

Military Education Partnerships Under Review: Implications for Higher Education

Recent Pentagon Actions and Emerging Uncertainty

In February 2026, Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the Pentagon would discontinue all “graduate level Professional Military Education, fellowships, and certificate programs” at his alma mater, Harvard University.¹ This announcement was followed by cuts to approximately 100 Senior Service College Fellowship programs for military leaders to study at a number of civilian universities, in addition to a number of leading think tanks, beginning in the 2026–27 academic year.²

According to Pentagon documents, fellowships were reviewed based on the following criteria: intellectual freedom, relationships with foreign adversaries, and “public expressions in opposition of the Department.”³ The Pentagon did not publicly release any analysis or further information on their review.

Details are still emerging about the Pentagon’s efforts to remake military education at civilian institutions of higher education. Actions have so far been limited to some graduate education, fellowship, and certificate programs. Internal Pentagon guidance reviewed by ACE from February 2026 clarifies that current review and policies do not apply to ROTC programs, tuition assistance and other voluntary programs, and some formal professional degree programs such as medical, dental, and law programs.

However, because the Pentagon has primarily communicated policy changes through video announcements and press releases, there is still significant uncertainty for both service members and civilian institutions regarding the full impact.

Implications for Higher Education and the Military

Historically, civilian leadership at the Pentagon has avoided politicizing military education and preserved autonomy for each of the military branches to determine the educational needs of their forces. While recent Pentagon actions have so far been limited to a relatively small number of programs at civilian institutions, if continued, they would set a troubling precedent for politicizing service member choices in military education that could have longstanding negative impacts on both the military and higher education.

The military-civilian exchange fostered by these programs is mutually beneficial for the armed forces and for colleges and universities. While all details are not yet known, it would be a loss for both our armed services and campus communities to see these programs and partnerships eliminated.

¹ Todd Lopez, “War Department Cuts Ties With Harvard University,” *Pentagon News*, February 6, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4399812/war-department-cuts-ties-with-harvard-university/>.

² “Aligning Senior Service College Opportunities with American Values,” February 27, 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Feb/27/2003881802/-1/-1/1/ALIGNING-SENIOR-SERVICE-COLLEGE-OPPORTUNITIES-WITH-AMERICAN-VALUES.PDF>.

³ *Ibid.*

What Is Military Education?

More than 3.4 million personnel work for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), including about 1.3 million active-duty service members.⁴ DoD personnel are offered significant educational opportunities to enhance their professional training and experience. These opportunities help to support readiness, create incentives for recruitment and retention, and increase social mobility.

Military education encompasses the entire range of education-based professional development opportunities offered to service members and civilian employees across their careers.⁵ For officers, this education begins with pre-commissioning; for enlisted service members, it begins with basic training.

Military education continues throughout service or employment at DoD through both required and voluntary educational opportunities and ends with an individual's separation from the military or DoD. This education is intended to "equip Service members, civilian employees, and international-partner participants with competencies that may result in professional certifications necessary for their professional performance or advancement."

Many of these opportunities are offered in partnership with colleges and universities, but the depth and breadth of DoD's military education partnerships with civilian institutions is not widely understood.

Military Education Pathways at Colleges and Universities

Military and civilian personnel can pursue this learning in person, online, or through distance and blended-learning environments. Military education is offered by military educational institutions, including service academies like the Air Force Academy and West Point and graduate schools like the National Defense University and the Naval War College. Civilian institutions of higher education, including community colleges and four-year institutions, also partner with DoD and the branches of the military to offer educational opportunities.

Civilian colleges and universities play a critical role in military education by providing access to academic environments, research opportunities, and specialized expertise that complement the offerings of military training institutions. The three primary ways that DoD partners with civilian institutions to provide military

What Programs Do Current Pentagon Actions Affect?

Based on available guidance as of February 2026, recent Pentagon actions appear limited to certain graduate-level programs and fellowships involving civilian institutions.

Programs Affected

- Selected Senior Service College fellowships
- Some graduate-level military education placements
- Certain certificate and fellowship programs

Programs Not Currently Affected

- Tuition Assistance (TA)
- Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)
- Voluntary off-duty education programs
- Some formal professional degree programs, including, medical, dental, and law programs

⁴ Military One Source, "2024 Demographics: Interactive Profile of the Military Community," (2024). <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/chapter-1-total-military-force/>.

⁵ DoD Directive 1322.35, "Military Education: Program Management and Administration," April 26, 2022, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132235_vol1.PDF.

education are through the Tuition Assistance (TA) program, the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, and Graduate Education programs.⁶

Tuition Assistance Program

The TA program provides financial support to approximately 270,000 service members annually to pursue voluntary off-duty education.⁷ Service members can pursue a range of educational pathways using TA benefits, including undergraduate, graduate, vocational, licensure, or certificate programs—either in person or online.

TA benefits offer up to \$4,500 per year for each service member, with each branch of service establishing specific eligibility requirements for service members to receive funds.⁸ Civilian institutions sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DoD to participate in the TA program committing to meet program standards and reporting requirements. These MOUs are managed by DoD's Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES), but the TA program is managed by each branch of service.

While other military education programs or partnerships may refer to their funding as "tuition assistance," it is not the same as the TA program.

Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) Programs

The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) is an officer training and scholarship program for college students and serves as the largest single source of commissioned officers to the U.S. military, producing more than 8,500 officers each year.⁹ ROTC students can complete their undergraduate degree while training to become military officers.

Each branch of the military provides merit-based scholarships and other financial assistance to participating students who commit to serve as military officers after graduation. These scholarships can be awarded for two to four years and cover all or a portion of tuition, fees, and other expenses such as books and living expenses. Civilian institutions apply with the military branches to establish ROTC programs, which are administered separately by each branch of service. These longstanding programs have often resulted in meaningful and enduring partnerships between the host institution and the military branch.

Graduate Education, Fellowships, and Certificate Programs

These advanced education programs primarily serve senior military officers and involve each branch of service partnering with civilian institutions to provide a wide range of fully-funded graduate education, fellowship, and certificate programs to meet present force needs and objectives, anticipated requirements, or future capabilities.¹⁰ Developed to support the specific priorities of each branch of service, they are

⁶ While some educational opportunities are available to civilian employees, the programs discussed in this brief primarily serve active-duty service members and officers.

⁷ Tuition Assistance is separate from the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and is available only to active-duty service members.

⁸ "Tuition Assistance for Service Members," American Council on Education, 2025, <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Service-Member-Tuition-Assistance.pdf>.

⁹ "Defense Primer: Senior Reserve Officers' Training Corps," Congressional Research Service, October 3, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11235/IF11235.11.pdf.

¹⁰ DoD Directive 1322.10, "Policy on Graduate Education for Military Officers," April 29, 2008, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132210p.pdf>; DoD Directive 1322.06, "Fellowships, Legislative Fellowships, Internships, Scholarships, Training-With Industry (TWI), and Grants Provided to DoD or DoD Personnel for Education and Training," October 12, 2016, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132206p.pdf>.

often aligned with highly specialized areas of study, including law, medicine, cybersecurity, engineering, leadership, and public policy.

These programs include more formal initiatives such as the Funded Legal Education Program (FLEP), which enables each branch of the military to fully fund up to 25 service members to attend law school.¹¹ They also include opportunities such as the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) Fellows program, which places Marines with civilian institutions, think tanks, businesses, or federal agencies for 10-12 months to “interface with other military fellows, academics, and government or corporate/political leaders.”¹²

Conclusion

While the full scope and long-term direction of these policy changes remain unclear, the recent actions taken by the Pentagon signal a potential shift in how military education partnerships with civilian institutions are evaluated and structured. These partnerships have historically provided important benefits for both service members and colleges and universities, expanding access to specialized expertise, strengthening professional development, and fostering mutual understanding between the military and civilian sectors.

As policymakers consider future changes, maintaining clarity, consistency, and institutional autonomy will be critical to ensuring that military education continues to support readiness, recruitment, and the broader exchange of knowledge between the armed forces and higher education.

¹¹ DoD Directive 1322.12, “Funded Legal Education,” December 5, 2023, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132212p.PDF>.

¹² “CMC Fellows & Strategists, Foreign PME, & Olmsted Scholars,” Marine Corps University, <https://www.usmcu.edu/Academic-Programs/CMC-Fellows-Strategists-Foreign-PME-Olmsted-Scholars/Commandant-of-the-Marine-Corps-Fellowships/>.