



# Military-Connected Undergraduates: The Current State of Research and Future Work

**Friday, April 10, 2015**  
**Convening Summary**



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## Background

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Recent data signal the importance of better understanding the experiences of military-connected undergraduates, defined as individuals on active duty, reservists, National Guard members, veterans, and their dependents. According to the 2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09) data, for example, 27 percent of veterans did not complete Algebra Two or a higher-level math course in high school, compared with 16 percent of other students—notable because math proficiency is a significant factor associated with college persistence and completion. During college, BPS:04/09 data show that 44 percent of veterans report never meeting with an academic advisor, and 44 percent report not meeting with faculty outside of class—supportive connections with academic advisors and faculty that are tied to students' college retention. Six years after entry into college, BPS:04/09 data indicate that 59 percent of veterans are still without a postsecondary credential. Moreover, recent National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12) data show differences among military-connected undergraduates. Veterans, for instance, begin college an average of five years later than their National Guard counterparts, and three years later than reservists and active duty personnel.

Although the limited data that are available point to the importance of supporting military-connected individuals who are considering where—and whether—to attend and complete a college education, the higher education community is without a sufficient understanding of their experiences and patterns related to access, persistence, and attainment. Without this information, higher education leaders and policymakers are left without adequate knowledge to support service members and veterans in pursuit of postsecondary education. To target next steps to support their success in college, the American Council on Education (ACE) and NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education have united in a three-part convening series to engage leading experts in practice, research, and policy related to military-connected undergraduates. This convening summary, co-produced with RTI International, captures key takeaways that emerged from the discussion with leading researchers from higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and the federal government. As the second in a three-part convening, the meeting was aimed at engaging leading experts in higher education practice, research, and policy related to military-connected individuals. The first convening, held in February at the 2015 NASPA Veterans Conference, featured student veterans and campus-based professionals who work directly with service members and veterans in areas such as students affairs, counseling, and admissions. The final convening is slated for 2016 and will look deeper at potential principles and promising practices for serving military-connected students.

## Meeting Overview

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The overall purpose of the convening was to develop a clear understanding of the current state of research on service members and veterans in higher education, and to enable our associations and partners to target future studies in a thoughtful and strategic manner.

## Key Takeaways

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**The higher education community needs better definitions and measures of service member and veteran success.** Participant comments centered on the idea that military-connected college students are often benchmarked against measures of success (e.g., three-year attainment rates for associate degree programs and six-year graduation rates for bachelor's degree programs) that may not sufficiently reflect their enrollment behaviors and diverse educational aspirations. Many commented that the higher education community and external stakeholders have jointly used these measures as a proxy for success without paying adequate attention to whether these account for characteristics that might reasonably influence steady matriculation, persistence, and attainment patterns. Insufficient measures of service member and veteran success may lead

to policy actions and interventions that do not appropriately respond to their true needs and—worse—may engender thinking that perpetuates damaging stereotypes about this growing, yet misunderstood, student population.

Participants shared that success may be a long-term process for military-connected undergraduates, and current research lacks the longitudinal focus to illustrate whether these students are meeting their goals. Convening participants recommended that researchers ask service members and veterans about their short- and long-term goals, take into consideration that goals are fluid, and, through qualitative work, strive to define the “buckets” of success for this growing population. In turn, this information can be used to frame success measures that are more appropriately suited to their goals, aspirations, and characteristics.

**Institutions need a consistent and reliable approach to identify military-connected students.** The limitations encountered by researchers attempting to identify service member and veteran students were discussed during the convening. Several individuals shared that many institutions do not have consistent and reliable methods for collecting information on military-connected students, and the methods in place at some institutions may deter these students from participating in the identification process. Further, it was stated that many institutions do not segment their campus’s military-connected populations to distinguish veterans from reservists, National Guard members, active duty personnel, or their dependents. This in turn limits the ability of researchers to accurately identify and crosswalk datasets that may build upon the understanding of service members and veterans through the use of existing data. Consistency in the approach institutions take to capture military service status is an important next step toward building an understanding of how military-connected individuals access and succeed in higher education.

**Researchers should make use of existing national-level data.** Convening members noted that there is a wide range of information available through existing data sources (NCES, GI Bill® Comparison Tool, Tuition Assistance DECIDE, and College Navigator) that could help researchers gain a better understanding of the higher education experiences of military-connected individuals. In particular, these datasets offer some promise for exploring service member and veteran experiences by enlistment status and branch of service to gain a clearer understanding of the diverse subpopulations of military-connected undergraduates. For instance, having a large sample size is one of the strengths of examining the 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12) data, which is nationally representative of U.S. undergraduates and graduate students (these data are not representative of military-connected students). However, this cross-sectional dataset was not designed to longitudinally follow all individuals on active duty or in the National Guard, reservists, or veterans through their college experience. To investigate veterans longitudinally, researchers must rely on NPSAS’s smaller spin-off study, the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS). This study conducts three- and six-year follow ups only of NPSAS students who were starting college for the first time. BPS therefore includes just a subsample of those found to be military-connected in NPSAS.

**National-level data should be improved to respond to lingering research and policy questions.** In addition to the insufficient understanding of service member and veteran success in higher education, participants also discussed the importance of data that would enable researchers to respond to other lingering questions related to remediation, college choice, affordability and financial aid, and credit articulation and transfer. Using national-level data, participants noted, offers a promising approach to exploring factors that help to build an understanding of the successes and challenges of military-connected undergraduates. The participants affirmed that the use of existing national-level data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) would aid in addressing these lingering policy and research questions. Several participants stated that a suite of secondary and postsecondary NCES survey studies capture the full spec-

trum of veterans before, during, and after their military experiences, as well as in and out of higher education and the labor market, significantly addressing available data limitations. What follows are the descriptions of each of these national datasets as defined by NCES.

#### **Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002)**

The Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) tracks the educational and developmental experiences of a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores in the United States. Administered during participants' high school years, ELS:2002 was an integrated, multilevel survey involving multiple respondent populations. Base-year surveys were administered in 2002, including separate questionnaires for students and their parents, teachers, school administrators, and librarians. Follow-up surveys were also administered during the sample members' postsecondary years; the second follow-up was conducted in 2006 (approximately two years after the sample's modal high school graduation date), and the third follow-up was conducted in 2012 (when the majority of the sample members were approximately 26 years old).

#### **National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS)**

The purpose of NPSAS is to compile a comprehensive research dataset, based on student-level records, on financial aid provided by the federal government, the states, postsecondary institutions, employers, and private agencies, along with student demographic and enrollment data. As a large, nationally representative sample of institutions and students, NPSAS offers a highly efficient, cost-effective way to identify nationally representative samples of student subpopulations of interest to policymakers and to obtain baseline data for longitudinal study of these subpopulations. Specifically, NPSAS data provide the base-year sample for the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and the Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B) Longitudinal Study.

#### **Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS)**

Each cycle of the BPS follows a cohort of students who are enrolling in postsecondary education for the first time. The study collects data on student persistence in, and completion of, postsecondary education programs, their transition to employment, demographic characteristics, and changes over time in their goals, marital status, income, and debt, among other indicators. BPS tracks students' paths through postsecondary education and helps answer questions of policy interest, such as why students leave a college or university, how financial aid influences persistence and completion, and what percentages of students complete various degree programs.

#### **Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B)**

The Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) examines students' education and work experiences after they complete a bachelor's degree, with a special emphasis on the experiences of new elementary and secondary teachers. Following several cohorts of students over time, B&B looks at bachelor's degree recipients' workforce participation, income, debt repayment, and entry into and persistence through graduate school programs, among other indicators. It addresses several issues specifically related to teaching, including teacher preparation, entry into and persistence in the profession, and teacher career paths. B&B also gathers extensive information on bachelor's degree recipients' undergraduate experience, demographic backgrounds, expectations regarding graduate study and work, and participation in community service.

Participants shared that sample sizes of service members and veterans from most available databases are relatively small, particularly for examining points of difference among military-connected individuals. As a result, researchers have had to rely on aggregating data on military-connected individuals, which can lead to

the conflation of differences on student population. Increasing the number of military-connected students in future national-level data collection efforts, coupled with the thoughtful inclusion of additional variables to capture a more holistic depiction of service members and veterans in higher education, would build upon the capacity to conduct meaningful analyses on this growing, yet understudied, student population. In addition, some participants expressed support for the benefit of merging existing data on each service member and veteran to leverage existing data in a useful and informative way. Making use of secondary school data to account for pre-enlistment characteristics, such as data collected in the ELS of 2002 and High School Longitudinal Study (HSLS) of 2009, was offered as one recommendation. As more data are collected, the HSLS of 2009 (HSLS:09) data—the newest NCES secondary sample survey—could also be used to follow high school students into the military, and perhaps into higher education and beyond.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

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Embedded throughout the discussion were a series of research and policy topics that serve as recommended next steps in building upon what the higher education community and its external stakeholders know about service members and veterans in higher education. Descriptions of each recommendation follow.

**1) Conduct comprehensive, longitudinal studies on service members and veterans.** It is important to capture the experiences of college-aspiring service members during their time in the military, and participants recommended that such a study follow these individuals through college discernment, matriculation, and completion. Convening members also shared the importance of capturing demographic and enlistment characteristics of student veterans. Based on these factors, it is recommended that researchers examine possible points of difference among military-connected students to develop a more nuanced understanding of these individuals in relation to their college access, institutional choice, persistence, attainment, and labor market outcomes.

**2) Understand the transition from military service to higher education.** The need to better understand the transition from military service to higher education, particularly among those who may face certain access, persistence, and completion barriers, was highlighted during the discussion. Participants shared that more information on service members and veterans who initially enroll in community college is needed. In particular, it is recommended that researchers more closely examine the transfer patterns of service members and veterans and the effectiveness of academic advising on their initial enrollment and college experience. It is also suggested that researchers examine the enrollment patterns of military-connected individuals who use GI Bill benefits without a clear goal of achieving a postsecondary credential and possibly tie in the impact on later-life outcomes. Research on service members and veterans who initially enroll in community college may help reveal better information on retention and completion among military-connected undergraduates.

**3) Study the link between institutional programs and services to college outcomes.** Currently, most colleges and universities offer programs and services for military-connected students, but little is known about the extent to which these resources meet the needs of these students on campus. Through the examination of programs, resources, and services offered to military-connected students by a college or university, institutional leaders will have a better understanding of the impact of these services on service members' and veterans' sense of belonging and other factors associated with a positive and successful college experience. This information can be useful to leverage improvements to campus support systems for military-connected students.

**4) Develop a better understanding of remediation and credit for prior learning.** Future research on service members and veterans should include studies on remediation and its impact on their college outcomes. In

addition, studies should examine the efficacy of programs such as Veterans Upward Bound, Warrior-Scholar Project, Service to School, credit for prior learning (CPL), and massive open online courses (MOOCs), and how they facilitate college access and success. One recommended approach is to employ a systemic framework (i.e., a large system such as those in California, Texas, or Florida) to study service members and veterans who use remediation, and also to track the credit transfer and articulation success of CPL within and between institutions. Moreover, researchers should study the impact of remedial courses and CPL on the financial aid and GI Bill benefits of military-connected undergraduates.

**5) Study the impact of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Department of Defense education benefits, and other financial aid, on affordability and college outcomes.** It is important to understand the income and financial aid characteristics of service members and veterans, particularly as these relate to the use of GI Bill benefits, affordability, institutional choice, and student debt. Convening participants framed several questions for researchers to examine: Are the benefits in place right now insufficient to cover the cost of college, and, if so, at which institutions and by how much? Do service members and veterans need to learn how to use their benefits in a more efficient manner? Is the GI Bill truly debt-neutral to student veterans and other military-connected individuals? During the convening, it was noted that some student veterans may not be receiving full educational benefits due to their limited time on active duty, which may partially explain the accrual of loan debt. Another participant's research showed that there is a difference in unmet financial need among student veterans by race/ethnicity and gender. Subsequently, there is a need to understand financial aid issues and how they might differ among military-connected undergraduates. Participants articulated the importance of developing a better understanding of college affordability among service members and veterans to examine whether policy actions may be warranted. However, participants also noted that research should appropriately balance the discernment process of students who are considering how to use their GI Bill. In turn, these considerations can help target possible policy actions, informational resources, and other support strategies that are needed for military-connected college success.

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