By incorporating military skills, O*NET could be used to better translate military experiences into civilian occupations, skills, and certifications.

To be sure, the private sector has addressed these limitations outside of the public sector by organizing better information technologies to analyze labor supply and demand, but these efforts are not integrated into the O*NET framework. This is particularly problematic as O*NET—or its predecessor, the Dictionary of Occupational Titles—is cited as the database of record for more than 33 regulations ranging from disability determination, immigration administration, and more.[53] A better public-private interface to modernize O*NET should ensure better government regulation and program administration. Furthermore, the resulting open data will help spark entrepreneurs and innovators in the public and private sector to build better tools to match job seekers, and veterans in particular, to the right jobs.

One model to reference is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's Peer to Patent initiative, which allows the patent office to crowdsource its pending patent applications in order to overcome inherent information deficits.[54] While patents receive a final vetting by the office's patent examiner, this peer review allows for an expert network to provide an initial helping hand in assessing claims.[55] O*NET could use a similar process. By creating opportunities for talent experts in the private and academic sectors to contribute real-time updates and recommended expansions to the core O*NET database, O*NET could establish a more sophisticated model to map U.S. occupations. An example of this is a pilot initiative in California, where state officials are examining high-growth industry sectors with occupations not fully described in O*NET—specifically, the distinction between traditional animators in the entertainment industry and the more technically advanced occupation of "3D computer artist."[56] Under the pilot program, California relied upon greater industry participation, which resulted in a new O*NET classification.[57]

While these additions will certainly make O*NET more dynamic and comprehensive, concerns about O*NET's continuity must also be taken into consideration. In particular, the current O*NET classification serves various stakeholders, including federal and state workforce-training initiatives, educational institutions, and data-collection agencies.[58] Any changes to O*NET must ensure that data-collection efforts are historically comparable. Various data-collection agencies have dealt with historical comparability before. For example, with the introduction of a new Census occupational and industry classification in 2003, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, or BLS, dual-coded old Census classifications from 1990 and new ones in 2002 and used conversion factors to approximate general employment data over time.[59] In a similar fashion, new O*NET data should be able to branch back to or be rendered using the past O*NET models in an effort to ensure a level of data coherence.

As O*NET stated in its OMB clearance package, "the world of work is constantly changing, and technological advancements are occurring so rapidly that an efficient, effective way to remain current and accurate is to obtain the information directly from those performing the work."[60] Combining O*NET's current survey work with data from online job boards and public- and private-sector talent experts will help stakeholders get more complete coverage of the occupations and skills available in high-growth and high-demand industries. Moreover, by improving how it gathers and includes military skills data, O*NET will be better able to act as a bridge in servicing veterans looking for civilian employment.

## Convene the private sector to standardize skills data

Most job openings are posted by individual companies on their respective websites, each with a different backend-coding framework and often written in language that obfuscates the full picture of skills needed. Similarly, resumes posted to online databases carry considerable variability in broadcasting a candidate's skills. While there is a vibrant, competitive marketplace for job postings and online resume banks, lacking is an industry standard on how best to express skills data that are accessible across websites. This limitation makes aggregate workforce planning more difficult.

A voluntary, industry-led, uniform skills data standard for job openings and resumes posted online would provide developers access to data in a format that would allow them to easily build more personalized products and services to

match talent to jobs, or assist planners in how best to allocate limited resources. This effort would preserve the dynamic, grassroots nature in which skills data are defined, while at the same time simplifying how those skills are presented. This capability would foster a more dynamic marketplace of tools, allowing workforce planners to search for in-demand skills rather than just job openings, or give employers the ability to identify their specific skill needs and be better matched with job seekers who can fill those needs. This would be especially advantageous for veterans whose military careers are already categorized by MOS data. A new crop of so-called "civilian skills translators" could ensure that the labor market fully harnesses the capabilities of our returning service members and matches them with a more transparent, detailed, geographically pegged account of the skills needed by local employers who make a commitment to hiring veterans.

In 2011, President Obama launched the Veterans Job Bank, which built upon a standardized online job posting method, to better assist employers who wanted to make a veteran hiring commitment.[61] The White House convened the leaders of Schema.org, a network of search engines, including Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo, to implement a "job posting" schema to organize and interpret information.[62] As stated in a White House blog post, the schema made "structured data on the Web easier to find."[63] By noting or tagging a job opening in the job posting schema, that job posting would be made available and easily searchable in the Veterans Job Bank, and subsequently the public via a standardized API. Moreover, aggregating veteran-friendly jobs became a more routine task that did not require significant information technology, or IT, investment. The White House initiative launched with more than 500,000 tagged jobs.[64]

Building on that progress and in an effort to better engage the private sector, we recommend that the U.S. Departments of Defense, Labor, Veterans Affairs, and Commerce—through its National Institute of Standards and Technology, or NIST, which works to improve technology, measurement, and standards[65]—convene leaders in human resources and industry more broadly to standardize how skills data are presented on the Internet, especially for veteran-friendly employers, and to foster the development of better military skills translation tools.

Created in 1901, NIST was congressionally authorized with a broad mandate to improve the United States' industrial competitiveness by revamping standards and measurement infrastructure.[66] NIST has both the experience and the statutory authority to act as an intermediary between various entities, including businesses,

the federal government, and state governments, and has a proven record with work ranging from creating measurements for nanotechnology and the human genome project to improving fire-hose and building standards.[67] NIST should use its authority and broad mandate to bring together federal agencies, the private sector, and other stakeholders to facilitate the development of a uniform method of presenting skills data for job openings and resumes posted online. This effort should be specific to employers seeking to hire transitioning veterans.

In addition to having an agency that can act as convener, the federal government already has a baseline for skills categorization. Described above, O*NET works to create a common "framework to facilitate communication about industry skill needs among business, education and the workforce investment system."[68] While O*NET is ripe for improvement, it does provide a skills breakdown of job postings, which assists various stakeholders in quickly identifying the skills required for high-demand occupations.[69] More importantly, as O*NET states, "the primary dissemination strategy of the O*NET Program is for the private sector to build O*NET based products that are tailored to specific audiences or user needs."[70] This schema provides a model to build upon by which all employers can better convey skills requirements associated with every job posting on the Internet.

The ability to create a uniform method to present skills data for every available job opening in the United States is an enormous challenge requiring buy-in and leadership from private industry, educational institutions, regulators, labor unions, and many others. The federal government already has in place a convening agency as well as a standing skills framework. While the government should not be and is not in the business of mandating the definition of skills, it does have a unique ability to convene and "accelerate standards development and implementation to help spur technological advances and broaden technology adoption," as outlined in the OMB memorandum addressing federal engagement in standardization.[71] Perhaps the resulting public-private approach could influence a new, more open, grassroots collaborative approach that would eventually replace the government-regulated O*NET to ascribe a more accurate skills taxonomy on the jobs of today and tomorrow. The federal government has played this role in other industries, including fostering greater interoperability of clean energy and health care data; why not do the same with the labor market?[72]

## Accelerate learning pathways

Finally, once access to various forms of data and a more comprehensive skill profile for job openings have increased, it is intriguing to think about the ways that public and private sectors can better utilize all of this data. With improved labor-market information, job seekers, particularly veterans looking for work, will be able to tailor their education to the specific skills that are in demand. Evolving competency-based workforce-training models are quicker to complete and are more affordable than traditional credit-based programs, and would allow veterans to supplement the skills they have already acquired in the military with the more specific skills needed by the employer.[73] As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has noted, competency-based programs allow students and adult learners "flexibility to fit their education into their lives or work through a class on their own pace."[74]

Some individual federal agencies have begun to support these types of competency-based models. As early as 2006, the Department of Education created a rule to establish eligibility requirements for programs that measure direct assessments instead of seat time or credits.[75] Then in 2013, the Education Department provided guidance to encourage institutions with competency-based programs to apply for Title IV funding using the existing 2006 eligibility requirements for direct assessment programs.[76]

In addition to the Education Department, the VA is considering new innovative learning models to better serve veterans. In July 2014, Allison Hickey, the VA's under secretary for benefits, authored a "Dear Colleague" letter stating that the "VA is keenly interested in the viability of innovative learning models such as ALPs [accelerated learning programs] for both short- and long-term economic achievement of our Veterans" and is planning on testing various "demonstration projects" over the next few months.[77] The VA is also sending out letters to various ALPs to provide guidance on the state approval process for GI Bill eligibility.[78]

While interest is growing, these practices are not yet the norm. When thinking about veterans in particular, the GI Bill still does not have a formal process to cover tuition for competency-based models. The federal government has announced clarifying guidance on how such programs might qualify for tuition reimbursement, which is a terrific start, but further work can be done to streamline this process.[79] Furthermore, work needs to be done on better aligning standards and guidance for tuition assistance among various federal agencies. Whether it is the GI Bill or Title IV of the Higher Education Act, there is no

reason why the Department of Education and the VA have separate processes for determining if an institution should be reimbursed. Guidance for how Title IV funding and the GI Bill tuition assistance should be spent as it relates to potential competency-based training models should be clarified and made uniform.

One promising development is the VA's announced intention to launch a $10 million accelerated learning program, or ALP, competition called the *Accelerated Learning Competition*. Starting in fiscal year 2015, the initiative will assess the effectiveness of various training models at getting post-9/11 veterans into work.[80] The initiative will provide funding for veterans to take part in what the VA calls "IT centric ALPs," including "coding bootcamps," with the idea that some of these models will be scaled.[81]

Beyond this initiative, the federal government should establish an innovation center to begin to test, scale, and affirm various innovative competency models. This will help identify what new training models work and which deserve to be covered by the GI Bill, while adding an additional layer of credibility to the programs. A good model for this is the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services, or CMS, Innovation Center. Established through the Affordable Care Act, the center tests and scales various innovative medical payment and service models that improve the quality of Medicare, Medicaid, and Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, services while lowering costs.[82] To do this, the center has created a portal by which the public can submit worthy ideas. These ideas are then vetted and converted into requests for proposals, or RFPs.[83] The secretary of health and human services has the authority to expand or terminate the testing of a particular model without congressional approval.[84]

A similar model to the CMS Innovation Center could be used to vet and fund new competency-based training models for veterans. The Department of Education has begun to put this in place with its Experimental Sites Initiative, which tests various innovative models related to federal financial aid.[85] As of July 2014, the Department of Education has requested proposals for institutions to participate in four related experiments, including prior learning assessment, limited direct assessment, and competency-based education.[86] Unfortunately, the congressional authority to perform these experiments belongs exclusively to the Department of Education and not the VA.[87] Consequently, these experiments are unlikely to result in better services for veterans.

Finally, it is important to note that there are a bevy of education programs that cater to veterans that have failed to meet the return on investment promised.[88] Any process for funding new non-accredited competency-based programs should be well vetted with safeguards in place to ensure they these programs are truly beneficial to veterans. Furthermore, while we advocate for innovative programs that would help veterans take advantage of their military skills and decrease the time it takes to complete their education, we also believe that for those who have they capacity, there are huge advantages to traditional college and university programs. Many of these institutions allow veterans to transition from active duty to civilian life in an educational environment in which they can truly thrive.

# Conclusion

Veterans who return from service and re-enter the workforce do so with new skills and knowledge that are of tremendous and immediate value for businesses and industry. Unfortunately, even with these meaningful experiences and talents, a significant number of veterans remain unemployed. We need to ensure that veterans are finding good opportunities, starting work, and ultimately adding value to their companies more quickly and easily than is currently possible.

When a veteran with medical skills returns to his or her community from active duty, that veteran should immediately know what jobs are open and what skills those jobs require. Moreover, that veteran should know precisely how the skills he or she possesses match with the jobs that are available. If that veteran finds that she or he lacks the right skills, there should be an easy-to-access and affordable, accelerated competency-based training course available—one that is reimbursed under the Post-9/11 GI Bill—to provide the veteran with the skills needed.

Over the past decade, we have seen tremendous innovation in the job-search process. As Jeff Weiner, chief executive officer of LinkedIn, has noted: By increasing access to granular and sophisticated labor-market data, we are creating a market where emerging job opportunities are better matched to a job seeker's skills, past experiences, and interests. Simultaneously, a job seeker can tailor his or her occupational and educational choices toward the skills in demand.[89] Building on this concept, the federal government should help facilitate an ecosystem that supports veteran job seekers. This report has outlined a number of policy proposals that will result in a more accessible and functional labor market for veterans and will allow workforce intermediaries, policymakers, and innovators to achieve better outcomes—specifically, making sure that veterans, who served this country so heroically, quickly return to full productivity.

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## Acknowledgments

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