



Undergraduate Military Learners: EXPLORING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MILITARY LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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TABLES AND FIGURES

- **POPULATION ESTIMATES**

- Table 1. Number and Percent Distribution of Undergraduates, by Military Status

- **DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES**

- Figure 1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Gender
- Figure 2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Race and Ethnicity
- Figure 3.1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Average Age at Start of Postsecondary Education
- Figure 3.2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Age
- Figure 4. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Income Percent of Poverty Level
- Figure 5. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Students with Any Dependents
- Figure 6.1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Students with Dependent Children
- Figure 6.2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Single-Parent Status
- Figure 7. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Parents' Highest Education Level

- **ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS**

- Figure 8. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Degrees Sought
- Figure 9. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Institutional Sector
- Figure 10. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Student Residency Status
- Figure 11. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Exclusively Online Programs
- Figure 12. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Attendance Intensity

- **EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL AID**

- Figure 13. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Employment Status While Enrolled
- Table 2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Source and Average Amount of Financial Aid

INTRODUCTION

Today's postsecondary students are increasingly diverse, and they represent various lived and intersecting experiences. Among those, U.S. military learners—including active duty personnel, Reserve or National Guard members, and veterans—all have distinct ways of entering and engaging in postsecondary education. Though this brief collectively refers to this group of students as military learners, it is important to differentiate experiences across military types to inform policies and evolve practices that meet the individual needs of those who have served, are serving, or will enter military service. Thus, disaggregating data are necessary to understand these varied experiences and build sustainable support structures through postsecondary education.

In 2015, the American Council on Education and NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education released *Military Connected Undergraduates: Exploring Differences Between National Guard, Reserve, Active Duty, and Veterans in Higher Education*, a report that highlighted important differences across military undergraduate learner populations and explained how those differences may impact access and success in postsecondary education. The report not only demonstrated the value of data to provide insights on military learner experiences, but it also acknowledged where gaps exist and opportunities for improving data usage and availability.

This brief aims to promote awareness of who undergraduate military learners are and draw attention to what sets these service groups apart from one another, with the intention of maximizing access to credentials, increasing use of benefits among students, and improving outcomes.

ABOUT THE DATA

Data for this analysis are from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES data analyzed are from the 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:UG), a nationally representative sample of undergraduate students in the United States during the 2019–20 academic year. The NPSAS:UG dataset includes various student demographic, financial, academic, and enrollment characteristics, as well as a robust sample size of active duty, Reserve or National Guard, and veteran college students. Table 1 shows that there were about 820,000 undergraduate military learners in academic year 2019–20, which represented about 5 percent of the total undergraduate population once the data were weighted.¹ For the purposes of this brief, "undergraduate military learners" refers to active duty personnel, Reserve or National Guard members, and veterans—though military learners may also be inclusive of family members and other beneficiaries.

POPULATION ESTIMATES

Table 1. Number and Percent Distribution of Undergraduates, by Military Status

	Number	Percentage
No military service	16,282,994	95.20
Military learners	820,829	4.80
Active duty	342,713	2.00
Reserve or National Guard	50,767	0.30
Veterans	427,349	2.50
Total undergraduates	17,103,823	100.00

Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

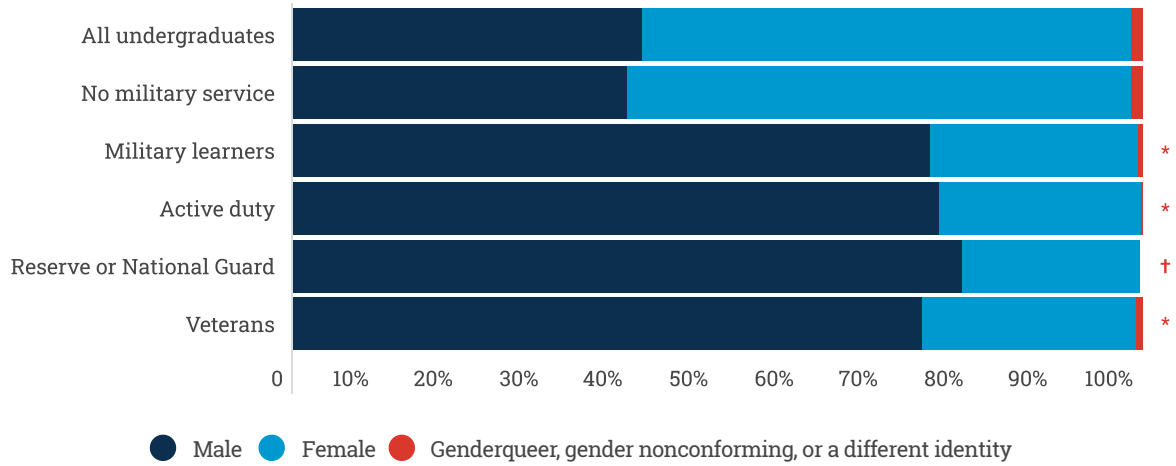
¹ Weighting is a technique in survey research aimed at accurately reflecting the population under study when simple random sampling is not possible. A weighting technique, also called sample balancing, is used to correct for over- or under-sampling and self-selection of survey respondents. For this study, the sampling weight "WTA000" was used in all analyses with the goal of projecting the results presented here to the undergraduate population.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Gender

As shown in figure 1, one in four veterans (25 percent) were women, followed by 24 percent of active duty undergraduates and over one-fifth of Reserve or National Guard members. Women are generally underrepresented across military learner groups when compared with the proportion of women in the total undergraduate population (58 percent).

Figure 1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Gender



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

* Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 50 percent of the estimate.

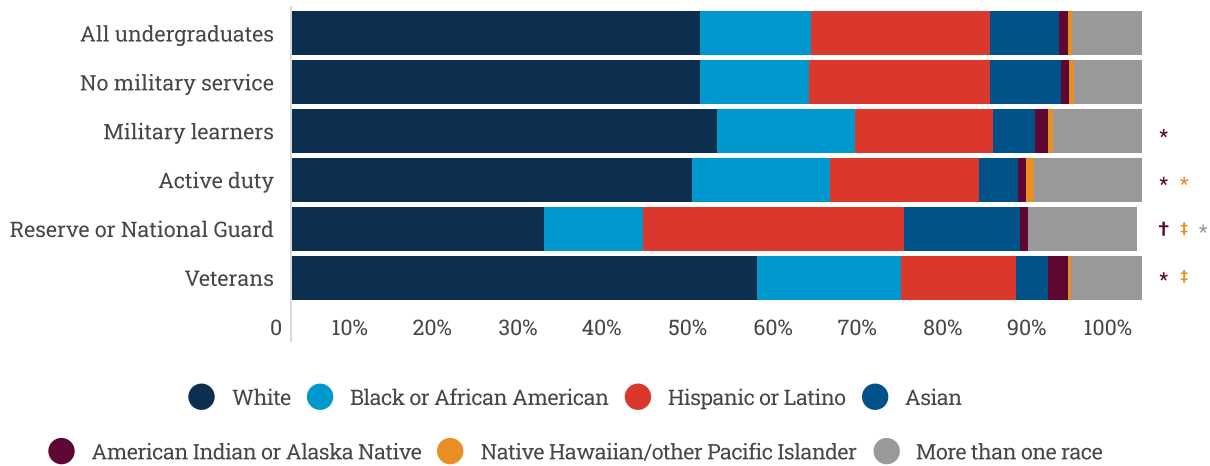
† Reporting standards not met.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Race and Ethnicity

When considering the race and ethnicity of military learners, over half of Reserve or National Guard (56 percent) and active duty (51 percent) undergraduates identified as students of color (see figure 2).² The highest proportion of White undergraduate military learners was among veterans (55 percent). Notably, there was a higher proportion of Black students represented among active duty (18 percent) and veteran (17 percent) undergraduates when compared with Black students in the total undergraduate population (13 percent). Similarly, there was a higher proportion of Hispanic or Latino undergraduate students serving as members of the Reserve or National Guard (31 percent), compared with Hispanic or Latino students in the total undergraduate population (21 percent).

Figure 2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

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‡ Reporting standards not met.

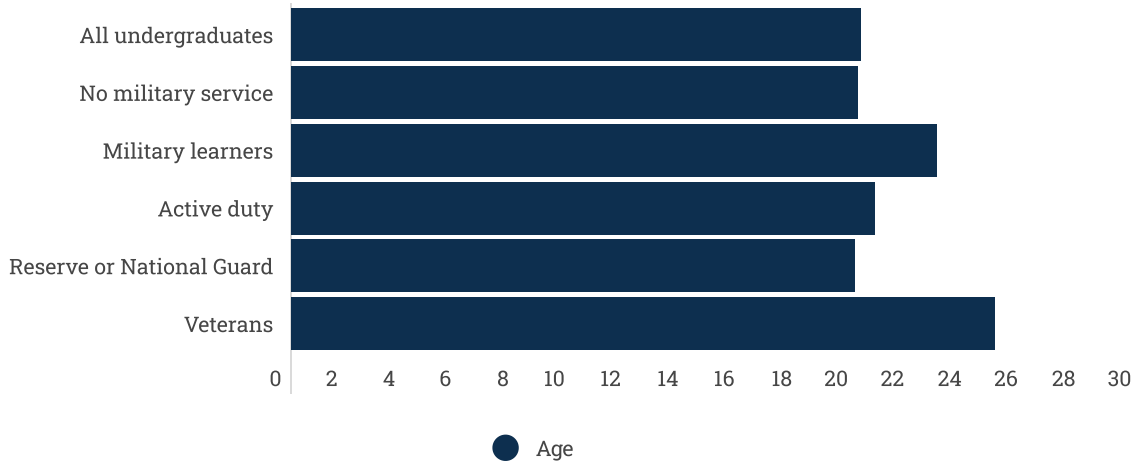
² The term “students of color” denotes respondents who identified as racial and ethnic categories other than White.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Age

Age upon initial enrollment in postsecondary education varied by military status (see figure 3.1). Veterans, on average, began their undergraduate education at an older age (25), compared with Reserve or National Guard members (20), active duty learners (21), and the total undergraduate population (20).

Figure 3.1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Average Age at Start of Postsecondary Education

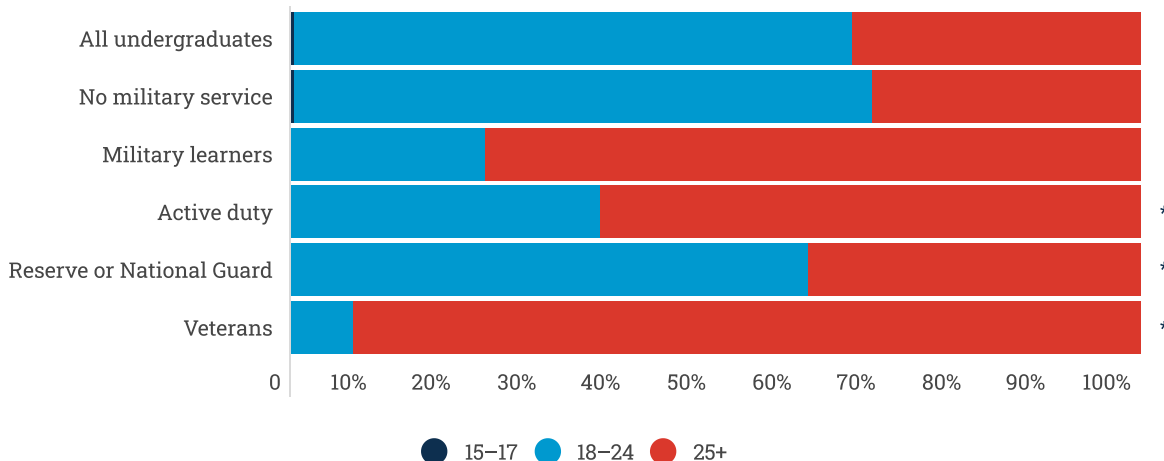


Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Looking at respondents' ages at the time of data collection (see figure 3.2), the average age of undergraduate military learners was 32 years old. Nearly two-thirds of active duty undergraduates (64 percent) and most veterans (93 percent) were ages 25 and older. Conversely, over six in 10 Reserve or National Guard members (61 percent) were between the ages of 18 to 24.

Figure 3.2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Age



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

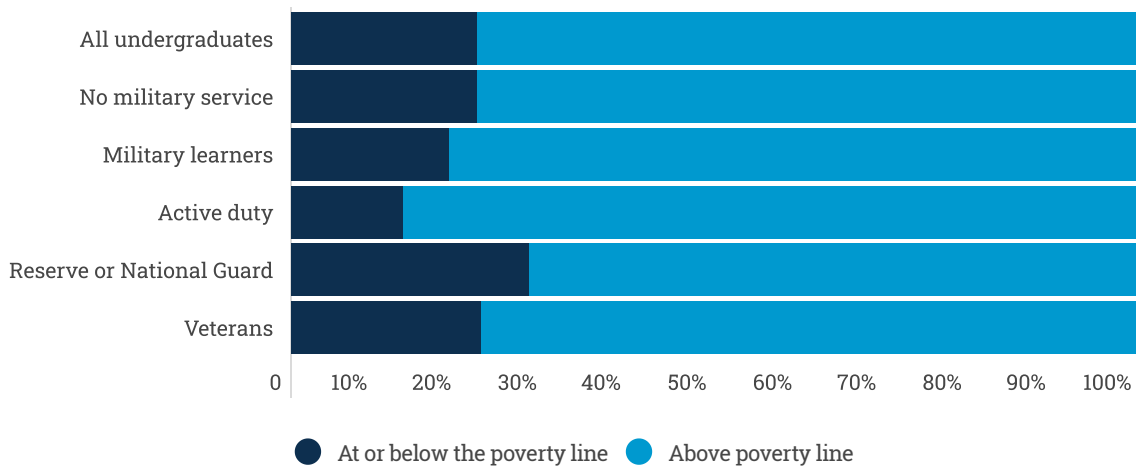
* Reporting standards not met.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Income Percent of Poverty Level

When considering undergraduate military learners' income percent of poverty level (see figure 4), the proportion of students living at or below the poverty line was highest among Reserve or National Guard members (28 percent), followed by veterans (22 percent). Active duty undergraduates had a lower prevalence of students living at or below the poverty line (13 percent) when compared with that of the total population of undergraduate students (22 percent).

Figure 4. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Income Percent of Poverty Level



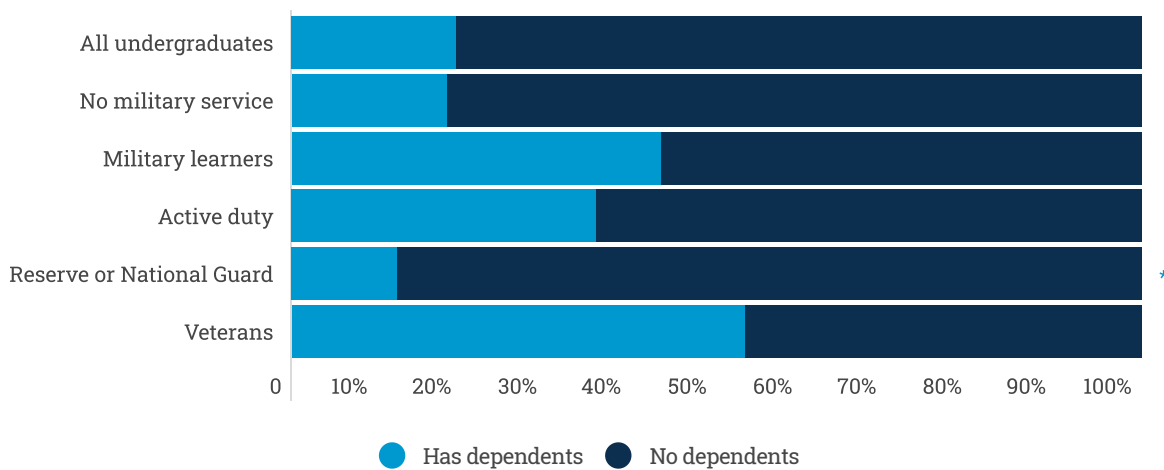
Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Dependents

The proportion of undergraduate military learners with at least one dependent varied by military type (see figure 5). More than half of veteran undergraduate students (53 percent) reported having at least one dependent, whereas a little more than one-third of active duty students (36 percent) reported having at least one dependent.

Figure 5. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Students with Any Dependents



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

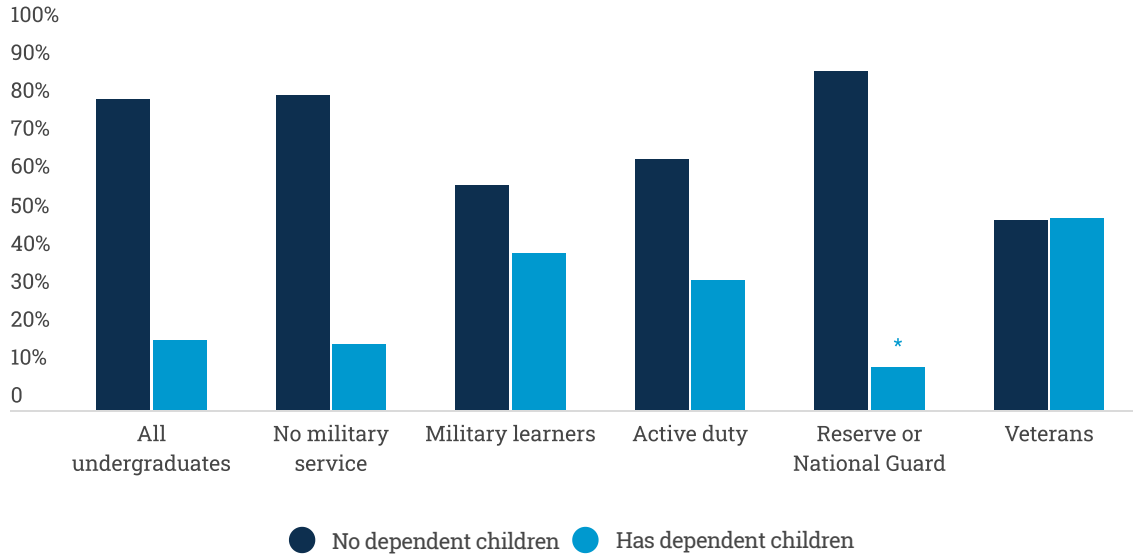
* Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 30 percent of the estimate.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Student-Parents and Single-Parent Status

Half of veteran students and one in three active duty students (34 percent) were student-parents who reported having at least one dependent child (see figure 6.1).³

Figure 6.1. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Students with Dependent Children

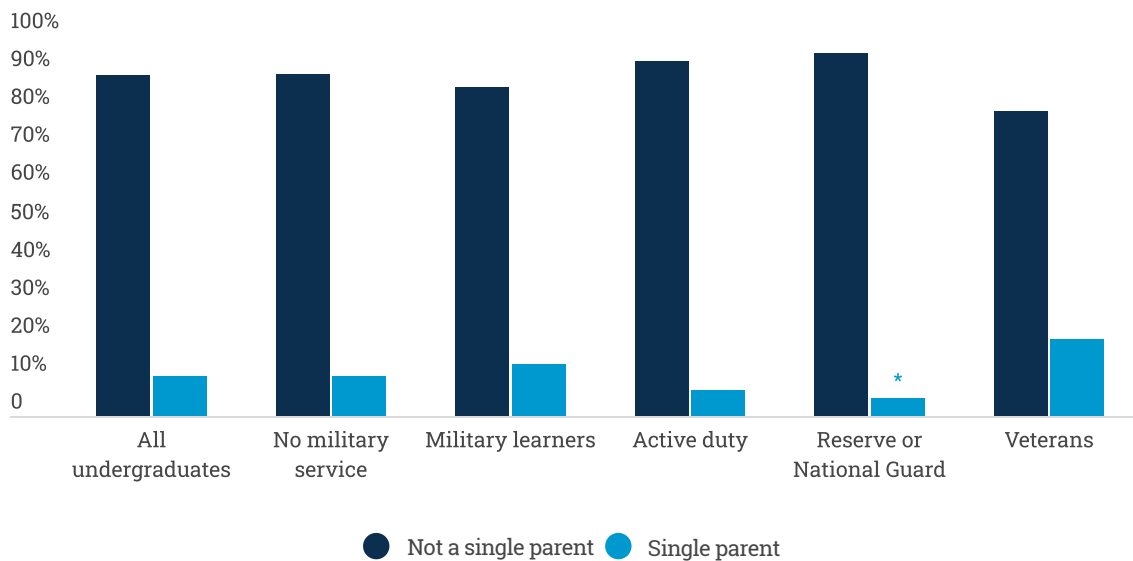


Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Further, one in five veterans enrolled in undergraduate studies were single parents (see figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Single-Parent Status



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

* Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 30 percent of the estimate.

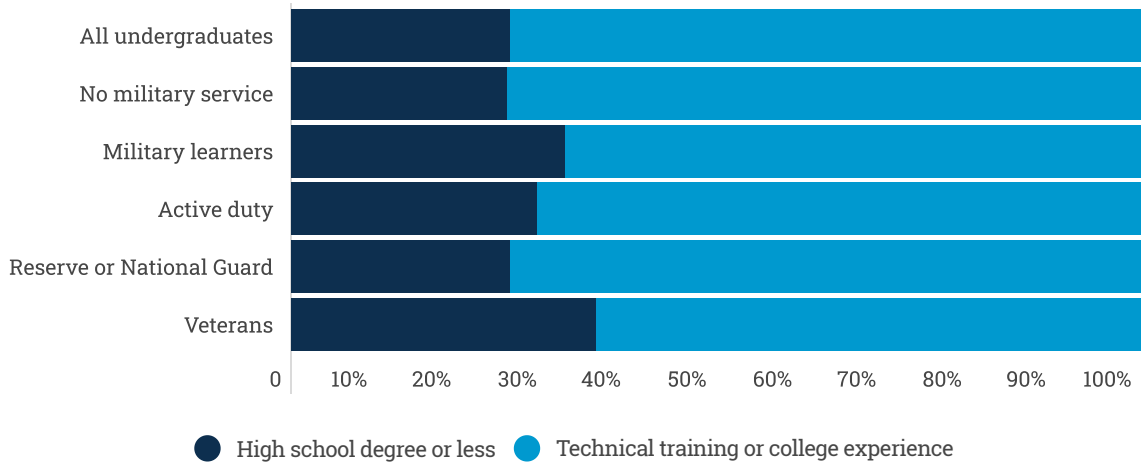
3 The term “student-parents” denotes respondents who indicated that they have dependent children.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

First-Generation Student Status

When considering first-generation student status (see figure 7), over one-third of veterans (36 percent), nearly three in 10 active duty students, and more than one in four (26 percent) Reserve or National Guard members reported their parents' highest education achieved was a high school diploma (or equivalent) or less.⁴

Figure 7. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Parents' Highest Education Level



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

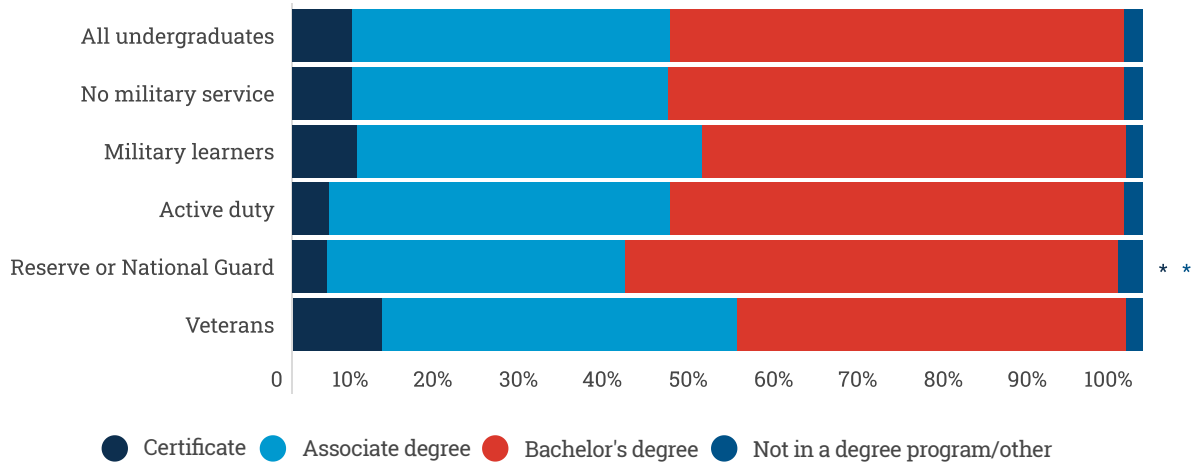
⁴ The term “first-generation student” includes those students whose parents’ highest education achieved was reported as a high school diploma (or equivalent) or less.

ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Degrees Sought

Looking at undergraduate military learners' enrollment by the type of degree sought, figure 8 shows that more than half of Reserve or National Guard members (58 percent) and active duty students (54 percent) were pursuing a bachelor's degree. Reserve or National Guard members (35 percent) were the lowest proportion among military learner populations to be enrolled in an associate degree program. Veterans were slightly more likely to be pursuing a bachelor's degree (46 percent) than an associate degree (42 percent), and they were the highest proportion of military learners enrolled in a certificate program (11 percent).

Figure 8. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Degrees Sought



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

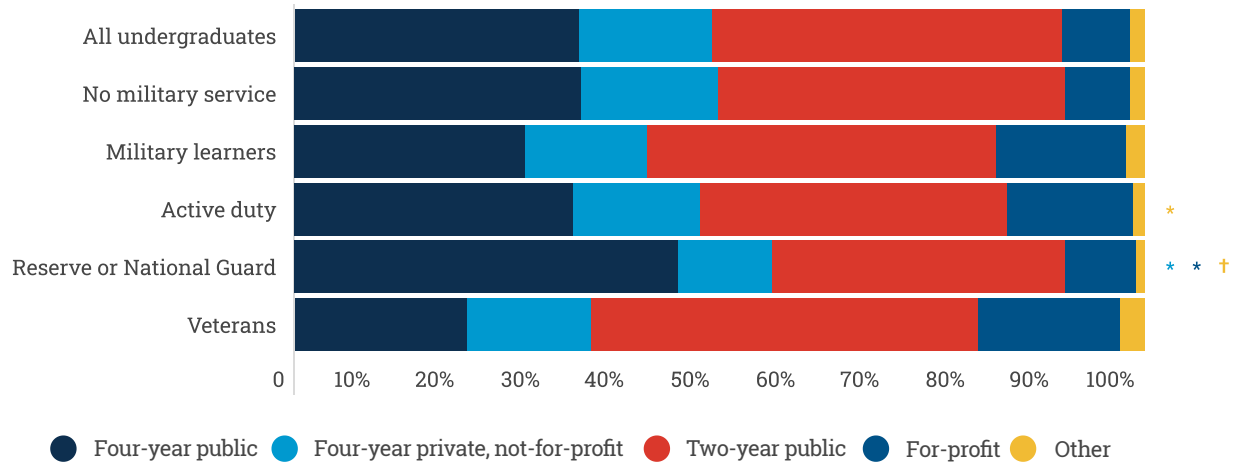
* Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 30 percent of the estimate.

ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Enrollment by Sector

In terms of postsecondary enrollment by institutional sector (see figure 9), veterans (46 percent) and active duty (36 percent) undergraduates had the highest proportion of students enrolled in public two-year institutions. Reserve or National Guard members had the highest proportion of students enrolled in four-year public institutions (45 percent). Nearly two in 10 veterans (17 percent) and 15 percent of active duty undergraduates were enrolled in the private for-profit sector.

Figure 9. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Institutional Sector



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

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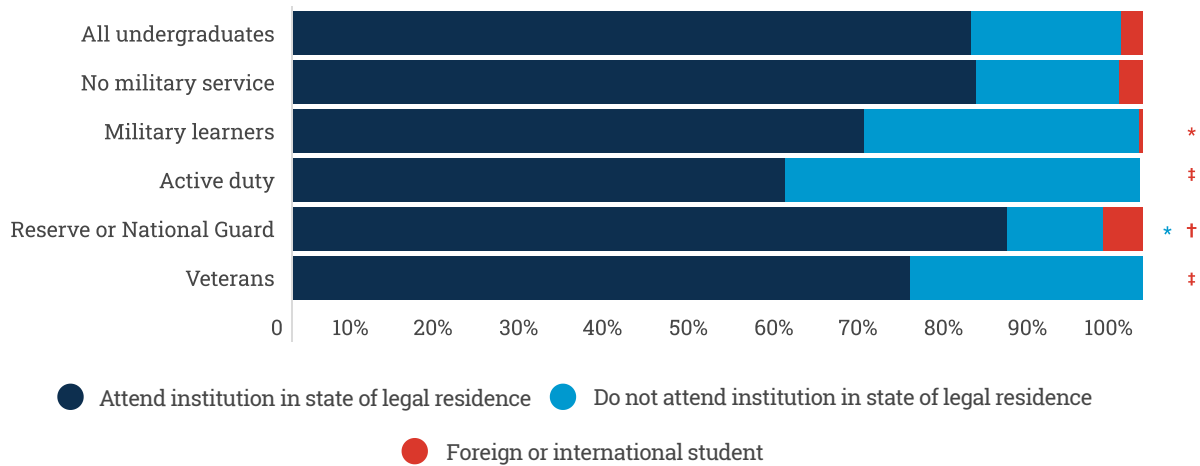
† Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 50 percent of the estimate.

ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Student Residency Status

Differences were found between undergraduate military learners based on residency status in the state where they lived at the time of enrollment (see figure 10). Two in five active duty students (42 percent) were attending a college or university in a state in which they were not classified as a resident. In contrast, a majority of Reserve or National Guard members (84 percent) and veterans (73 percent) were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in states where they held residency status.

Figure 10. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Student Residency Status



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

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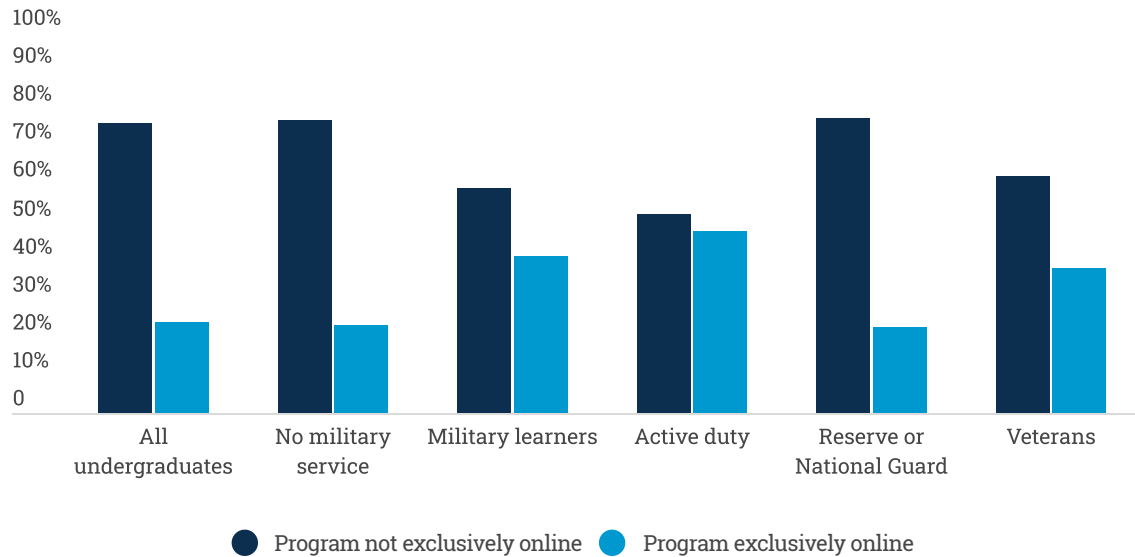
‡ Reporting standards not met.

ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Exclusively Online Programs

When considering the proportion of military learners who reported that their entire academic program was online (see figure 11), active duty students had the highest enrollment in exclusively online programs (48 percent), followed by veterans (38 percent), and Reserve or National Guard members (23 percent).

Figure 11. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Exclusively Online Programs



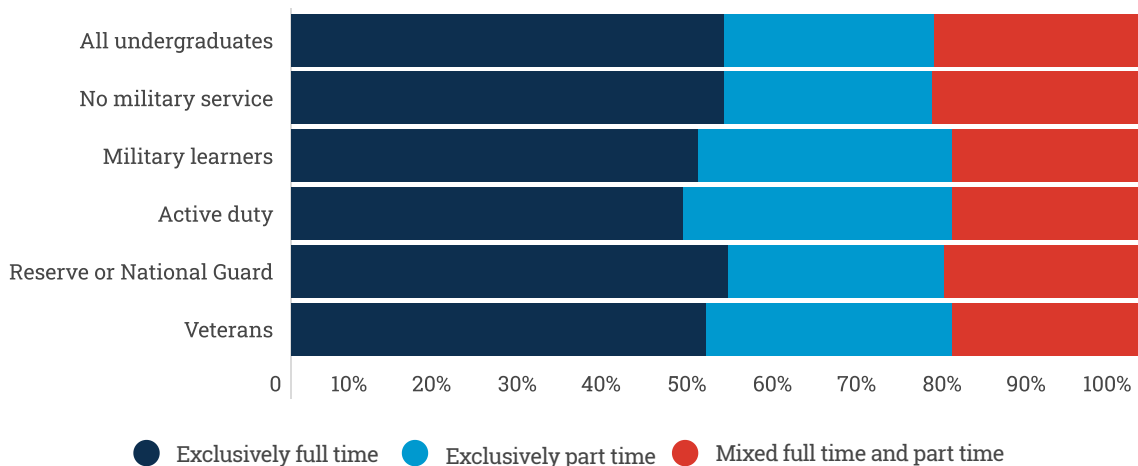
Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Attendance Intensity

There were differences among undergraduate military learners in terms of whether students maintained enrollment exclusively full time, exclusively part time, or a mix of full- and part-time attendance while enrolled at a college or university (see figure 12). Reserve or National Guard undergraduates (51 percent) and veterans (49 percent) had the greatest proportion of students enrolled exclusively full time, while active duty students (32 percent) had the greatest proportion of students enrolled exclusively part time.

Figure 12. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Attendance Intensity



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

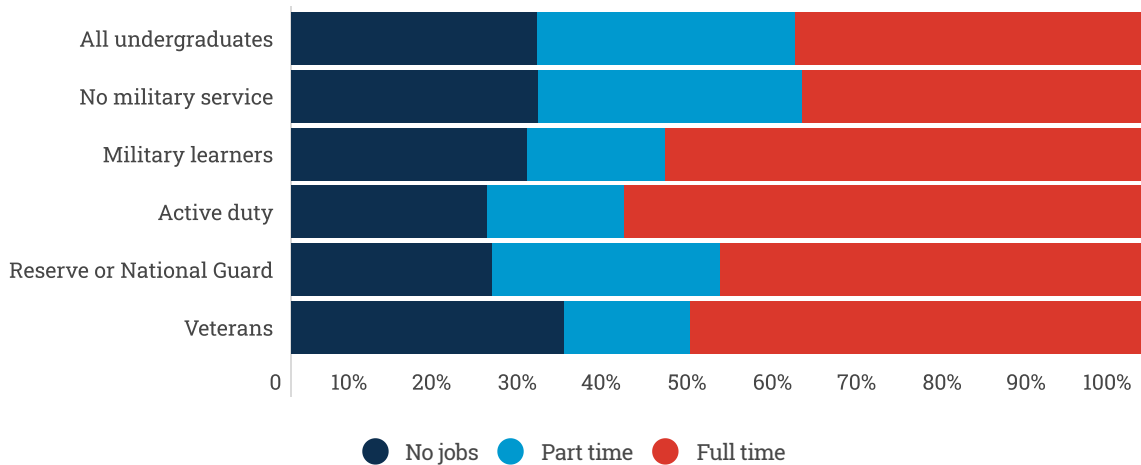
Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL AID

Employment Status

A majority of military learners worked either part time or full time while enrolled in postsecondary education. As shown in figure 13, however, employment status varied across military learner populations. The majority of active duty undergraduates (61 percent) worked full time while enrolled, compared with half of Reserve or National Guard members and 53 percent of veterans who were employed full time while enrolled. Approximately one-third of veterans (32 percent) and one in four Reserve or National Guard members (24 percent) were employed neither part time nor full time while enrolled. Greater than one-fourth of Reserve or National Guard members (27 percent) worked part time while enrolled.

Figure 13. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Employment Status While Enrolled



Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL AID

Source and Average Amount of Financial Aid

Among undergraduate military learners who received any type of financial aid, average total amounts ranged from \$11,453 for Reserve or National Guard members to \$14,850 for veteran students (see table 2).

Reserve or National Guard members (65 percent) were most likely to have received grants to support tuition and related education expenses, followed by active duty (55 percent) and veteran students (54 percent). One in four Reserve or National Guard members and 24 percent of veterans received loans, while 13 percent of active duty students incurred loan debt as part of their financial aid packages.

Veterans were the highest proportion of undergraduate military learners (40 percent) who received federal veterans benefits through the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense grant funding during the 2019–20 academic year, followed by 37 percent of active duty students.

Table 2. Undergraduate Military Learners, by Source and Average Amount of Financial Aid

	Any Aid (%)	Average Amount	Any Grants (%)	Average Amount	Any Loans (%)	Average Amount	Any Benefits or Grants (%)	Average Amount
All undergraduates	71.55	\$14,052.11	63.87	\$9,280.15	36.25	\$9,872.97	2.34	\$17,643.78
No military service	71.39	\$14,026.19	64.35	\$9,458.23	37.15	\$9,925.18	0.51*	\$19,871.92
Military learners	74.48	\$14,515.45	54.91	\$5,387.22	19.55	\$8,022.46	36.59	\$17,065.52
Active duty	74.23	\$14,441.22	54.50	\$5,337.59	13.09	\$7,432.52	37.34	\$18,238.93
Reserve or National Guard	66.87	\$11,453.57	64.70	\$8,031.45	24.63	\$8,818.60	1.52 †	‡
Veterans	75.44	\$14,849.94	54.17	\$5,091.49	23.50	\$8,162.89	39.74	\$16,316.70

Source: Data from National Center for Education Statistics, 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Undergraduate 2020 (NPSAS:UG) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

* This represents undergraduate students who did not have military service but benefitted from federal veterans benefits or Department of Defense grants.

† Interpret data with caution. Estimate is unstable because the standard error represents more than 50 percent of the estimate.

‡ Reporting standards not met.

CONCLUSION

The higher education sector and its critical stakeholders must do more to advance postsecondary access, support persistence, and ensure completion for undergraduate military learners. The data analyzed in this brief, which highlight the varied experiences of these students, should be a catalyst for addressing barriers to credential attainment while improving policy interventions and building programs that center the unique experiences of military learners.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND NEXT STEPS

As we continue to think about the implications for further research on military learner experiences, the improvement of our collective ability to analyze the experiences of family members or other beneficiaries of military education benefits is important to future analyses. Additionally, improving the transparency, expediency, and accessibility of data will be critical to these efforts.

When it comes to increasing awareness and providing actionable data to stakeholders, ACE is committed to sharing the stories of military learners' challenges and opportunities with employer, educator, and policymaker stakeholders. In the coming months, ACE will synthesize and share a landscape analysis of practices for serving military learners and demonstrate how military experiences can help military learners succeed in postsecondary education. ACE will also continue to synthesize data on student experiences and develop shared ways to demonstrate evidence of military learners' knowledge, skills, and abilities with stakeholders.