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# Why stay? Factors That Encourage Active-Duty Military and Veterans to Complete Their Online degrees



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## Abstract

To shed light on factors that encourage retention among active-duty military and veterans as they pursue degrees, a mixed-methods exploratory study was designed. A random sample of active-duty military and veterans enrolled in online degree programs at one private institution was invited to participate. Students were interviewed in online focus group sessions. Insights from the focus group participants informed a survey that was distributed to additional servicemembers and veterans. Study participants indicated they were attracted to the institution because faculty and staff were responsive to the needs of military students, the institution had a generous transfer credit acceptance policy, and it offered credentials that matched their career aspirations. Advising and enrollment assistance as well as financial incentives further contributed to student persistence toward degrees. Family and employer support along with self-determination were noted by participants as very important to degree attainment.

### Why stay? Factors that encourage active-duty military and veterans to complete their online degrees

While considered a subgroup of the adult non-traditional student population (Hernández & Belding, 2021), active-duty military and veterans face unique challenges as they pursue higher education (Arminio et al., 2015; Klaw et al., 2021). For example, they may experience feelings of isolation, lack of clarity regarding educational benefits to which they are entitled and sensitive to the amount of support they will receive from the institution (Deshpande, 2021). Servicemembers may stop out of one institution and then find another one when they are ready to re-engage. They may not have consistent guidance on the appropriate courses to take for a career path. Thus, active-military students often accumulate credits over time only to find that those credits cannot be applied toward a program (Smith et al., 2018).

Furthermore, preparation for war in a systematic way requires a culture that is highly structured, disciplined, and group oriented. This is in sharp contrast to academic culture with its emphasis on independent thought, policies and procedures that vary across institutions, and an individualistic approach to academic success (Arminio, et al., 2015; Kees, et al., 2017). Thus, the transition to academia from the military can be a challenge.

Service members and veterans appreciate are drawn to online education due to the flexible scheduling it offers (Kirchner & Pepper, 2020). Despite the propensity of students who are members of the military to study online, most of the research on factors influencing the academic success of these students is based on residential campus study. This paper presents findings from the perspectives of active-duty military and veterans in online degree programs on factors that contributed to their retention.

### Retention Among Servicemembers and Veterans as They Pursue Degrees

The first systematic, rigorous, large-scale quantitative study of completion among members of the military, titled the Million Records Project (MRP), was commissioned by Student Veterans of America, in partnership with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse (Cate, 2014). The study

found that active-duty military and veteran students completed their degrees on par with traditional college students and at a higher rate than non-traditional students unaffiliated with the military. Furthermore, “a high percentage of student veterans are pursuing degrees in business, public service, health, science, and engineering” (Cate, 2014, p. 2). The MRP set the stage for further research.

A follow-up study, titled the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST), focused on the population of those who had used only post-9/11 GI Bill benefits between August 2009 and December 2013. NVEST findings parallel those of the MRP. Military students and military veterans are succeeding in higher education (Cate et al., 2017). One aspect of assisting servicemembers and veterans as they pursue higher education has been the evolution of the “military-friendly” institution.

### **Military-Friendly Institutions**

Vacchi (2012) predicted that service members and veterans would flock to colleges and universities as the war in Iraq ended and the United States began to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. These soldiers were able to utilize the expanded educational benefits of the post-9/11 GI Bill. According to U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs 2017 data, as cited by Natal and Atwood (2018), “the number of military veterans taking advantage of post-9/11 educational benefits has increased significantly, from 34,393 in 2009 to 790,090 in 2016” (p. 1). Some institutions have seen enrollment increases as high as 65% in this sector based on use of post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Rouscher, 2018).

To attract current and former members of the military to college campuses, institutions of higher education across the United States began to label themselves “military friendly” despite varied levels of modification to their policies and services to meet the unique needs of this sector (Dillard & Yu, 2016). There is limited peer-reviewed research on what makes an institution friendly toward military and veteran students (Dulchinos, 2014). However, what is available suggests that to be military friendly, an institution must have a clear strategy specific to this group and be open to changes in policies, procedures, and services.

In her book on the rise of the military-friendly campus, Moore (2017) cautions colleges and universities on their assumptions related to active military and military veterans as students. These students are diverse, and a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Dulchinos (2014) found that student demographics, such as gender, marital status, number of dependents, part-time or full-time enrollment, active duty, or veteran status, had significant impact on student choice of online or on-ground programs and on what was most valued by them in an institution. Policies and practices sensitive to the needs of these students were more important than was the “military-friendly” label (Browning, 2015; Rouscher, 2018).

While strides have been made, there is no time to be complacent (DiRamio, 2017). Factors that promote retention among active-military members and veterans are varied. To that end, additional research in this area remains of critical importance.

### **The Study**

As there is not yet a term for this group of students used in consistent fashion (Klaw et al., 2021; Natal & Atwood, 2018), this paper refers to the participants as active-military and veterans rather than as a broad category of veterans or student veterans. As noted earlier in this paper, most active-military and veterans are enrolled in online or hybrid programs. Participants in this study were drawn from one online, private, not-for-profit institution of higher education; however, rather than emphasize the online aspect of the student experience, the spotlight was on what helped these students continue in their studies. The main research question of this study was: What factors influence retention in online programs among active-military and military-veteran students?

### **Methodology**

This was a mixed-methods exploratory study. Two data collection methods were used: Focus groups via Zoom technology and an online survey. The focus group data was used to inform the survey questions. Survey participants were not the same as those who participated in the focus groups. However, a random sample of

active-duty military and veterans students enrolled in or recently graduated from one private non-profit institution as used for both focus groups and survey participants.

**Focus Groups.** A random sample of eligible active-military and veteran students and alumni were invited to participate in focus-group sessions lasting up to one hour. Eligibility was based on the following criteria:

- were admitted to a degree program at any level at the institution;
- held active-duty military or veteran status while enrolled;
- completed at least one course for academic credit at the institution between 7/1/2019–6/30/2020;
- were enrolled at the institution or had earned at least one degree from the institution at the time of the study;
- willing to participate in a focus group held using Zoom technology.

Invitations to participate were sent via email. Prospective participants were provided a list of dates and times from which to choose a session. Six sessions were held.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. The core questions focused on factors that motivated participants to choose the given institution, supports that helped them stay on track with their studies, ways to strengthen retention, and advice they would give to prospective military students interested in higher education. Participants were also given an opportunity to provide additional comments.

**Survey.** To complement the focus groups, an online survey was designed based on insights provided by focus-group participants. The survey was created in the Qualtrics survey platform. Forced choice questions were used with opportunity for additional comments. Survey questions mirrored those of the focus groups. The survey was distributed by email to those in the sample who did not participate in a focus group.

## Results

A total of 12 participants were interviewed in one of six focus group sessions. Seven were active military and five were veterans. Nine men and three women participated. Eight participants were White; two identified as Black or African American; and two as Hispanic. At the undergraduate level, cybersecurity and engineering majors were prominent; at the graduate level, majors included management, business, and criminal justice (see Table 1). By verbal identification, a variety of military branches were represented, including Army National Guard, Coast Guard, and Navy.

**Table 1. Degree Programs: Focus Group Participants**

Discipline	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Business / Management	3	25.00%
Criminal Justice	1	8.33%
Cybersecurity	1	8.33%
Health Sciences	1	8.33%
Liberal Arts	2	16.67%
Technology	4	33.33%
	12	100.00%

The survey was distributed to 584 students/alumni in May 2021. A total of 45 responses were received, for a response rate of 7.7%. Twenty-four participants were active military, and 21 were veterans; 36 were male and 9 were female; 27 participants classified themselves as White, 12 as Black or African American, 4 as Hispanic, 1 as two or more races, and 1 as unknown. Undergraduate degree program representation clustered around majors in engineering, technology, health care fields, business, and the liberal arts (see Table 2). Graduate programs represented were engineering, cybersecurity, business, administration (including health care), and management.

**Table 2. Degree Programs: Online Survey Participants**

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percent of Respondents</b>
Business / Management	13	28.89%
Cybersecurity	4	8.89%
Health Sciences	2	4.44%
Liberal Arts	6	13.33%
Technology	10	22.22%
Nursing	3	6.67%
Public Administration / Public Service	7	15.56%
	45	100.00%

The survey contained six core questions, and as with the focus groups, these were semi-structured interview questions. The survey questions, however, presented choices from which participants could select one or more responses. The choices were based on themes that emerged during focus-group interviews. The option to comment per survey question was provided, and there were two open-ended questions that aligned with focus-group questions to allow for in-depth responses pertaining to 1) ways in which the institution could strengthen its approach to help military and veteran students complete their degrees and 2) advice the survey completers would offer to prospective military and veteran students on pursuing higher education.

Data from active-duty military and veterans were combined. Table 3 provides a synthesis of the focus-group and survey questions.

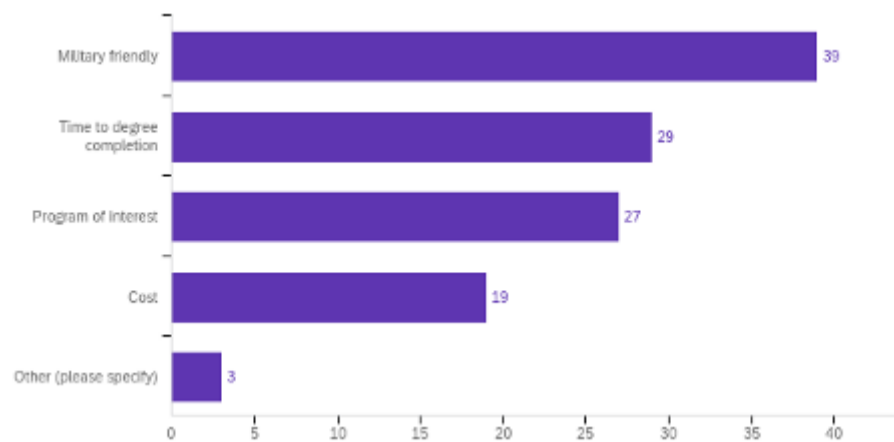
**Table 3. Core questions asked of study participants.**

- 1.) Why did you choose to attend this institution? (select all that apply)
- 2.) What helped you stay on track with your studies? (select all that apply)
- 3.) Were there specific staff at the institution who helped you? If so, what areas were most helpful? (select all that apply)
- 4.) What recommendations do you have for strengthening the military/veteran student experience? (open-ended responses)
- 5.) What advice would you give prospective military or veteran students on completing their degrees? (open-ended responses)

### **Factors influencing student choice of institution**

There was consistency between focus-group and online survey participants regarding reasons active military and veterans chose this institution to pursue their degrees. As illustrated in Figure 1, the institution was perceived by participants as military friendly. Its generous credit transfer policy, including military credits, reduced time-to-degree and contained costs. As one participant noted in response to why the college was chosen: "Number of credits accepted, military friendly, shortest path to the degree."

Equally important were the number of online programs offered along with accreditations; for example, another survey respondent commented in response to why the college was chosen: "ABET accredited and online." A third student mentioned being impressed by "the credentialing" in addition to scheduling options and the college's reputation.

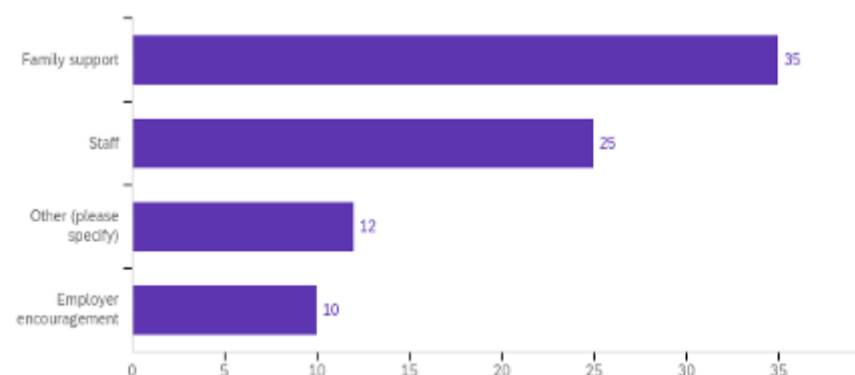
**Figure 1. Why did you choose to attend this institution? (select all that apply)****Factors that helped students stay on track with their studies (in general)**

Among focus-group and online survey participants, family support ranked high as a motivational factor toward degree completion. Five of the 12 focus group participants mentioned their families as key to their academic progress. The majority (35) of survey respondents indicated family support was key to their retention in the program. As one focus group participant said, “I’m using my kids as my motivation. The further I go academically, that’s the baseline for a child’s education.”

The support participants received from the institution’s staff members was also important to their continuation toward a degree. Comments indicated that respondents appreciated the timely and sincere interactions with members of the support staff. A focus group participant described it thus: “I have been to other places, and I didn’t get that personal touch that you guys give in regard to helping us to further our education.”

Commanding officers and supervisors played a role in student success. In one case, a student on active duty enrolled in difficult courses indicated that his superiors “allowed me to take some extra time throughout the day to study and do some assignments.” Focus-group participants noted that military personnel were supportive of academic pursuits, but that the active-duty students were on their own to find the time to complete courses. As one described it, “I always found our commands very supportive of furthering your education. Oftentimes, it was on yourself to find the time to do that but, generally, didn’t see any problems with it.”

Four of the 12 focus group participants stressed their own determination in response to this question. Though intrinsic motivation was not listed as a forced-choice option, seven survey participants wrote with the option for “other (please specify)” that self-determination drove them to stay on track with their studies.

**Figure 2. What helped you stay on track with your studies? (select all that apply)****Were there specific staff at the institution who helped you? If so, what areas were most helpful?**

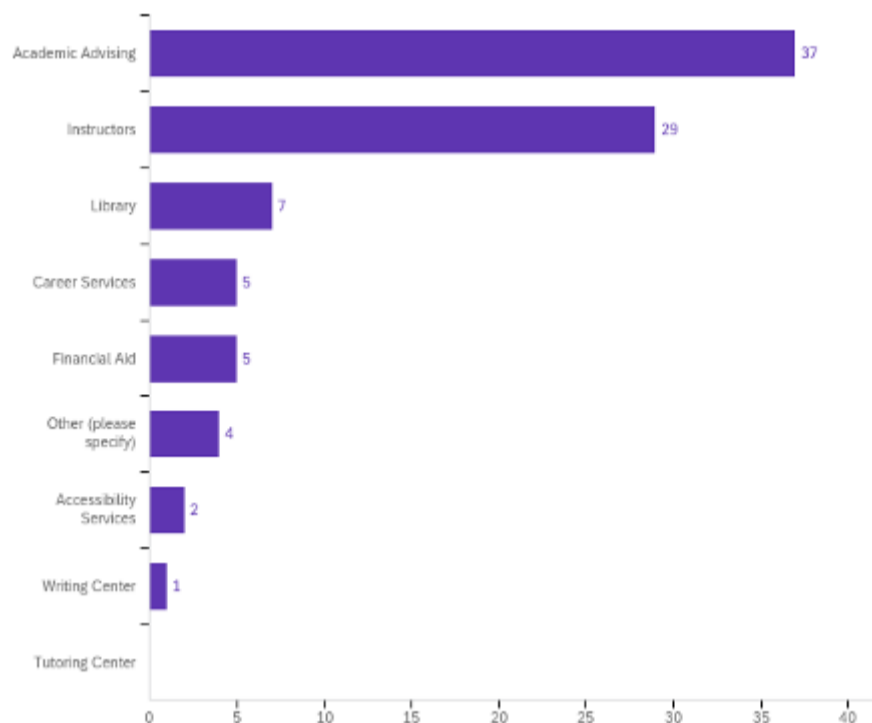
As illustrated in Figure 3, academic advising was particularly beneficial to student success. Three focus-group members mentioned this function as helpful. One said, “my counselor is not overly pressuring but highly encouraging of me to keep going.” Another mentioned, “your advising team is excellent.”

Thirty-seven (83%) of the survey respondents indicated that academic advisors were very helpful to them. Twenty-nine (65%) survey respondents ranked instructors as important to their success. Two focus-group members mentioned instructors. One emphasized access to instructors, and the other provided an example of how an instructor had helped the student improve written communication.

The professor said, ‘Your writing isn’t up to par, but this is what you need to do.’ What made me feel comfortable is, they told me writing is a skill, not a talent. So, it’s something you can learn.

Support provided by the library, career services, financial aid, accessibility services, and the writing center were less important, with 7 or fewer ratings by survey participants. For example, although only a small number (7) of survey participants chose library support as helpful, 5 of the 12 focus group participants mentioned this service as one that stood out. Beyond that, two focus group participants mentioned enrollment management help as did one survey participant who wrote in “Registrar.”

**Figure 3. Were there specific staff at the institution who helped you? If so, what areas were most helpful? (select all that apply)**



### Ways to strengthen the student experience for active military students and veterans

“What recommendations do you have for strengthening the military/veteran student experience?” was an open-ended question. Focus-group members emphasized the importance of courses that are state-of-the-art and align well with students’ career pathways. It was important for students to get authoritative advice on the most appropriate courses in which to enroll related to their career aspirations. To underscore the importance of this point, a focus-group member mentioned the military adage, “Choose your rate, choose your fate,” meaning in this context that if one wants to complete their program in a timely fashion with promising job prospects, it is wise to proceed with care from the start on program and course selection.

Five of the focus-group participants mentioned that it would be helpful early on for military and veteran students to be informed of the full range of financial aid options. The post-9/11 GI Bill was familiar to, and appreciated by, participants; however, participants noted that it is easy to lose sight of the range of possibilities when it comes to aid. Consequently, clear and thorough guidance around available aid options at the Admissions stage was recommended.

Students valued faculty who understood their situations and made appropriate accommodations. It should be noted that three focus-group members indicated poor experiences with instructors. In one case, it was a grade dispute resolved in the student’s favor; in another, it was needing access to course materials prior to deployment; and, in the third, it was related to assignment flexibility during deployment as the student was not able to get any points for discussion even though lack of engagement was due to “being in the field.”

One survey participant wrote,

Nearly all instructors were accepting of late work when I was challenged with significant work challenges; however, one particular instructor was extremely difficult and provided no flexibility. I had to elevate it to the department manager level before it was addressed.

Technology challenges were referred to by four survey participants and three focus-group members. When students are deployed, it can be difficult to access the internet, especially if they are in the field or on board a ship. One focus-group member noted that those on-board ships need to have access to upper-division educational resources because many courses offered on ships are lower-division, general education in type.

Furthermore, three focus-group members spoke at length on the importance of an array of courses that position students for careers as well as for advanced degrees. Some also addressed the importance of certifications offered simultaneously while earning degrees. As one student noted, "Certifications are the huge push as far as being able to get higher pay/raises with the degree." To emphasize the implications of certifications, another focus-group participant commented, "For the military right now, if you don't have Security Plus [certification] you cannot work an IT job after the military, so that is essential [to offer] and Comp TIA."

### **What advice would participants give to prospective servicemembers or veteran students on completing their degrees?**

This was an open-ended question. Eight of 12 (67%) focus-group participants said, "Stick with it," and 9 of 45 (18.37%) survey participants wrote, "Do not quit." A focus-group member referred to military training as excellent preparation for pursuing an online degree program:

Stick with it.... Anything that can be done, you can do. It doesn't matter how hard it is. Everything is achievable. You just have to push through it. That's something that you learn in the military, just gotta do it.

### **Results synopsis**

Table 4 provides highlights of main themes from the focus-group interviews reinforced by survey participants who were able to choose from focus-group-derived items.

#### **Table 4. Main themes based on focus group participant interviews**

Policies: Credits accepted through transfer, including military credits, accelerated time to degree; cost; military friendly

Curriculum: Online; state-of-the-art courses; curricular directions that align with careers; accreditations/certifications offered and earned simultaneously with degree

Faculty: Career advising regarding course pathways for jobs/careers in select areas; understanding and accommodating unique challenges faced by military students during deployment; accessible

Support services: Academic advisors; career services beyond resume writing; technical support even when deployed; financial aid information

Personal: Family support; commanding officer/supervisor support; self-determination; modeling higher education for children and family members

Advice to prospective military/veteran students: Importance of sticking with one's plan; engage in regular course taking (rather than stopping out); time management

### **Discussion**

The importance of an institution being military friendly arose unsolicited during focus group interviews and was endorsed by survey participants. Based on institution-related items that received high ratings, it appears that military friendly is an umbrella term that encompasses generous acceptance of transfer credits, which translates to reduced time-to-degree, confined cost, programs that lead to career paths, understanding support staff, and faculty willing to accommodate the unique needs of this student group. That there were no unanimous ratings per item aligns with findings that these students are heterogeneous (Moore, 2017) and what matters most to them varies by demographic characteristics (Dulchinos, 2014).

Students in this study were career oriented. Participants wanted to attain certifications while they earned their degrees to speed the employability process. Rouscher (2018) recognized the challenge active-military personnel and veterans faced finding suitable employment based only on their military experience and related training

programs; thus, it is not a surprise that these students were keen on an institution with an array of programs that could lead them to a viable career. As noted in findings by Cate (2014) and Cate et al., (2017), these students tended to choose STEM and health care majors.

For military students, the role of faculty is complex. On the one hand, participants indicated that most faculty understood the challenges these students faced especially during deployment. On the other hand, there were two instances (one focus group and one survey) in which students expressed serious concern about instructors who did not understand, or were not accommodating of, student needs due to deployment. Also, a student deployed on short notice mentioned that course material was unavailable just prior to the student's unexpected leave; early access to the material was recommended. The need for faculty development related to this group of students has been identified in the literature (Dillard & Yu, 2018; Hawkins, et al., 2022).

Academic advisors were critical to student progress; however, substantive data in this study is limited on what made them effective. It appears that encouragement, a resource link related to career pathways, and periodic check-ins with students were valued. Based on Arminio, et al., (2015), it might be the case that these students, while disciplined, lack the navigation skills particular to higher education. Furthermore, as a number do suffer from visible and invisible wounds of service, having a central point-of-contact, which is often the role of an advisor, seems to be important.

When asked what helped students stay with their studies, family support followed by the institution's staff ranked high. Self-motivation and determination were popular write-in comments among the survey participants and mentioned by focus-group members. This may be an area where online education had an impact. For example, Barry et al., (2017) found that students in their study benefited from social support of peers for academic work and relied more on family for emotional support and encouragement. Browning (2015) had mixed results related to social support needs in her work, with participants favoring family and personal support networks to those of student peers.

The dynamic interplay between student support services and retention on the part of students at a distance was mentioned by Chakiris (2013). Perhaps as students in this study were enrolled in online programs, their support service needs differed from those of students in on-ground programs. At the same time, while only one focus-group member mentioned orientation programs, literature urges consideration of such programs for active-military and veterans at the start of their degree programs (Klaw et al., 2021; Rouscher, 2018) as well as a range of customized student support services (Molina & Ang, 2017).

## **Summary**

In summary, while military students are considered a subgroup of the adult non-traditional student population, as a group they have distinct needs. These include faculty understanding when a student is deployed, orientation to academic culture, guidance on how best to apply any credits accumulated during service toward degrees, financial aid advice, and student support services. Recognition of commonalities and differences among active-duty military and veterans who have experience combat from those who have no such experience appears to be important when shaping policies, procedures, and support services.

These students are diverse (Milan, 2018; Vaccaro, 2015). Even though misperceptions about them persist across colleges and universities (Cate, et al., 2017), higher education has much to learn and gain from these students; for example, the attitude expressed by participants of "stick with it" can be helpful to other students, beyond those with military service. As most of these students are enrolled in online or hybrid programs, while most research on this group is based on their campus experience (Kirchner & Pepper, 2020), additional related research could be very useful.

## **Recommendations**

While generalizations cannot be made based on this study, the findings along with related literature suggest the value colleges and universities conducting an internal review of their approach to active-duty military and military veteran students. This type of audit might include examination of the number of credits earned during military



service the institution will accept, cost, and time-to-degree. It could also include a review of student support services, especially academic advisors, to ensure services are properly staffed.

Advisors and faculty should be educated about the unique challenges and opportunities these students bring to the campus, on ground or online. A one-size-fits-all approach is no longer (and may never have been) appropriate. Examination of a student's record and interests should help advisors guide students to degree programs that allow students to make use of credits to transfer for the shortest path to the degree. It should also be noted that GI Bill benefits may not cover all education-related expenses, and some students using the GI Bill are also eligible for federal financial aid. Hence, admissions counselors should link students to financial aid experts from the beginning of a student's engagement with an institution.

Faculty development programs are recommended to help instructors understand and respond to student issues that arise when students get deployed while enrolled in classes. Instructors should be encouraged to understand how to help students adjust from military culture to civilian/student life. Equally important, faculty mentors should work with students to determine the most appropriate courses within the major the student wishes to pursue. Administrators at colleges and universities might spend time helping faculty better understand the concerns and challenges that military personnel face as students, and how to steer students toward support resources when needed. This could lead to changes in policies and procedures to address faculty concerns regarding exceptions for these students and related issues.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The low response rate for the focus groups as well as the surveys is a limitation of this study. Based on the study's design and response rate, generalizations cannot be made. However, insights gained from this study add to the body of information about what can facilitate retention among active-duty military and veterans as they pursue degrees.

### **Future Research**

Further research on the experience of active military and veterans as online students is warranted. A multi-institutional study that mirrored the National Veteran Education Success Tracker project (Cate, et al., 2017) in terms of scale, with emphasis on qualitative factors and limited to retention among those in online programs, would be useful. That type of study would lend credibility and reliability to understanding the unique challenges faced by students who are active or former military personnel. The study should seek to better understand the characteristics of a military-friendly institution and segment data between active military personnel and veterans.

Based on this study's findings, it is important to study faculty perceptions of active military personnel and veterans in on ground and online programs. There may be a need for further training of faculty. It is also possible that institutions might need to modify policies and procedures in support of faculty as they respond to active-military and veteran students.

Last, while Klaw et al., (2021) provided a "scoping review" (p. 76) on how to best serve students who are active or former members of the military, a comprehensive literature review on this topic is recommended. That would allow for a full perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by these students. It could also encourage future research that replicates existing studies or builds upon them.

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