

Military-Affiliated Student Experiences in Post-Secondary Education

Cole Hendrix

Department of Student Affairs Administration, Arkansas Tech University

Military-Affiliated Student Experiences in Post-Secondary Education

Military-affiliated students are diverse populations within a diverse population. These students can be non-traditional, underrepresented groups, responsible for a family, employed, disabled, first-generation, low-income, commuter students, and more (Giffin & Gilbert, 2015). With all of these hardships in mind, these students also have to transition from life in the armed forces into a civilian world.

There are educational benefits for military-affiliated students. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or the GI Bill, grants tuition assistance to service members, veterans, and their dependents (Hitt et al., 2015). There are other programs such as the Federal Tuition Assistance and the Yellow Ribbon Scholarship that aid in financial security for post-secondary education (PSE).

Research Problem

There have been many studies on veteran students in relation to traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (Levinson, 2015; RAND Corporation, 2022). There are also studies that use data through GI Bill registration and the National Student Clearing House that can monitor success rates easily but there have not been many studies on the hardships of transitioning into civilian lifestyle, academic readiness, or noting the struggles of other disadvantaged backgrounds (Washton, 1945).

Justification of Research Problem

According to the Congressional Budget Office (2019), "the GI Bill from 2010 to 2016 has spent \$65 billion on educational benefits for 1.6 million veterans, service members, and dependents on tuition, fees, and housing." (para. 1). Even though it is an expense to taxpayers, it is a worthy investment. The return of this economic impact of education and giving a better

chance for a higher wage career to those who have spent time in the armed forces would be difficult to measure. It is important to assist these students more so than just the financial aspect of PSE because there are struggles with this population that Federal Tuition Assistance and the GI Bill cannot resolve. It is important to understand the issues that this group experiences at different types of universities. With this information, institutions could find solutions to improve the retention and success of military-affiliated students (Hitt et al., 2015).

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Typical studies of military-affiliated students tend to report students' attendance in PSE, persistence in their programs, and retention numbers. What is not shown are the struggles that they face as they transition from the military into a university setting. Additional studies that are focused on the experiences of individuals may show common trends and patterns that could assist with access and success at an institution of higher education.

The Audience

Military-affiliated students have access to funding for PSE, but they frequently face hardships outside of finances. Taxpayers, institutions, veterans, service members, and their families would greatly benefit from improving the success and retention rate of these students (Callahan & Jarret, 2014, pp. 38-39). If there were known factors that impede access and success at institutions of PSE that could be mitigated through policy or improving infrastructure and resources, there could be a positive change that institutions could graduate more students, military-affiliated students could secure better careers, and taxpayers could realize a better return on their investment of government programs. What could assist this population of students may also assist students of a similarly disadvantaged background who are not military-affiliated (Hawn 2011).

Literature Review

Adversity in Post-Secondary Education

Hawn (2011) discussed the issues that she witnessed with the military-affiliated students in her class. The veteran students felt isolated due to being the smaller population, recognizably older, having physical and mental disabilities, and having a different outlook for having a “boots on the ground” experience when talking about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. She noted “63 percent of those serving in Iraq will have seen dead bodies or remains, 50 percent will experience being shot at, and 79 percent will have known someone seriously injured or killed (p. 258). With witnessing these scenarios and the effects of improvised explosive devices, “one-third of veterans will return from these conflicts with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or major depression; however, only about half of these troops will receive treatment for these conditions.” (Hawn, 2011, p. 258). The symptoms of these traits affect sleep, concentration, memorization, mood swings, social interaction, and more. These are all critical attributes that dictate the performance of students.

Hitt et al. (2015) stated that military-affiliated students have experienced interruptions or delays in education, making them feel uncertain about academic readiness or the ability to succeed (p. 537). Achieving academic success is more difficult when a student has other focuses such as a full-time job or a family. When the student has been out of a formal classroom for several years and all of these other obstacles are making PSE that much more challenging, it can affect success and retention rates. Even before enrollment, there is a clash between military and campus culture. The military is structured, direct, and tasks are clear, whereas campus is more ambiguous, there is the freedom to pick what to study, and it is more of an intrapersonal journey.

Coping

Many PSE institutions have a staff member or an area dedicated to military-affiliated students. This can be someone who is a school certifying official (SCO) that processes students' education benefits or it may be a success center that offers all services of the institution specifically for these specific students. This gives military-affiliated students a space to be with other students with similar experiences. Having this dedicated space is beneficial for the students, but may not aid in transitioning because it allows them to maintain isolation. What is helpful is facilitating the conversation between military-affiliated students and the rest of the general student population (Hitt et al., 2015).

Giving veterans the ability to share their experiences gives the other students another perspective on how to look at world issues or day-to-day problems. It can also lead to conversation after leaving the classroom when relatable topics are introduced. If a veteran is in a history class and sharing their being in the Battle of Fallujah and listening to the rock band Metallica during patrol operations after securing the city, a student may also enjoy that music and start on conversation based on that (Hitt et al., 2015, p. 260).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to compare the amenities provided for military-affiliated students at public, private, 2-year, and 4-year schools and what institutions could do to better assist this group of students. In this study, there is a questionnaire given to military-affiliated students at different institutions. The guiding questions for this study include, what are the most important things institutions can do to improve military-affiliated students? And how do military-affiliated students describe their overall satisfaction with their post-secondary education experiences. There are also questions that will identify their military affiliation, component

status, and other disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of the issues that the military-affiliated students have could also be irrelevant from their military affiliation, and the solution would affect others that are not in this population.

Method

This study compared how 2-year, 4-year, public, and private institutions assist military-affiliated students in being successful in PSE. After I received approval from the Institutional Review Board I contacted the SCO for Arkansas Tech University at Ozark (ATU-Ozark), Arkansas Tech University-Main Campus (ATU), Hendrix College, University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton (UACCM), and University of Central Arkansas (UCA). They were able to email all of those who are receiving benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with a flyer and explanation of the purpose of this study and where they could meet me to participate. To entice the students, I offered snacks in their veteran's lounge or community area. I purposely timed this to be in a 2-3 hour window between meal times. With this being over a few hours it was my plan to see them between classes during a break.

The survey had 6 questions. Questions 1 and 2 are checkboxes to identify how they are affiliated with the military and at what capacity. Question 3 is also a check box to determine other disadvantaged backgrounds that the participant may identify with. Questions 4-5 were open-ended questions that asked what their greatest struggles are transitioning into PSE, what the institution offers to aid them, and what would be beneficial to assist in their PSE success. There was a hyperlink to an online version of the questionnaire that was sent out through the SCO email list for those who were not able to participate in the study in person. I compiled the data from the five institutions. The disclosure form and questionnaire are shown in the appendix.

Background

Military-affiliated students are made up of three main groups. Veterans, who are no longer serving. Service members, who are currently serving. Dependents, who is the spouse or child who served. These three groups are all entitled to education benefits but fall under different chapters of the VA. They also have varying experiences as some may have had an extended time in the service and are now free to focus on PSE. Those currently serving have to maintain their military bearing and are simultaneously serving and studying. Others may have never served but were subject to move with their family to other duty stations and remain stateside while a loved one was deployed overseas.

There is also a difference in the component of which they served or continuing service. Active duty are those who were full-time with a branch within the Department of Defense. Reserve are those who were part-time with a branch within the Department of Defense. National Guard are those who were part-time within their state. All components are still capable of having full-time positions, training exercises conducted all over the world, and overseas deployments.

People join the military for family legacy, honor, to give back to their country, and other reasons. It is also a steady career path that can start at a young age, provides housing, clothing, travel, a way to leave home, and so much more that is attractive for people with disadvantaged backgrounds. Those who also experience disadvantages from being first-generation, low-income, or have a disability that is connected to their service have additional hardships that they have to face.

All of these will be addressed by checking a box on the survey and will then be categorized once all of the data is compiled.

Institutional Assistance

Most military-affiliated students will go to public institutions, but dependents will be more likely to go to private schools than veterans and service members. Their family may have saved up more finances for their education and supplemented some of the cost with their GI Bill benefits. It is still important to examine how private schools are assisting this population of students. Hendrix College was the institution in this category.

The military offers mostly hands-on career paths. Veterans and service members like to stay active and occupied with things that require focus and fine motor skills with their hands. The 2-year schools that offer programs in automotive, welding, and medical will have a large group of study participants. With this knowledge, it is also important to look at trade schools. ATU-Ozark and UACCM are the institutions in this category.

Institutions that offer more programs, more students, and amenities are typically public 4-year schools. ATU and UCA are the bulk of the participants and should also provide the most support for their students. Each of these schools also offers a Reserve Officer Training Corps that is attractive to enlisted service members who want to commission in their military component.

Results

Out of the five institutions that participated there were a total of 22 students. There were 11 from ATU, seven from UCA, two from ATU-Ozark, one from UACCM, and one from Hendrix College.

Background

The military connection of all students were 10 veterans, six service members, and six dependents as shown in Figure 1. Nine came from Active Duty, six National Guard, one Reserve, and six were dependents as shown in Figure 2. When asked about other disadvantaged

backgrounds (they could choose multiple) nine were first-generation, five low-income, 10 were non-traditional, nine were commuters, one with a mental disability, four with a physical disability, three were people of color or minorities, five identified as LGBTQ+, one English as a 2nd language, and one other. This is shown in Figure 3.

Open Responses

The hardships that the study population were facing eight said they felt a lack of camaraderie and isolation from other students. There were four that noted not having the structure the military lifestyle provides and PSE is seen as too ambiguous. Three stated mental health was also important, not just combat-related stresses but generalized anxiety and major depression. Other mentions were school/work/life balance, finances, and the mindset of the campus not having the same experiences or not being aware of the outside world due to other students spending most of their life in education. This is shown in Figure 4.

In the places the study population found resources that were helpful, 18 said military-affiliated staff or offices, seven benefitted from non-military-affiliated staff or offices, four said community military-affiliated organizations, and two said they were not getting any assistance. Shown in Figure 5.

The students identified ideas on what would benefit their PSE experience. Six stated a Military-Affiliated Success Center, four Military-Affiliated Orientation, three after-hour access to resources, and two additional military-affiliated staff and/or training for those who are not military-affiliated staff. Shown in Figure 6.

Discussion

The results of this study were both expected and unexpected. With the test area being near National Guard bases, it was hypothesized to be more National Guard personnel than active duty, but the National Guard was the same amount as the military dependents. The second hypothesis is that there would be more students that noted mental and physical disabilities with the United States being in conflict for the past 20 years in the Global War on Terror. Mental health did get referred to by three students that were not the one that confirmed a mental disability. This shows that the one who confirmed a disability is diagnosed and getting successful treatment whereas three are not obtaining any assistance. This may be caused by not wanting to be labeled while still serving, not knowing available resources, or not wanting the stigma of needing mental health resources in general. The third hypothesis is that students who were at a 4-year public institution that had access to a veteran service office and/or lounge would be more content with their setting. An overwhelming number of students at various institutions wanted a one-stop such as a military-affiliated success center. This not being feasible for most institutions they could have a military-affiliated orientation course that would present topics such as transitioning, veteran benefits, veteran resources, and resources that would cover some of the more common disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implications

With this study group, there were mirroring issues at the 2-year, 4-year, private and public schools. The 4-year public schools had over 200 students receiving VA benefits per institution. The VA recommends at least one full-time SCO per 200 students (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). With this specialized office, there is occasionally room for the students receiving benefits to have their own space in a study area or lounge. The students who

had access to this, still wanted staff trained in advising, counseling, financial aid, etc. but also experienced with the military-affiliated population. Veterans and service members are non-traditional students and would like to be treated in a way that reflects their age and experience.

The 2-year institutions had less than 100 military-affiliated students. These students did not have the same access to resources that the 4-year institutions had. These students felt more isolated from their campus because they did not have a place of their own and were more likely to conclude their classes or appointments and leave campus. Even at smaller schools, there are plenty of extracurricular activities and events that could be beneficial for students. Not having an environment where military-affiliated students can meet with their peers and go to activities together, takes away from their overall experience in PSE.

The private institution had approximately 20 military-affiliated students and those were mostly dependents. These students had even less access to resources that are pertinent to their needs.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that occurred during this study. Collecting data from so many areas, some from a distance, was time-consuming. This also limited the window of opportunity for students to complete the surveys. Some institutions in the area were structured in a way that it was difficult to get approval to conduct the study on their campus and others that did not have adequate space or a participating eligible population to get a sample. Another limitation was those who participated online were not as likely to ask questions, get clarification about the questionnaire, or have a detailed discussion on their experiences. Also, the majority of participants were found through the SCO email list for those who receive benefits. There are other students who may have been eligible to participate in the study, but were not eligible or

utilizing VA benefits. Not being able to notify all military-affiliated students limited the amount of potential participants.

Future Research

There are many articles that look for behavior and cognitive function for post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, but there is a lack of literature on the general experiences of military-affiliated students. There is room to study this topic with a larger target area and have more than a one-page questionnaire. It may be more accurate to set up interviews for a more qualitative study to get a better idea of their personal experiences. Institutions should survey their own students regularly so that they can make updates on how they serve their students.

Conclusion

The military-affiliated students have made more sacrifices than most other students for their access to educational benefits. This population having potentially more access to finances for their education should be an appealing target for institutions of post-secondary education to recruit and retain. In order to do this, these students would benefit from a one-stop military-affiliated success center for the schools that find it feasible or a military-affiliated orientation course to cover resources and topics pertinent to their needs. The institutions should also address the needs of the secondary disadvantaged backgrounds of these students so that they can benefit this group along with the other non-military-affiliated student populations.

Veterans and service members are purpose driven individuals. When separating from the armed forces and fail to transition into a civilian lifestyle and are absent a career, education, or any other self-fulfilling purpose it may lead to suicide ideation. There is an average of 16.8 veteran suicides per day (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). Finding a way to recruit, retain, and graduate veterans may aid in the decline of veteran suicide.

References

- Callahan, R., Jarrat, D. (2014). Helping student: servicemembers and veterans succeed. *Change*, 46(2), 36-41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44081632>
- Congressional Budget Office, (2019). *The Post-9/11 GI Bill: Beneficiaries, choices, and cost*. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/55179#:~:text=Total%20annual%20benefits%20were%2C%20on,total%20spending%20in%20that%20year>.
- Griffin, K. A., Gilbert, C. K. (2015). Better transitions for troops: an application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 71-97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43694832>
- Heather, H. (2011). Veterans and veteran families in general education. *The Journal of General Education*, 60(4), 248-264. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jgeneeduc.60.4.0248>
- Hitt, S., Sternberg, M., MacDermid, S., Vaughan, J., Carlson, R., Dansie, E., & Mohrbacher, M. (2015). The higher education landscape for US student service members and veterans in Indiana. *Higher Education*, 70(3), 535-550. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43648886>
- Levinson, M. H. (2015). General semantics and PTSD in the military. *A Review of General Semantics*, 72(3), 258-264. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24762164>
- RAND Corporation. (2022). Strategies to improve long-term outcomes for veterans with traumatic brain injury. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep41325>
- U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2020). *GI Bill Update: Recommended SCO to Student Ratio*. Education Service.
- U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022). *National Veteran Suicide Prevention: Annual Report*. VA Suicide Prevention.

Washton, N. S. (1945). A Veteran goes to college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 16(4), 195-196. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1976507>

Appendix

Disclosure Form

Military-Affiliated Student Experiences in Post-Secondary Education

Hello and thank you for having interest in this survey. I am Cole Hendrix, a graduate student in the Department of Student Affairs Administration at Arkansas Tech University. I am conducting a project for my graduate research class.

The purpose of this study is to compare the resources provided for military-affiliated students at public, private, 2-year, and 4-year schools and what institutions could do to better assist this group of students.

It is my hope that the benefit of this research will give post-secondary education institutions clarity of the needs for military-affiliated students and what they can do to aid in their student's success.

This survey should only take approximately 3-5 minutes of your time, and you are free to exit the survey at any time without penalty. There are no foreseeable risks or costs associated with this survey. Please feel free to partake in the snacks provided whether you participate in the survey or not, and take a veteran pin for yourself or any veteran that you wish to give it to.

The information obtained from this survey will only be used for research purposes. No identifying information will be held and results will be reported in the aggregate.

Below is contact information you may take a picture of or take an additional copy in the event you have any questions about the study:

Cole Hendrix
Graduate Student
Student Affairs Administration
Arkansas Tech University
Russellville, AR
chendrix3@atu.edu

Rene Couture, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director
Student Affairs Administration
Arkansas Tech University
Russellville, AR
rcouture@atu.edu

Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board: irb@atu.edu

If you are willing to complete the survey, please sign your name below stating that you have read over this form and provide your consent to participate in this brief survey.

Name: _____

Figures

Figure 1

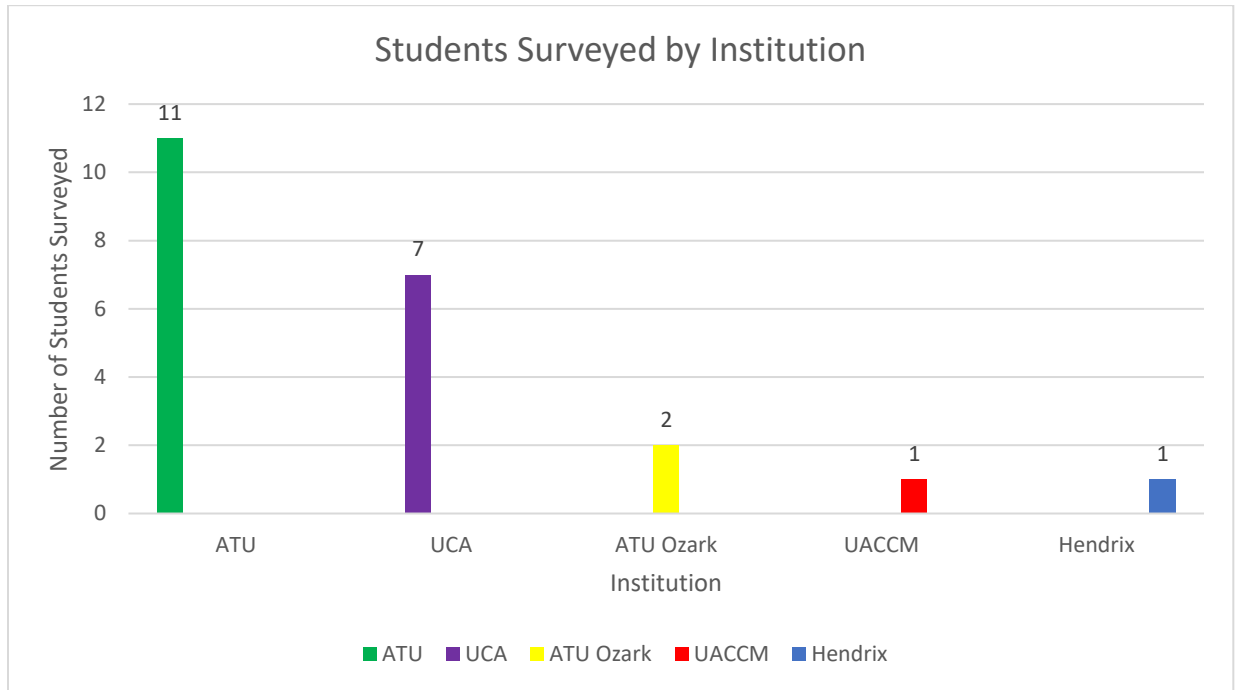


Figure 2

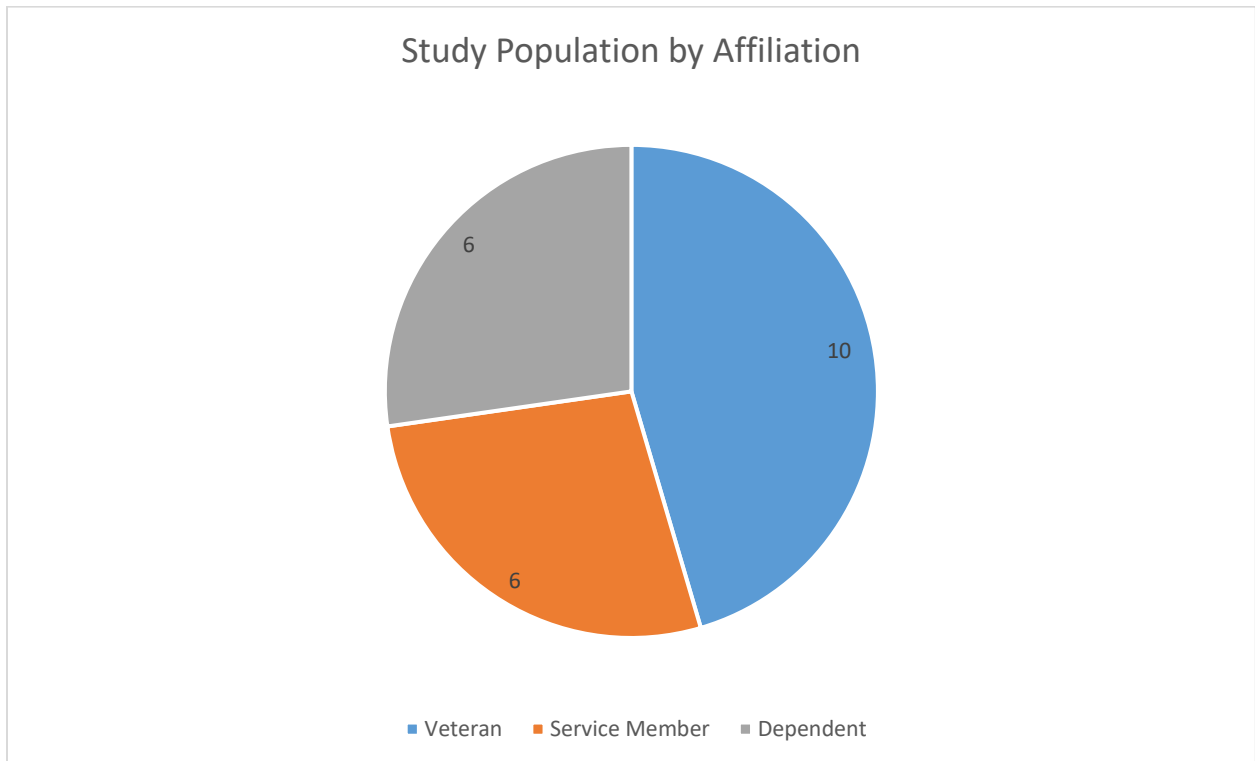


Figure 3

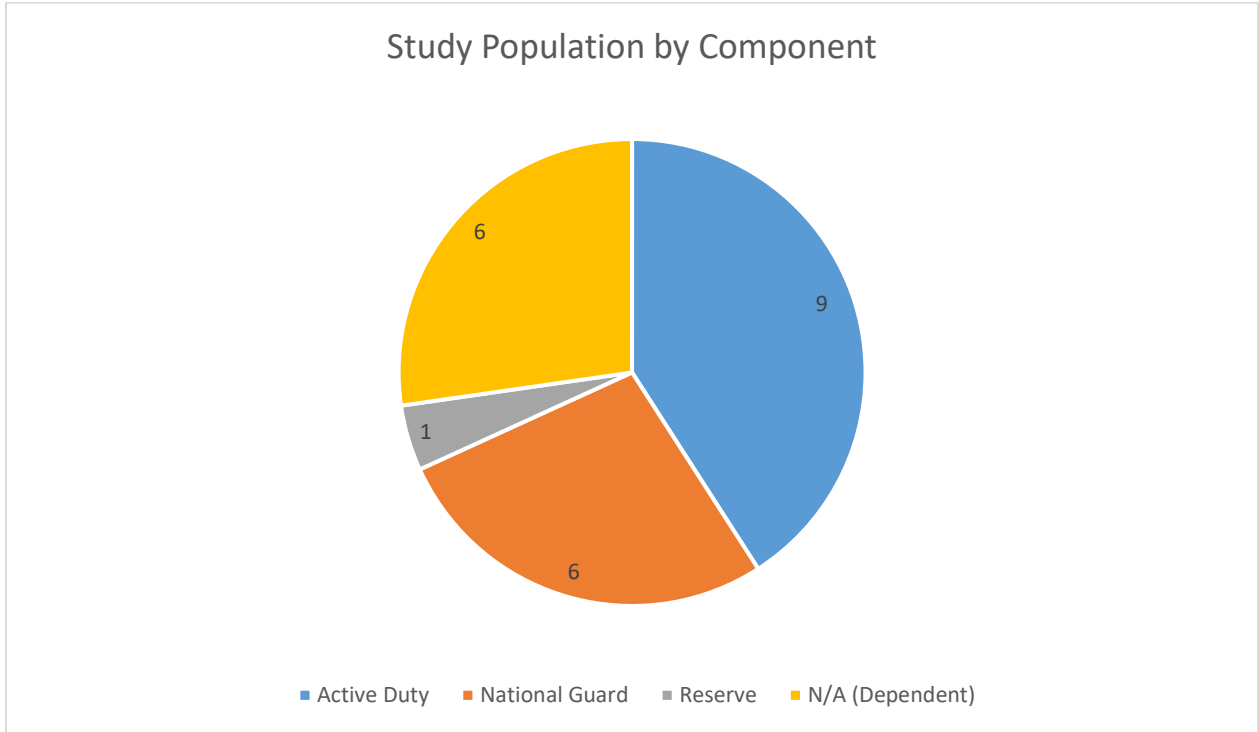


Figure 4

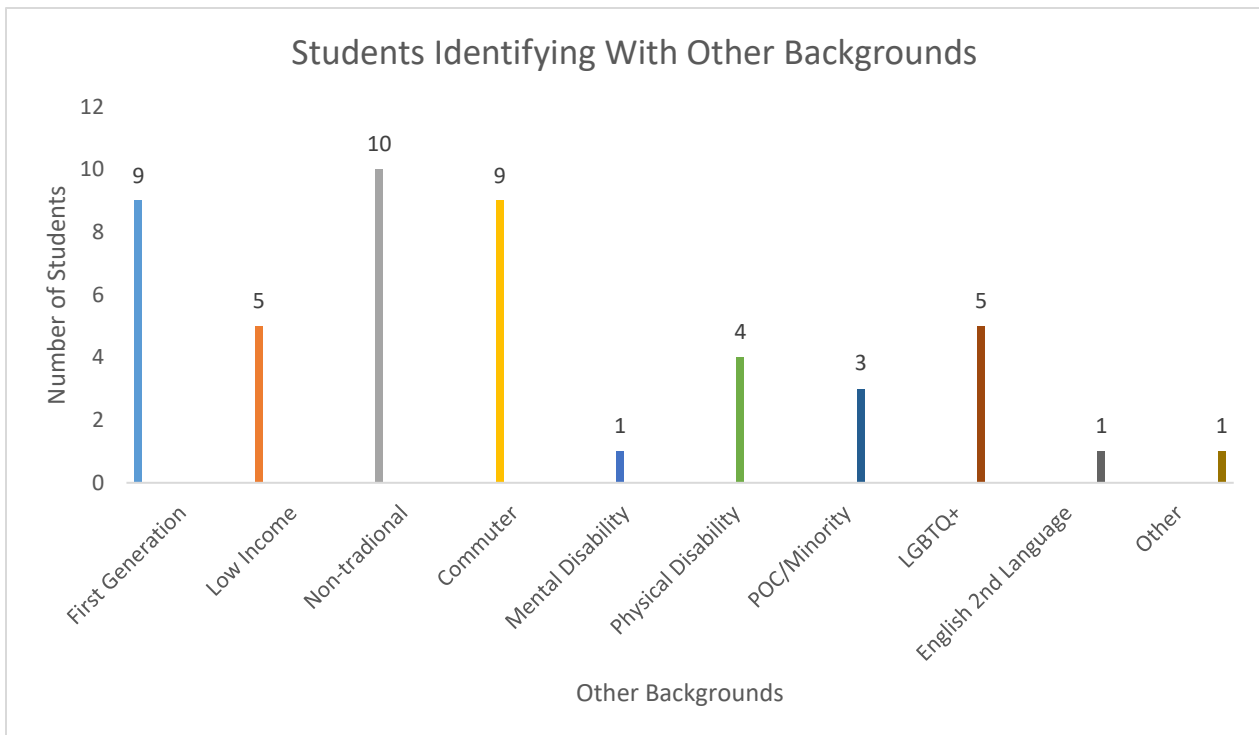


Figure 5

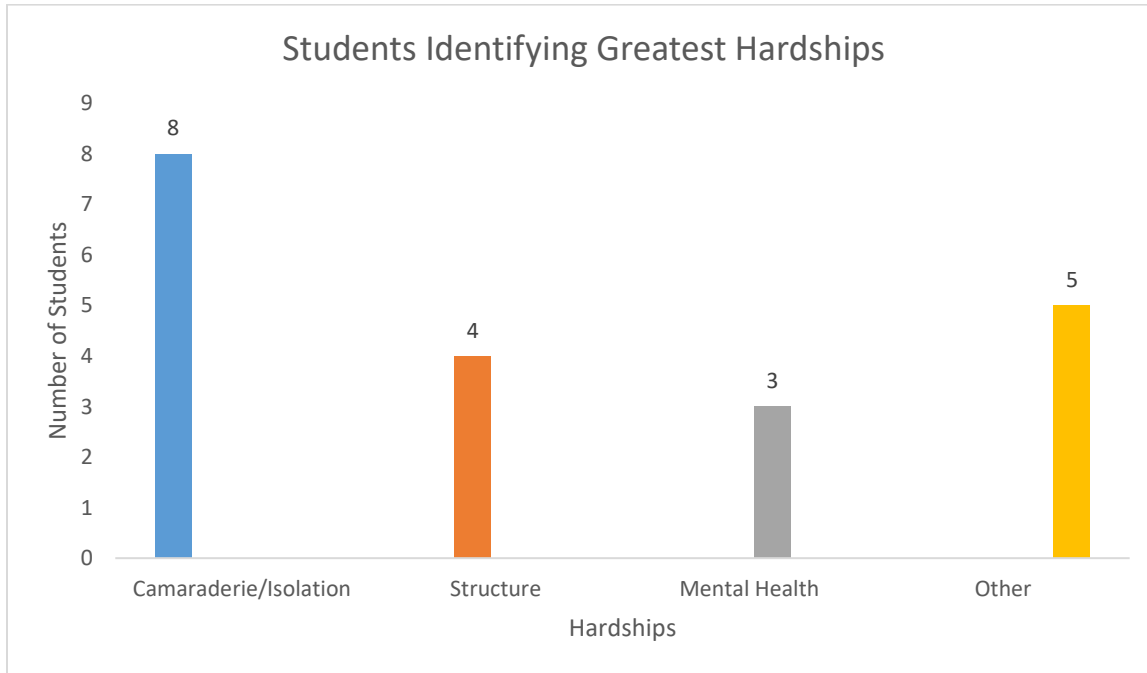


Figure 6

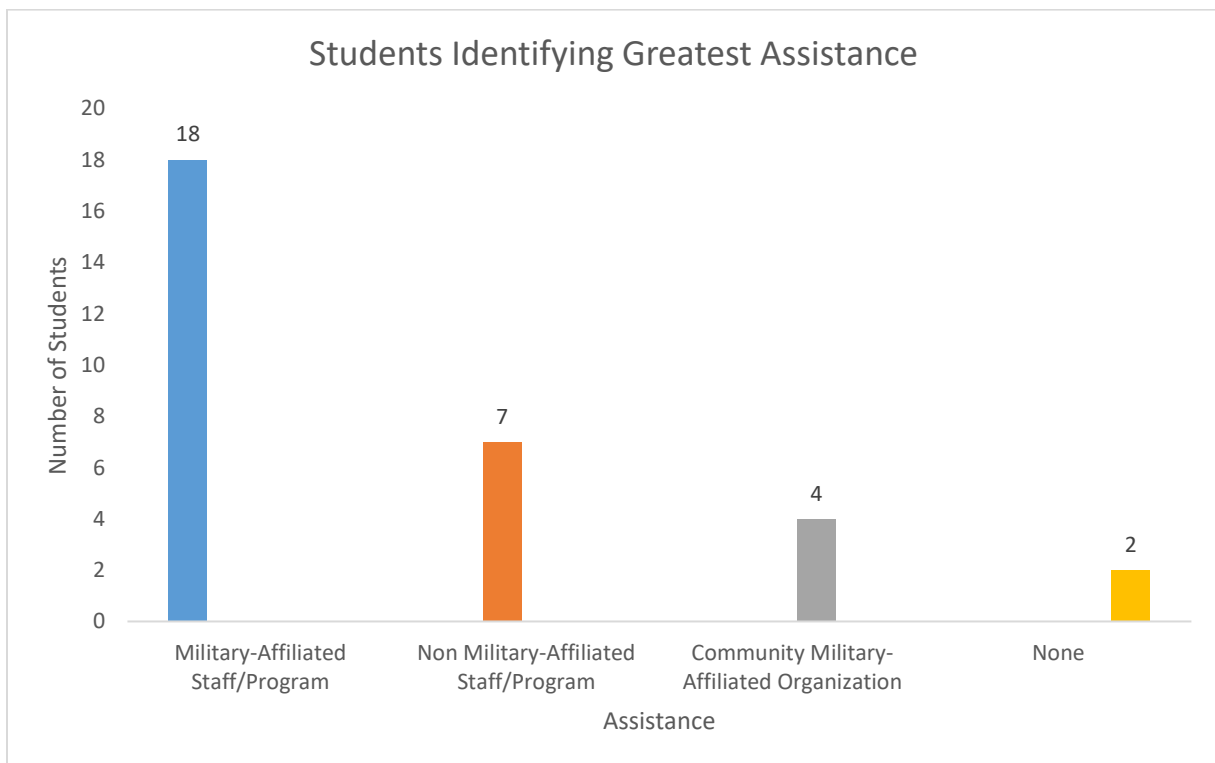


Figure 7

