

AMU, PHOENIX LEAD THE PACK

New analysis of troops' and veterans' top college choices

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Veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill leveled off in fiscal 2015, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, marking the first time the popular new benefit failed to increase its base by tens or hundreds of thousands of users over the prior year.

Meanwhile, active-duty service members using military tuition assistance, or TA, fell by 2.7 percent from fiscal 2014 to fiscal 2015. But that drop is much less drastic than the 16 percent plummet charted a year earlier, data from the Defense Department and Coast Guard show.

Other information collected by Military Times as part of the annual analysis showed that for-profit institutions' military students tend to pass classes at higher rates. University of Phoenix, a for-profit college the Defense Department briefly barred from enrolling new TA students in 2015-16, actually posted one of the best course completion rates among big TA schools.

Those outcomes challenge common perceptions about for-profit institutions, which have come under heightened scrutiny from Congress and feder-

al agencies in recent years amid questions about their academic quality.

Officials at DoD, and among the military services, stress that the most popular colleges aren't necessarily the best.

While some of the most popular win glowing praise from students and brass alike, others have been suspended or put on probation by federal entities for various aspects of their operations.

ENROLLMENT DROPS AND SLOWDOWNS

Since going into effect in 2009, use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill has skyrocketed, quickly overtaking the Montgomery GI Bill. That growth appears to have all but stopped.

In fiscal 2015, Post-9/11 GI Bill students numbered 790,507, just about 100 students more than the 790,408 who used it the previous year, VA says. But an asterisk accompanies the trend. VA says the most recent totals are calculated differently than in past years, when students changing institutions mid-fiscal year might have resulted in their being counted twice. An apples-to-apples comparison of new data with past counts, without adjusting for duplications, would show a 36,000-student

drop in Post-9/11 GI Bill users from fiscal 2014 to fiscal 2015.

The VA was unable to immediately provide reasons for the overall enrollment slowdown, and the president of the nation's largest GI Bill college didn't have any theories, either.

"It's a great question," said University of Phoenix President Tim Slottow. "I'm interested in and curious about it as well."

In fiscal 2013, more than 355,000 service members enrolled in classes using TA across the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. That total plunged to about 298,100 in fiscal 2014. In fiscal 2015, it dropped to 290,100.

Dawn Bilodeau, DoD's voluntary education chief, attributed the drops to automatic spending cuts enacted by Congress, also known as sequestration, as well as to new rules and restrictions on who can use TA and when.

In a written statement, Bilodeau highlighted periods during which the entire TA program across DoD was suspended due to sequestration and a government shutdown.

The change in enrollment between fiscal 2014 and 2015 should be viewed as more typical than the prior year's



COURTESY OF AMERICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Graduates attend American Public University System's 2016 undergraduate commencement in National Harbor, Md.

much steeper drop, she said.

"Due to the aforementioned irregularities, variations experienced in both FY13 and FY14 may be viewed as anomalies."

Kelly Wilmeth, a vice president at University of Maryland University College, the nation's second-largest TA provider, largely agreed.

"I think things are starting to normalize," she said. "I think the new normal is probably the TA market shrinking, a little bit at a time, especially if the military is downsizing."

Every service branch charted fewer TA enrollments in fiscal 2015 than in fiscal 2014, except for the Navy and the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard's 10 percent enrollment gain in fiscal 2015 pales in comparison to the nearly 55 percent enrollment loss the prior year.

But the Navy increased its number of TA users by 31 percent in fiscal 2015, after the previous year's 11 percent drop, apparently making it the only military branch to recover from the steep declines.

DoD's Bilodeau said the Navy is reviewing its outcome for an explanation.

TOP TA COLLEGES, BY SERVICE

A Military Times analysis of Defense Department data for fiscal year 2015:

AIR FORCE

Rank	College or system	Students using TA	Courses	Cost
1	American Public Education Inc. [1]	21,619	54,309	\$41,356,502
2	University System of Maryland [2]	11,077	24,559	\$16,480,408
3	Bridgepoint Education	8,980	26,548	\$19,893,496
4	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	4,357	11,894	\$8,799,377
5	Park University	4,322	10,029	\$7,524,116

[1] Includes American Military University [2] Includes University of Maryland University College

ARMY

Rank	College or system	Students using TA	Courses	Cost
1	American Public Education [1]	18,731	49,750	\$37,287,348
2	Central Texas College	10,956	25,010	\$11,239,192
3	University System of Maryland [2]	9,495	24,296	\$15,973,253
4	Columbia Southern Education Group	4,453	12,359	\$7,937,924
5	University of Phoenix	4,045	12,597	\$9,080,651

COAST GUARD

Rank	College or system	Students using TA	Courses	Cost
1	American Public Education [1]	1,107	2,978	\$1,694,867
2	Excelsior College	221	559	\$294,862
3	Vincennes University	183	432	\$209,299
4	Columbia Southern Education Group	169	464	\$228,816
5	Thomas Edison State College	157	357	\$201,804

MARINE CORPS

Rank	College or system	Students using TA	Courses	Cost
1	American Public Education [1]	4,147	11,516	\$8,708,738
2	University System of Maryland [2]	2,021	4,964	\$3,372,722
3	Central Texas College	1,111	2,203	\$1,278,680
4	Bridgepoint Education	1,091	3,864	\$2,889,155
5	Park University	978	2,737	\$2,044,549

NAVY

Rank	College or system	Students using TA	Courses	Cost
1	University System of Maryland [2]	6,309	15,393	\$10,286,878
2	American Public Education [1]	6,039	14,632	\$11,044,934
3	California Community College System	3,375	6,979	\$3,450,079
4	Excelsior College	3,086	7,376	\$5,056,189
5	Columbia College	2,784	6,222	\$4,429,452

METHODOLOGY AND OUTCOMES

To track Post-9/11 GI Bill use, Military Times considered multiple VA data sets showing how many people used the GI Bill in fiscal 2015 and the resulting cost. Yellow Ribbon program use was not included. Military Times combined this data with Education Department information to group institutions that are part of the same university system.

To track tuition assistance use, information including students numbers, course counts and cost was collected from the Defense Department covering the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. The Coast Guard provided similar information, and institutions were grouped consistently with the GI Bill analysis.

Also included in the DoD data were the number of courses that TA students successfully completed at each institution, but the information was redacted for any college that enrolled 10 or fewer students, citing a “privacy concern.” Fiscal 2015 courses reported late may not have been counted.

“Course completion is one student outcome measure and, in isolation, may not be a useful indicator of program quality or value,” Bilodeau said.

Partial completion rates provided by DoD and the Coast Guard show University of Phoenix with a 96 percent course completion rate in fiscal 2015. Only one institution among the top 50 TA colleges posted a better rate.

“DoD is serving our students well by taking us off probation,” Phoenix’s Slottow said. “I think the rationale that they provided for putting us on probation was not strong enough in the end.”

University of Phoenix saw significant declines in its TA and Post-9/11 GI Bill populations that couldn’t be attributed to the probation — which wouldn’t have been recorded in fiscal 2015 — losing 15.6 percent of its TA population and 10.6 percent of its Post-9/11 GI Bill population between fiscal 2014 and fiscal 2015. That represents a combined \$54.6 million drop in revenue from the two programs.

Slottow predicted the slide would continue, based in part on the negative attention the DoD probation brought. He said the institution is also consciously trying to reduce enrollment to bring more resources to a smaller number of programs.

TOP 50 COLLEGES FOR POST-9/11 GI BILL

A Military Times analysis using data from the Department of Veterans Affairs for fiscal 2015. Individual institutions within a system, displayed in italics, would have ranked in the top 50 without being combined as part of the parent institution.

Rank (previous)	Institution or system	Headquarters or main campus	Sector	Highest degree offered	GI Bill recipients	Cost
1 (1)	University of Phoenix <i>University of Phoenix-Online Campus</i> <i>University of Phoenix-Southern California Campus</i> <i>University of Phoenix-San Diego Campus</i>	Phoenix	For-profit	Doctoral	43,973 22,709 3,737 3,254	\$292,948,815 \$135,107,635 \$30,864,515 \$25,940,470
2 (2)	California Community College System	Sacramento, Calif.	Public	Asc. or lower	18,914	\$8,713,699
3 (3)	University System of Maryland <i>University of Maryland University College</i>	Adelphi, Md.	Public	Doctoral	18,243 11,977	\$70,666,496 \$45,083,484
4 (5)	Education Management Corp.	Pittsburgh	For-profit	Doctoral	14,619	\$171,857,058
5 (6)	American Public Education Inc. [1]	Charles Town, W.Va.	For-profit	Master's	14,399	\$55,544,752
6 (4)	DeVry University Inc.	Downers Grove, Ill.	For-profit	Master's	13,655	\$107,095,101
7 (7)	ITT Educational Services Inc.	Carmel, Ind.	For-profit	Master's	11,223	\$151,238,710
8 (8)	Virginia Community College System <i>Northern Virginia Community College-Annandale</i>	Richmond, Va.	Public	Asc. or lower	11,025 3,173	\$29,547,030 \$8,870,028
9 (9)	Strayer Education Inc.	Herndon, Va.	For-profit	Master's	10,094	\$64,119,968
10 (10)	Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	Olympia, Wash.	Public	Bachelor's	9,467	\$30,107,511
11 (12)	Bridgepoint Education <i>Ashford University Online</i>	San Diego	For-profit	Doctoral	9,008 8,828	\$41,319,845 \$39,886,727
12 (11)	Career Education Corp. <i>Colorado Technical University-Online</i>	Schaumburg, Ill.	For-profit	Doctoral	8,786 3,192	\$83,007,721 \$27,720,673
13 (17)	Liberty University	Lynchburg, Va.	Private	Doctoral	8,598	\$37,246,788
14 (15)	North Carolina Community College System	Raleigh, N.C.	Public	Asc. or lower	8,040	\$10,875,992
15 (21)	University System of Georgia	Atlanta	Public	Doctoral	7,894	\$38,978,036
16 (14)	State University System of Florida	Tallahassee, Fla.	Public	Doctoral	7,484	\$38,830,426
17 (18)	Kaplan Higher Education Corp. <i>Kaplan University-Fort Lauderdale</i>	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.	For-profit	Doctoral	7,166 5,102	\$42,834,493 \$27,513,648
18 (13)	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	Daytona Beach, Fla.	Private	Doctoral	7,110	\$44,327,315
19 (16)	State University of New York System	Albany, N.Y.	Public	Doctoral	6,714	\$25,490,468
20 (20)	University of Texas System	Austin, Texas	Public	Doctoral	6,674	\$42,640,844
21 (19)	California State University	Long Beach, Calif.	Public	Doctoral	6,495	\$28,013,649
22 (22)	State University and Community College System of Tennessee	Nashville, Tenn.	Public	Doctoral	6,156	\$27,077,023
23 (24)	University of North Carolina	Chapel Hill, N.C.	Public	Doctoral	6,078	\$34,940,704
24 (25)	Universal Technical Institute Inc.	Scottsdale, Ariz.	For-profit	Asc. or lower	5,550	\$69,257,679
25 (26)	Alamo Colleges	San Antonio	Public	Asc. or lower	5,284	\$6,392,364
26 (29)	Arizona Board of Regents <i>Arizona State University-Tempe</i>	Phoenix	Public	Doctoral	5,246 3,445	\$46,397,177 \$34,169,659
27 (23)	Corinthian Colleges Inc.	Santa Ana, Calif.	For-profit	Master's	4,869	\$43,853,479
28 (36)	South Carolina Technical College System	Columbia, S.C.	Public	Asc. or lower	4,850	\$13,893,977
29 (27)	Saint Leo University	Saint Leo, Fla.	Private	Doctoral	4,679	\$22,430,629
30 (31)	Colorado Community College System	Denver	Public	Asc. or lower	4,611	\$14,258,220
31 (28)	Central Texas College <i>Central Texas College Main Campus</i>	Killeen, Texas	Public	Asc. or lower	4,588 3,467	\$6,397,254 \$4,020,560
32 (33)	National University System <i>National University-San Diego</i>	La Jolla, Calif.	Private	Doctoral	4,494 4,423	\$30,815,925 \$29,959,506
33 (30)	Webster University	St. Louis	Private	Doctoral	4,407	\$19,557,495
34 (32)	Novateur Education	Virginia Beach, Va.	For-profit	Master's	4,361	\$46,412,242
35 (34)	Maricopa Community College District	Tempe, Ariz.	Public	Asc. or lower	4,321	\$8,608,783
36 (38)	Technical College System of Georgia	Atlanta	Public	Asc. or lower	4,241	\$7,693,583
37 (35)	Texas A&M University System	College Station, Texas	Public	Doctoral	4,205	\$23,719,538
38 (39)	Columbia Southern Education Group Inc. <i>Columbia Southern University</i>	Orange Beach, Ala.	For-profit	Doctoral	3,843 3,699	\$11,843,827 \$11,268,305
39 (37)	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities	St. Paul, Minn.	Public	Doctoral	3,699	\$13,952,721
40	University of Hawaii Board of Regents	Hilo, Hawaii	Public	Doctoral	3,622	\$13,828,569
41 (43)	Grand Canyon University	Phoenix	For-profit	Doctoral	3,604	\$18,232,946
42	Southern New Hampshire University	Manchester, N.H.	Private	Doctoral	3,534	\$14,977,934
43 (47)	The Pennsylvania State University	University Park, Pa.	Public	Doctoral	3,468	\$37,844,379
44 (40)	Park University Distance Learning	Parkville, Mo.	Private	Master's	3,372	\$13,033,488
45	Grantham University	Lenexa, Kan.	For-profit	Master's	3,348	\$11,694,797
46 (44)	City University of New York	New York	Public	Doctoral	3,341	\$14,447,757
47 (41)	Columbia College	Columbia, Mo.	Private	Master's	3,251	\$10,026,393
48 (45)	Alabama Community College System	Montgomery, Ala.	Public	Asc. or lower	3,227	\$8,075,859
49	Education Corp. of America	Birmingham, Ala.	For-profit	Master's	3,174	\$33,672,464
50 (48)	Full Sail University	Winter Park, Fla.	For-profit	Master's	3,138	\$40,276,320

[1] American Military University is part of American Public Education Inc. Department of Veterans Affairs data did not distinguish it from its parent company, so precise student, course and dollar counts were not available.

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TOP 50 COLLEGES FOR TUITION ASSISTANCE

A Military Times analysis using data from the Defense and Homeland Security departments for fiscal 2015. Individual institutions within a system, displayed in italics, would have ranked in the top 50 without being combined as part of the parent institution.

Rank (previous)	College or system	Headquarters or main campus	Sector	Highest degree offered	Students using TA	Courses	Course completion rate	Cost
1 (1)	American Public Education Inc. [1]	Charles Town, W.Va.	For-profit	Master's	51,643	133,185	91%	\$100,092,388
2 (2)	University System of Maryland	Adelphi, Md.	Public	Doctoral	29,018	69,554	87%	\$46,300,478
	<i>University of Maryland University College</i>				25,346	60,854	87%	\$40,780,408
	<i>University of Maryland University College-Asian Division</i>				1,959	4,397	87%	\$2,811,245
	<i>University of Maryland University College-European Division</i>				1,552	3,780	88%	\$2,365,772
3 (3)	Bridgepoint Education	San Diego	For-profit	Doctoral	15,802	48,165	94%	\$35,790,159
	<i>Ashford University</i>				15,785	48,112	94%	\$35,750,500
4 (4)	Central Texas College	Killeen, Texas	Public	Asc. or lower	14,570	32,096	82%	\$15,456,842
5 (7)	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	Daytona Beach, Fla.	Private	Doctoral	8,877	23,854	93%	\$17,400,189
6 (6)	Columbia Southern Education Group Inc.	Orange Beach, Ala.	For-profit	Doctoral	8,627	23,478	90%	\$15,100,011
	<i>Columbia Southern University</i>				8,303	22,462	90%	\$14,370,436
7 (5)	University of Phoenix	Phoenix	For-profit	Doctoral	7,938	23,890	96%	\$17,425,588
8 (10)	Excelsior College	Albany, N.Y.	Private	Master's	7,153	18,296	92%	\$12,571,904
9 (9)	Liberty University	Lynchburg, Va.	Private	Doctoral	7,101	20,786	91%	\$15,098,294
10 (8)	Park University	Parkville, Mo.	Private	Master's	6,277	15,481	93%	\$11,558,950
11 (11)	Kaplan Higher Education Corp.	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.	For-profit	Doctoral	5,854	15,606	91%	\$12,585,428
	<i>Kaplan University</i>				5,831	15,547	91%	\$12,540,498
12 (14)	Columbia College	Columbia, Mo.	Private	Master's	5,127	13,042	92%	\$9,100,297
13 (15)	California Community College System	Sacramento, Calif.	Public	Asc. or lower	4,792	10,141	90%	\$4,904,263
	<i>Coastline Community College</i>				4,012	8,740	89%	\$4,630,811
14 (12)	Grantham University	Lenexa, Kan.	For-profit	Master's	4,463	14,493	94%	\$10,311,693
15 (16)	Saint Leo University	Saint Leo, Fla.	Private	Doctoral	4,219	11,445	91%	\$8,365,376
16 (13)	Trident University International	Cypress, Calif.	For-profit	Doctoral	4,178	9,240	88%	\$9,122,487
17 (17)	Thomas Edison State College	Trenton, N.J.	Public	Master's	3,341	7,651	81%	\$5,635,708
18 (18)	North Carolina Community College System	Raleigh, N.C.	Public	Asc. or lower	3,224	7,880	86%	\$1,855,926
	<i>Fayetteville Technical Community College</i>				2,165	5,290	86%	\$1,240,955
19 (19)	Post University	Waterbury, Conn.	For-profit	Master's	2,876	7,795	94%	\$5,760,789
20 (23)	National University System	La Jolla, Calif.	Private	Doctoral	2,869	7,496	96%	\$5,176,943
21 (24)	Virginia Community College System	Richmond, Va.	Public	Asc. or lower	2,446	5,756	86%	\$2,355,256
	<i>Tidewater Community College</i>				1,488	3,588	87%	\$1,355,680
22 (32)	Southern New Hampshire University	Manchester, N.H.	Private	Doctoral	2,407	7,163	93%	\$4,760,245
23 (20)	Webster University	St. Louis	Private	Doctoral	2,393	6,272	98%	\$4,640,075
24 (22)	Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	Olympia, Wash.	Public	Bachelor's	2,111	4,748	88%	\$2,343,405
	<i>Pierce College</i>				1,344	3,013	89%	\$1,665,998
25 (21)	Touro College and University System	New York	Private	Doctoral	2,055	4,857	87%	\$4,756,293
	<i>Touro College-Main Campus Midtown</i>				2,006	4,704	86%	\$4,652,855
26 (27)	DeVry University Inc.	Downers Grove, Ill.	For-profit	Master's	1,957	5,560	93%	\$4,548,799
	<i>DeVry University</i>				1,513	4,406	93%	\$3,598,945
27 (25)	Allied American University	Laguna Hills, Calif.	For-profit	Bachelor's	1,953	5,734	87%	\$4,144,842
28 (26)	Troy University	Troy, Ala.	Public	Doctoral	1,851	5,809	93%	\$3,932,450
29 (28)	Grand Canyon University	Phoenix	For-profit	Doctoral	1,716	4,583	95%	\$4,345,417
30 (29)	Career Education Corp.	Schaumburg, Ill.	For-profit	Doctoral	1,649	5,834	94%	\$3,845,125
	<i>Colorado Technical University</i>				1,121	3,832	95%	\$2,507,735
31 (30)	Vincennes University	Vincennes, Ind.	Public	Bachelor's	1,582	3,410	96%	\$2,058,265
32 (42)	Chapman University	Orange, Calif.	Private	Doctoral	1,285	3,293	93%	\$2,426,237
33 (31)	Wayland Baptist University	Plainview, Texas	Private	Master's	1,219	3,395	95%	\$2,392,646
34 (41)	University System of Georgia	Atlanta	Public	Doctoral	1,202	4,151	93%	\$2,243,677
35 (35)	North Dakota University System	Bismarck, N.D.	Public	Doctoral	1,165	2,541	94%	\$1,548,186
36 (45)	University of Management and Technology	Arlington, Va.	For-profit	Doctoral	1,115	3,741	94%	\$2,797,738
37 (39)	Hawaii Pacific University	Honolulu	Private	Master's	1,083	2,925	93%	\$2,144,401
38 (36)	Southwestern College	Winfield, Kan.	Private	Doctoral	1,062	2,938	96%	\$2,190,109
39 (34)	University of Oklahoma	Norman, Okla.	Public	Doctoral	1,057	2,727	95%	\$1,988,646
	<i>University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus</i>				1,056	2,726	95%	\$1,987,896
40 (37)	State University of New York System	Albany, N.Y.	Public	Doctoral	1,047	2,535	84%	\$1,681,391
41	Florida State College at Jacksonville	Jacksonville, Fla.	Public	Bachelor's	1,036	2,561	91%	\$844,795
42 (47)	University of the Incarnate Word	San Antonio	Private	Doctoral	1,031	3,085	93%	\$2,294,738
42 (33)	State University and Community College System of Tennessee	Nashville, Tenn.	Public	Doctoral	1,031	3,453	88%	\$1,835,565
44 (49)	Education Management Corp.	Pittsburgh	For-profit	Doctoral	999	3,110	95%	\$2,002,705
45 (38)	Colorado Community College System	Denver	Public	Asc. or lower	967	2,303	87%	\$1,330,151
46 (46)	Strayer Education Inc.	Herndon, Va.	For-profit	Master's	963	2,882	93%	\$2,076,169
47	Barton County Community College	Great Bend, Kan.	Public	Asc. or lower	881	2,070	91%	\$864,140
48	Central Michigan University	Mount Pleasant, Mich.	Public	Doctoral	834	2,237	96%	\$1,639,875
49	Norwich University	Northfield, Vt.	Private	Master's	820	1,918	96%	\$1,728,925
50	Pennsylvania State University	University Park, Pa.	Public	Doctoral	808	2,414	94%	\$1,780,024

[1] American Military University, a part of American Public Education Inc., historically has had enough students to be listed as an individual school, but Defense Department data did not distinguish it from its parent company, so precise student, course and dollar counts were not available.

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“Our focus isn’t on growth. Our focus continues [to be] on quality, support, retention, graduation rate and outcomes,” Slottow said.

At all colleges for which information was available, the average TA course completion rate was 91.1 percent. Private colleges charted at a 92.9 percent completion rate, while for-profit institutions recorded 92.1 percent and public colleges 88.2 percent.

But for-profit and private schools are generally very pricey. Per student, they cost the government \$2,055.92 and \$1,977.69 respectively in TA in fiscal 2015, as compared to \$1,423.03 at public institutions. Similarly, Post-9/11 GI Bill costs per student were \$8,272.53 for for-profit institutions, \$8,242.87 for private institutions and \$4,363.25 for public institutions.

LITTLE MOVEMENT AT THE TOP

Many of the most popular Post-9/11 GI Bill colleges lost such students between fiscal 2014 and fiscal 2015. One notable exception was the University System of Maryland, where UMUC accounts for the bulk of GI Bill and TA enrollments. The system tacked on nearly 1,700 additional Post-9/11 enrollments in fiscal 2015. Similarly, the University System of Maryland increased its TA enrollment by just under 2,900 students over the same time period.

UMUC’s Wilmeth said the institution expects to continue increasing its military and veteran student populations by more than 5 percent per year.

“We do continue to grow consistently,” she said. “Our vision is to be the most trusted and respected university in the military and veteran community.”

AMU, meanwhile, shed 3,900 TA students between fiscal 2014 and fiscal 2015 but held mostly steady in its GI Bill enrollment. AMU’s Vice President of Military Relations John Aldrich said he expects “modest losses” in enrollment going forward but that the institution’s distance-learning model is well suited to active-duty and veteran students alike.

“They have families, and they have jobs,” Aldrich said. “They don’t have to put their lives on hold to go to a brick-and-mortar school.”

Even as AMU lost TA students and University of Phoenix lost GI Bill students, neither was anywhere near losing the top spot on its respective list.