

# Measuring the Success of Student Veterans and Active Duty Military Students

The NASPA Research and Policy Institute

In partnership with 

## Measuring the Success of Student Veterans and Active Duty Military Students

### INTRODUCTION AND ISSUE OVERVIEW

The nation's colleges and universities face an influx of students who are active duty or military veterans. According to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spends nearly \$9 billion annually on education benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, supporting nearly 600,000 service members, veterans, and other beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) reports that 325,000 active duty service members enrolled in postsecondary courses in 2011, using more than \$1 billion in funding through the DOD Voluntary Education Program.<sup>2</sup>

Given the significance of these student populations, both in terms of enrollment and taxpayer spending, it is no surprise that there has been an acute focus on the experiences and educational outcomes of student veterans and active duty military students in academic scholarship, policy conversations, and media reporting.

Unfortunately, the data available to support these important discussions remains limited. For instance:

- There are no accurate counts of the true number of active duty military and student veterans attending U.S. postsecondary institutions.
- There is very limited information available regarding the success rates of these individuals.
- Knowledge of the factors affecting the success of these students and of the institutional practices most likely to enhance their success is not widely held.

InsideTrack and NASPA, two organizations dedicated to advancing postsecondary enrollment, student learning, and degree completion, set out to better understand these issues through an institutional survey, coupled with interviews and the aggregation of insights gained from one-on-one mentoring and coaching of thousands of student soldiers and veterans over the last decade. This brief presents results of our project.

Designed to gauge efforts underway for tracking educational progress and outcomes for student soldiers and veterans, survey results summarize the approaches institutions are taking to data collection and student supports, and reflect opinions about what is working and what remains opaque in terms of effective practice. This brief concludes with recommendations based on the survey results

and our other work on this issue, suggesting a way forward for leaders interested in supporting active duty and student veteran educational success.

### SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument used in this study was designed by NASPA and InsideTrack and administered online. The voting delegate at each NASPA member institution received an invitation to participate in the project in November of 2012. Of 1,162 invited institutions, 239 institutions completed the survey—a 21 percent response rate. Survey respondents represent a broad range of institutions—public, private, small, and large—located throughout the United States. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of institutions responding to our survey.

After survey data was collected and cleaned, responses were matched to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) institutional characteristics, including postsecondary sector and total enrollments. When analyzing responses, we looked across all respondents for trends and themes. Where appropriate, we disaggregated results by subgroups of responding institutions.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

Results indicate that most institutions are making a concerted effort to better understand and serve student soldiers and veterans. However, we also found that most are doing so without the benefit of good data and strong measurement mechanisms.

Nearly three-quarters of responding institutions have dedicated personnel and resources specifically to active duty military student and student veteran affairs. Most have a variety of initiatives underway designed to enhance success among these students. At the same time, only a small minority claim to understand the primary causes of attrition among student soldiers and veterans, and the vast majority do not have the disaggregated retention and completion data required to measure the effectiveness of their interventions and investments.

Below we provide additional details on our survey findings.

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**Figure 1**  
**Characteristics of survey respondents (N=239)**

	Frequency	Percent
<b>Sector</b>		
Public, 4-year	124	51.9
Private not-for-profit, 4-year	80	33.5
Private for-profit, 4-year	2	0.0
Public, 2-year	33	13.8
<b>Location, degree of urbanization</b>		
City	125	52.3
Suburb	52	21.8
Town	44	18.4
Rural	18	7.5
<b>Location, census region</b>		
Northeast	61	25.5
Midwest	63	26.4
South	74	31.0
West	41	17.2
<b>Total undergraduate enrollment</b>		
Under 1,000	9	3.8
1,000-4,999	81	33.9
5,000-9,999	56	23.4
10,000-19,999	52	21.8
20,000 and above	41	17.2
<b>Total active duty military enrollment</b>		
Under 100	120	50.2
100-299	24	10.0
300-499	8	3.4
500-999	5	2.1
1,000 and above	4	1.7
Unknown	78	32.6
<b>Total student veteran enrollment</b>		
Under 100	62	25.9
100-299	47	19.7
300-499	17	7.1
500-999	24	10.0
1,000 and above	11	4.6
Unknown	78	32.6

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**DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS**

*Institutions are increasingly dedicating resources to support active duty military students and student veterans. Nearly 75% of respondents indicate having a specific staff member or office focused exclusively on these student populations.*

Responding institutions are demonstrating their commitment to active duty military students and student veterans through the presence of dedicated offices, staff, and professional development opportunities for staff, faculty, and administrators. Nearly three-quarters of responding institutions have either an office or a staff member focused solely on active duty military student and student veteran affairs, evidence of a continuing trend of additional resources being allocated to support these student populations.

Of note, institutions with at least 100 student veterans, regardless of total student enrollments, are more likely to have a dedicated office instead of a single staff member to support active duty and student veterans. A majority of dedicated offices are located within their institution's student affairs division, indicating that institutions are appreciating the unique needs of these student populations, but are embedding supports within general student support structures.

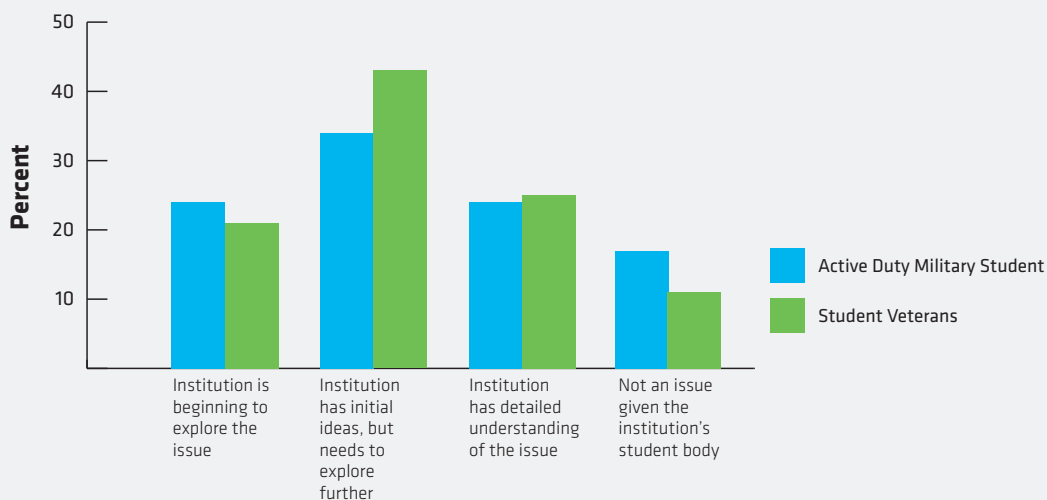
Reflecting efforts to institutionalize service to active duty and student veterans, nearly two-thirds of all institutions—and over three-quarters of institutions with dedicated offices—offer professional development to staff, faculty, and administrators focusing on the unique needs of active duty military students and student veterans; in our view a promising development.

*Only 1 in 4 institutions reported having a detailed understanding of the root causes of stop-out or dropout among undergraduate students who are active duty military and student veterans.*

Despite increasingly dedicating fiscal and human resources to support active duty and student veterans, only 25% of responding institutions indicate having a detailed understanding of the causes of stop-out or dropout among their active duty military and student veteran populations (Figure 2).

*Nearly three-quarters of responding institutions have either an office or a staff member focused solely on active duty military student and student veteran affairs*

**Figure 2**  
**Level of understanding of the root causes of stop-out or dropout among undergraduate active duty military students and student veterans**



*Only 25% of responding institutions indicate having a detailed understanding of the causes of stop-out or dropout among their active duty military and student veteran populations*

This finding suggests that although institutions increasingly recognize the need to more effectively support active duty and student veterans, there is a limited understanding of how best to design support initiatives.

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Institutions indicating a comprehensive appreciation of attrition factors are primarily public or private 4-year institutions, with slightly more than half (52%) enrolling less than 10,000 undergraduate students. A significant majority (72%) have fewer than 100 active duty military students. Student veteran enrollment varies widely, with 26% enrolling fewer than 100 student veterans, 23% enrolling 100 to 299 veterans, 19% enroll 300-499 veterans, 16% enroll 500-999 veterans, and 16% enroll 1,000 or more student veterans.

*Few institutions are disaggregating retention and completion data to identify active duty and student veteran populations, hindering assessments of student supports designed to reduce stop-out and dropout among these student groups.*

Institutional efforts to support active duty and student veterans are likely to be most effective when guided by timely and accurate data. However, results of our survey indicate that few institutions are disaggregating retention and completion data in ways that allow for unique tracking of active duty and student veteran populations (see Figure 3); a factor hindering assessment of the effectiveness of student supports designed to reduce stop-out and dropout among these student groups.

Specific to active duty military students, 28% of respondents indicated they are tracking retention and/or completion rates for these populations separately from the overall population. Breaking down this finding further, 1% of respondents track retention only; 5% track degree completion only; and 22% track both retention and degree completion.

Specific to student veterans, 33% of responding institutions indicated that they track student veteran retention and/or completion rates separately from the overall population. Twenty-six percent of institutions track both retention and degree completion, 6% track degree completion only, and 1% track only retention.

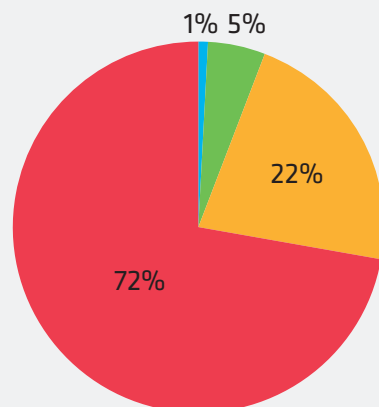
The importance of disaggregating retention and completion data becomes even more apparent when viewed in the context of institutions' goals for improvement. Of the 72% of responding institutions that track neither retention nor completion for active duty military students, 36% claim to have institutional goals for improving retention and completion rates for active duty military students over the next 2 years. Similarly, for those who track neither retention nor completion for student veterans, 38% claim to have institutional goals for improving retention and completion rates for this group over the next 2 years.

**Figure 3**

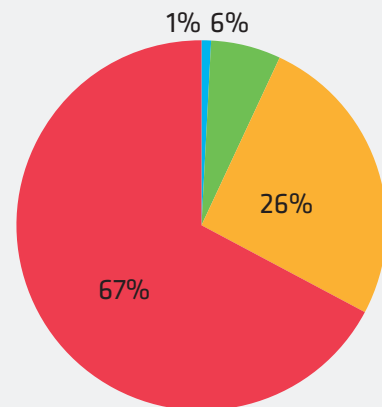
**Percent of institutions tracking retention and degree completion rates for active duty military and student veterans**



*Active duty military students*



*Student veterans*



## Measuring the Success of Student Veterans and Active Duty Military Students

In addition to supporting goals for improving educational outcomes, data on the educational experiences of active duty and student veterans is critical to assessing the effectiveness of improvement initiatives. While respondents listed myriad initiatives underway to improve retention and completion rates for student soldiers and veterans, only 5% claimed that their initiatives were successful and that they had the data to prove it (see Figure 4). Meanwhile, 31% reported that their initiatives seemed to be working, but that they did not have data to support that conclusion, and 54% reported that it was too early to assess the success of their initiatives.

### UNIQUE INSIGHTS FROM DIRECT WORK WITH STUDENT SOLDIERS AND VETERANS

InsideTrack works with colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. At the core of these efforts are one-on-one student coaching or mentoring programs designed to support students in defining their educational and career goals and developing a plan for reaching them. The professional coaches involved in these programs also help students master life skills such as time management and prioritization, and help them persist through obstacles that arise while they are in school.

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InsideTrack and its partner institutions have worked with thousands of active duty military students and student veterans over the last decade, developing a deep understanding of the factors most closely tied to successful outcomes. In addition to confirming many of the survey findings discussed previously, interviews with coaches engaged in this work generated unique insights that may contradict widely held beliefs regarding the behaviors and attitudes of student soldiers and veterans.

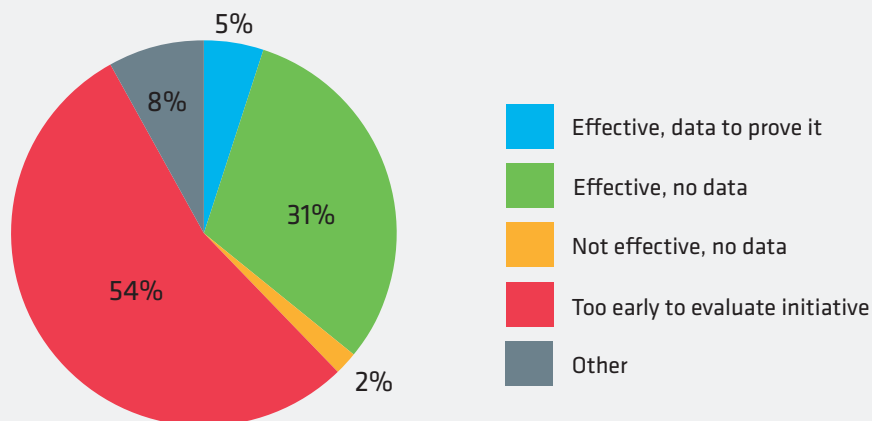
Of course, it is important to remember that each student is unique and that no group of students shares every attribute. Nonetheless, according to interviews with InsideTrack coaches, student support staff at their partner institutions, and other key stakeholders, we identified several misconceptions or myths about active duty and student veterans that are important to dispel.

- **Myth #1: Student soldiers and veterans have lower success rates than other adult student populations.**

The reality is that there is insufficient information regarding the enrollment and completion rates of these populations to make an assessment. In general, higher education institutions have difficulty tracking students who transfer from one institution to another or stop-out (take a temporary leave); a problem exacerbated in populations with high geographic mobility and irregular enrollment patterns. Moreover, universities rarely assess which of their current students are service members or veterans, beyond looking at which students are using DOD and VA funding to pay for their education; a reasonable but nonetheless imperfect proxy for capturing active duty and student veteran data.

Figure 4

### Effectiveness of current initiatives to address stop-out or dropout among undergraduate active duty military students and student veterans



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- **Myth #2: Student soldiers and veterans are less well prepared to succeed in college than other adult student populations.** Those we spoke with who work directly with students to support their success indicate that active duty military and student veterans are often among the best-prepared students. The challenge is in helping these students translate the skills and attitudes they've developed through their military service into an academic context. Most of these students are well versed in establishing a goal, defining the steps necessary to achieve it, balancing competing priorities and holding themselves accountable for execution; they simply need guidance on how to leverage these skills toward earning a degree and preparing themselves for postgraduate career success.
- **Myth #3: Student soldiers and veterans are resistant to support.** It's true that military service often promotes self-reliance. However, it also encourages teamwork and mutual trust. The experts we spoke with suggest that the key to engagement lies with positioning support services as part of a team effort for all students to achieve success, not as a remedial effort for individuals expected to fail. Conversations with individuals engaged in active duty and student veteran support services pointed out that this is not just true for learners with military experience, but for students in general. Student soldiers and veterans are just as likely to engage with support services as other students when engagement with these services doesn't carry a negative stigma and is presented in a timely fashion with clearly articulated expectations.
- **Myth #4: Student soldiers and veterans are proactive and direct in expressing dissatisfaction with their educational experience.** Most service members and veterans have experienced a variety of situations where they were expected to fulfill their duties without complaint, irrespective of unpleasant conditions or extremely challenging circumstances. As a result, they are sometimes hesitant to advocate for themselves or question authority. Some of the support professionals we spoke with drew a parallel between military learners and international students from certain countries. These experts

suggest that many student soldiers and veterans need guidance on when it's appropriate to express their concerns and how to raise those concerns in a constructive manner designed to meet their educational goals.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A great deal of attention is being paid to enhancing the experiences and educational outcomes of student veterans and active duty military students. Unfortunately, the data available to support these important activities remains limited. Making real progress will require an effective system for collecting and analyzing data across institutions.

The National Student Clearinghouse, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and Student Veterans of America recently announced a partnership to begin collecting such data.<sup>4</sup> Along with revised intake surveys and disaggregated reporting at the institutional level, this effort can provide a strong foundation for measurement and analysis moving forward. As indicated in the results of our survey efforts, data on student veterans and active duty military can drive institutional behavior in ways that hold promise for increasing desired educational outcomes for this critical student population.

There are a number of other ways that institutions and postsecondary systems can advance the cause of student veterans and military student success. These include:

- **Data-driven decision making:** There is a natural tendency to make new support services available to all students prior to assessing their impact and cost effectiveness. For some, it's a matter of fairness—why deny some students the potential benefit? For others, it's a matter of complexity—conducting a controlled study is often difficult. While no one wants to “reinvent the wheel,” failing to assess the efficacy of initiatives before rolling them out at scale often results in a waste of scarce resources. To the extent possible, leverage data and insights from institutions that have extensive experience measuring the impact of their initiatives to support student soldiers and veterans.

## Measuring the Success of Student Veterans and Active Duty Military Students

- **Coordination across functional boundaries:** Improving the success of student veterans and military students cannot be accomplished through a specialized department alone. Registrars, financial aid officers, orientation directors, institutional researchers, faculty, advisors and others all play a role in supporting the educational success of student veterans and active duty military students. The overall student experience must be coordinated and flexible enough to promote success across institutional boundaries, with particular attention paid to sharing and integrating data into programmatic offerings.
- **Proactive support:** Too often, student services efforts are focused on reacting to problems versus assisting students in developing the habits required for success. Why wait until a student has failed a test or missed several classes before addressing issues of time management and study skills? Proactively support students in developing a plan for achieving their goals. Guide them in assessing likely obstacles. Most importantly, encourage them to take ownership and hold themselves accountable for their own success.

### ABOUT NASPA'S RESEARCH AND POLICY INSTITUTE

The Research and Policy Institute (RPI) intentionally links policy, research, and effective student affairs practices in support of student success and the strategic priorities of NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. NASPA is the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession, serving a full range of professionals who provide programs, experiences, and services that cultivate student learning and success in concert with the mission of our colleges and universities. Founded in 1919, NASPA comprises nearly 14,000 members in all 50 states, 29 countries, and 8 U.S. Territories. For additional information, please visit: [www.naspa.org](http://www.naspa.org).

### ABOUT INSIDETRACK

InsideTrack works with colleges and universities to improve student and institutional success. Our one-on-one student coaching, process expertise, analytics and technology have been proven to increase graduation rates by an average of 15 percent and enhance the student experience. Since 2001, we've partnered with a broad range of universities to drive continuous improvement, including Penn State University, University of Dayton, and Columbia University. For additional information, please visit: [www.insidetrack.com](http://www.insidetrack.com).

<sup>1</sup>[http://veterans.senate.gov/hearings.cfm?action=release.display&release\\_id=48636dd0-0891-4f4d-a5b2-0a0df671eca8](http://veterans.senate.gov/hearings.cfm?action=release.display&release_id=48636dd0-0891-4f4d-a5b2-0a0df671eca8)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15718>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.naspa.org/divctr/research/soldiertostudent.cfm>

<sup>4</sup><http://chronicle.com/article/Veterans-Graduation-Rates-Are/136503/>