

Informing Improved Recognition of Military Learning

Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans
in Postsecondary Education



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Executive Summary

This report examines student veterans' experiences with and perceptions of having their military learning recognized by a postsecondary institution. Previous research suggests recognition of military training and occupation helps to support student veterans as they pursue postsecondary education and training after service in the military, but missing from the literature is a deeper understanding of this process and how it may vary across institutions. To fill this gap, we conducted interviews and focus groups and administered a survey to student veterans who were enrolled or recently enrolled in undergraduate programs at postsecondary institutions in the United States. Broadly, we found that, although there is considerable variation across institutions and programs, the credit most student veterans receive from postsecondary institutions for their military experience does not meet their expectations.

This report presents findings related to student veterans' experiences in postsecondary education:

Where do student veterans seek out or receive information about institutions when choosing an institution?

Most student veterans reported seeking information from military- and campus-based resources, as well as conducting their own research. Although most student veterans reported being aware of opportunities for credit recognition for their military learning, 14% reported not knowing this was a possibility, and among those who were aware, many struggled to find information about credit recognition.

What role do opportunities for recognition of military learning play in student veterans' choice of institution?

Nearly half (48%) of student veterans reported that opportunities for military credit recognition were an important factor in their decision about which institution to attend. This was significantly higher for students of color (57%). Although most student veterans first considered other factors—such as academic reputation (85%) and specific degree or program offerings (84%) in their decision—qualitative findings suggest that opportunities for credit recognition helped to narrow choices for some student veterans.

Do student veterans attempt to get credit for their military-based learning?

About 80% of student veterans attempted to get credit for their military training, as opposed to 60% for their military occupation. Findings differed significantly by race and gender, with female students and students of color being less likely than their male and White counterparts to attempt to get credit recognized.

What are student veterans' experiences with the process of gaining recognition of their military-based learning?

Experiences with the process of obtaining credit for military learning varied at the individual and institution levels. Some institutions had a streamlined process that started at registration, and others did not have clear guidelines. Academic advisors and on-campus student veterans centers played an important role in the experience, often providing valuable guidance to student veterans.

What, if any, credit do student veterans receive for their military training? Does the amount of credit awarded meet expectations?

A majority of student veterans (64%) received some postsecondary credit for their military training, while 21% received no postsecondary credit for such training. Credits were most commonly awarded for elective and general education courses; only 27% of student veterans received credit toward courses in their major. Additionally, most student veterans (64%) reported expecting to receive more postsecondary credits than they actually received.

To what extent does recognition of military learning affect student veterans' experiences in postsecondary education, both academically and nonacademically?

Most student veterans (62%) reported that credit recognition affected their academic experience. Of those students, 89% reported that credit recognition affected their time to degree completion. Student veterans had mixed opinions about whether their experiences with recognition of military learning affected their nonacademic experience and sense of belonging, often because the credit they received was in part a reflection of differences between the military occupation they had held and the field of study they wanted to pursue. Still, there may be indirect connections between credit recognition and sense of belonging.



Key Findings

Key findings from this study suggest that, although some postsecondary institutions have support processes or resources available to recognize the prior military learning of student veterans, there is still room for improvement in meeting student veterans' needs. In particular, institutions could benefit from better processes and practices to support mapping and understanding student veterans' paths and goals, including the inconsistencies they experience when trying to gain recognition of their military learning and the way that affects their impressions and experiences of the institution. We aim to begin to provide that deeper understanding in the fuller discussion that follows.

Introduction

U.S. military servicemembers learn and develop skills and expertise through their training and occupation during their military service, but many of them find it difficult to obtain academic credit for that learning once they enter postsecondary education. In a recent survey of more than 8,500 veterans, “skills translation” was rated as one of the top five most common concerns about transitioning to civilian education, ahead of common topics like “college/university culture and climate” and “using and accessing GI Bill benefits” (Zoli, Maury, & Fay, 2015). With more than 2 million student veterans enrolling in higher education since August 2009 and 96% of higher education institutions enrolling student veterans (Institute for Veterans and Military Families & Student Veterans of America, 2019), it is important to better understand the challenges that student veterans face in getting their military learning recognized by postsecondary institutions and the steps that institutions could take to address these challenges.

Although institutions of higher education have made progress toward better supporting student veterans, more comprehensive and consistent supports and policies are needed to ensure that student veterans receive appropriate credit for their prior military learning. Many institutions have developed veteran-friendly support services and centers on campus to support student veterans in the transition to campus life, and 34 states have some form of policy requiring public institutions to award credit for military experience—with most states requiring institutions to accept American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations (Education Commission of the States, 2018). Still, even in states where legislation on credit recognition is in place, variation remains in whether credits are awarded and whether the credits that are awarded are applicable to student veterans’ programs of study (Johnson & Appel, 2020). And student veterans’ experiences may vary based on several factors, including their military rank; administrators’ perceptions of “best interests” of student veterans; unique requirements of their course, department, or program; and policies at individual institutions (American Council on Education, n.d.; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

A better understanding of whether and how credit recognition affects student veterans' decisions about postsecondary education enrollment and persistence is a key component of providing adequate supports to student veterans. Although previous research has acknowledged some key questions related to student veterans' perceptions of their experiences getting credits recognized, a deeper understanding of this process and how it varies is still needed. **To address this gap in evidence, this report examines student veterans' experiences with and perceptions of having their military learning recognized by a postsecondary institution.** Key research questions include the following:

1. Where do student veterans seek out or receive information about institutions when choosing an institution?
2. What role do opportunities for recognition of military learning play in student veterans' choice of institution?
3. Do student veterans attempt to get credit for their military-based learning?
4. What are student veterans' experiences in gaining recognition of their military-based learning?
5. What, if any, credit do student veterans receive for their military training? Does the amount of credit awarded meet expectations?
6. To what extent does recognition of military learning affect student veterans' experiences in postsecondary education, both academically and nonacademically?

To answer these questions, we conducted interviews and focus groups and administered a survey with student veterans enrolled or recently enrolled at postsecondary institutions in the United States. **Broadly, we find that although there is considerable variation across institutions and programs, the credit most student veterans receive from postsecondary institutions for their military experience does not meet their expectations.** In the following sections, we present key findings about the transition from the military to postsecondary education, veterans' experiences with receiving credit for prior military learning, and the impact those experiences have on student veterans. Throughout, we explore differences in experiences by such factors as race/ethnicity, gender, age, and branch of military, and we report these differences when they are statistically significant. Based on these findings, we conclude with a discussion of implications and recommendations for practice.



Data Collected

To answer our research questions, we conducted interviews and focus groups and administered a survey with student veterans enrolled at postsecondary institutions in the United States. **The appendix provides a detailed description of survey, focus group, and interview sample and administration procedures, but major details include:**

- **Interviews and focus groups:** Most focus groups for this study were conducted in person at the Student Veterans of America (SVA) National Conference (NatCon) in January 2020. Additional interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually in November and December 2019 and February and March 2020. Participants in these groups were recruited mainly via Craigslist and with the support of SVA. Other sources included social media and the research team's network of contacts at postsecondary institutions across the country. In total, 26 student veterans participated in interviews and focus groups. Recruiting for interviews and focus groups focused on veterans who identified as Black, indigenous, or people of color, which accounted for approximately 27% of participants. Most respondents (84%) attended 4-year institutions.
- **Survey of student veterans in fall 2020:** Using contact lists provided by SVA, we surveyed current student veterans and those who had finished their undergraduate education during the previous 3 years. The survey launched in early September 2020 and closed in late November 2020. We received 486 responses for a response rate of 31%. About 35% of survey respondents were veterans of color, and survey respondents represented a range of military branches. Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) were from public institutions, and 86% were from 4-year institutions.

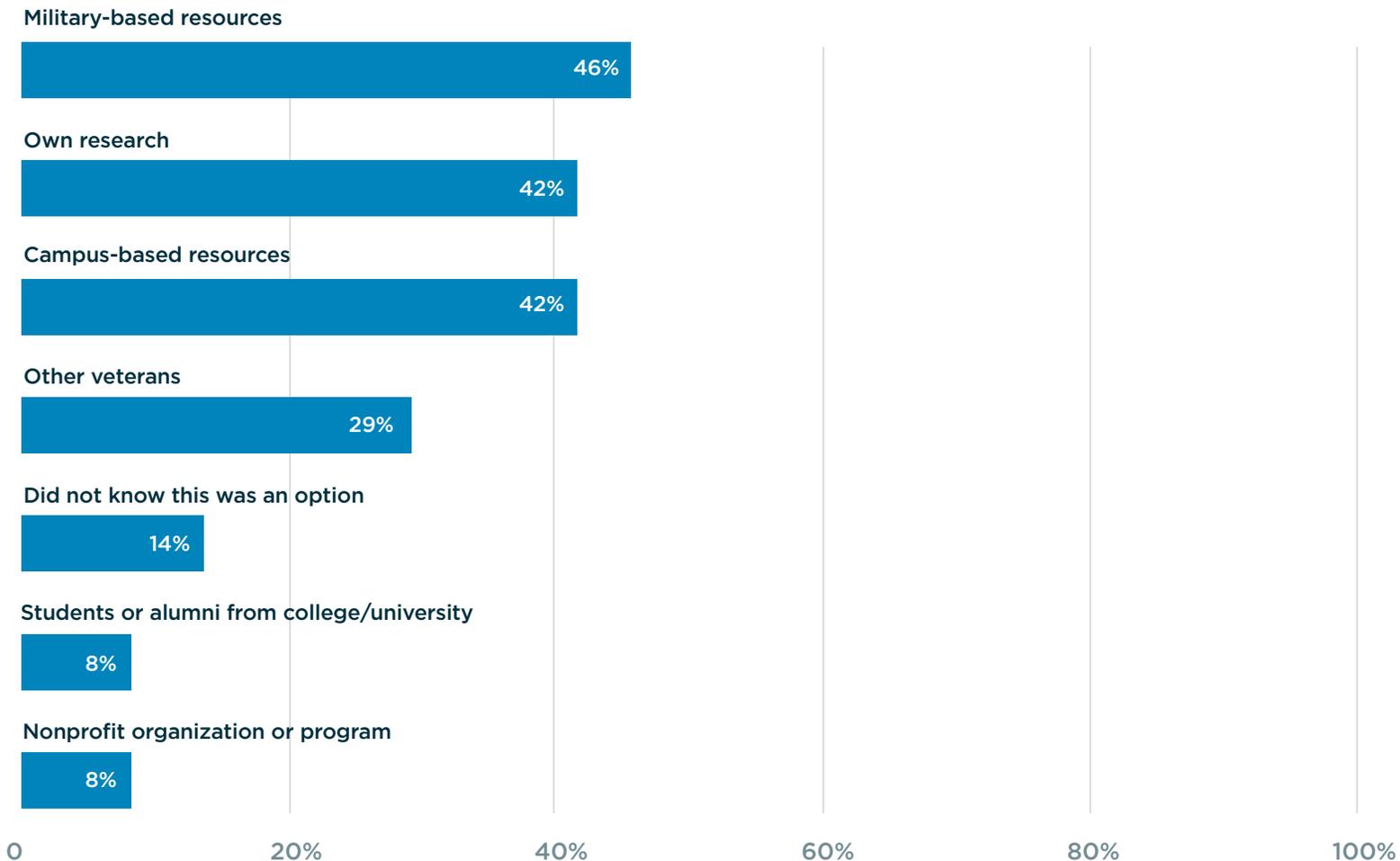
Where do student veterans seek out or receive information about institutions when choosing an institution?

The type, quality, and quantity of information individuals receive about their college options are important dimensions of the college choice process. Information from “multiple credible sources” supports informed decision making (Iloh, 2019). A key first step in understanding student veterans’ experiences (and perception of their experiences) with credit recognition is exploring how aware they were of opportunities for credit recognition when choosing an institution. To that end, we asked student veterans about the information they received about opportunities for credit recognition prior to enrolling in a postsecondary institution.

Almost 15% of student veterans did not know credit recognition was an option, and even those who were aware struggled to find helpful information.

Findings from the survey and focus groups suggest that not all student veterans were aware of opportunities for receiving credit for their military training or occupation, and even those who were aware of such opportunities faced challenges in getting accurate and helpful information. About 14% of survey respondents reported that they did not know receiving credit was an option. Among the 86% of student veterans who were aware that receiving credit for their military-based learning was an option, the most common sources of information were military- and campus-based resources and their own research (see Figure 1). A few student

FIGURE 1. SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT CREDIT RECOGNITION



veterans who reported having to do their own research to find information described finding support from nonprofit organizations, such as SVA, Service to School, and the Warrior-Scholar Project. Student veterans from the Air Force mentioned turning to the Air Force Virtual Education Center (AFVEC) as their source of information for obtaining information about credits, because the Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL) service outlines the steps that students should take with each institution to receive credit for prior learning.

Still, student veterans shared challenging experiences, especially with the information provided by the military prior to separation. For example, some student veterans mentioned trying to find information about credit recognition in online military portals but found these resources difficult to navigate because *“information is buried between six different layers, and no one really knows how to do it.”* Additionally, messaging from the military was often incorrect or discouraging, as one student veteran shared: *“They also told me that I would never find a job and that I should just stay. That’s what they actually told me.”*

What role do opportunities for recognition of military learning play in student veterans’ choice of institution?

To better understand the role that information about opportunities for recognition of military learning play in student veterans’ choices of postsecondary institutions, we asked survey and focus group respondents to reflect on their decision-making process and the most important factors for them.

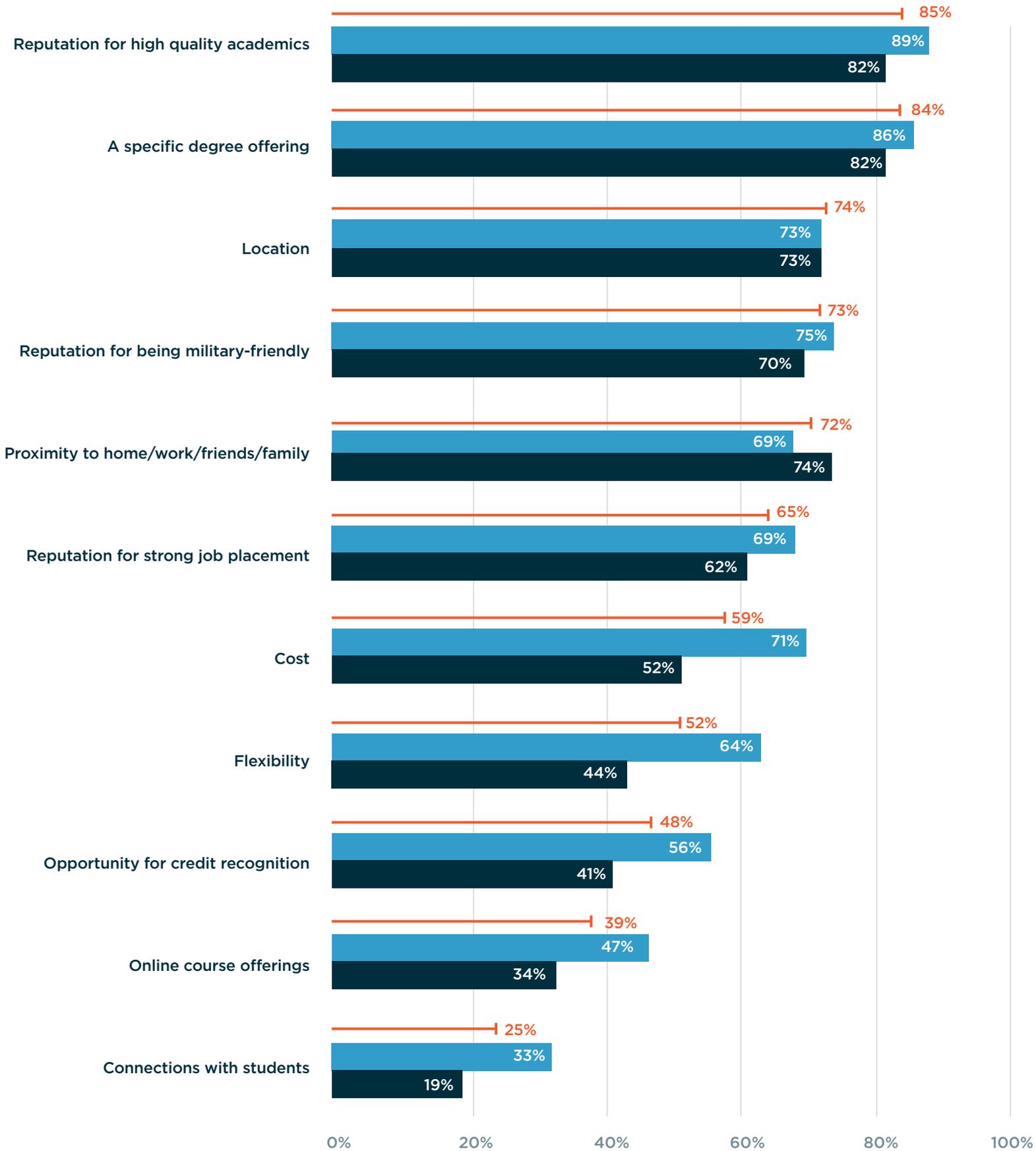
Student veterans were more likely to first consider factors other than credit recognition in their decision about which institution to attend.

It is useful to put the role that credit recognition played in student veterans’ decisions in the broader context of factors that student veterans considered. Based on the survey, the top two factors in student veterans’ decision-making process were “a reputation for high quality academics” and “specific degree or program offerings,” as 85% and 84% of respondents reported these as “somewhat important” or “very important,” respectively. Consistent with

research evidence on the factors that students consider when choosing an institution to attend (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000), external factors, such as proximity to friends and family, also played a key role in the initial decision making of student veterans. Specifically, 74% of survey respondents reported that location was “somewhat important” or “very important” in their decision about which institution to attend, and 72% of respondents reported that proximity to home, work, friends, or family was “somewhat important” or “very important” (see Figure 2). Many focus group participants also explained that they chose their institution because it was close to where they currently live or where they are originally from. One participant described deciding to attend an institution close to home: *“There’s an ease of that, connection to the family and whatnot. This is where I came after I left the military, so it was just convenient in that sense.”*

FIGURE 2. INSTITUTIONAL CHOICE FACTORS

ALL STUDENT VETERANS WHITE STUDENT VETERANS STUDENT VETERANS OF COLOR



Almost half of survey respondents reported that opportunities for military credit recognition were a somewhat or very important factor in their decision about which institution to attend.

Although other factors may be more important for student veterans, many also considered opportunities for recognition of military learning. Nearly half (48%) of survey respondents reported that opportunities for military credit recognition were a “somewhat important” or “very important” factor in their decision, and as Figure 2 highlights, student veterans of color were more likely to “agree” or “strongly agree” that credit recognition was a factor in

their choice. Findings from the focus groups echoed this. Some student veterans shared that opportunities for military credit recognition was an important part of their decision, while others clearly stated that it was not a factor in their decision-making process. Some student veterans decided to attend an institution even with the understanding that it would not credit previous military learning. Still, it is important to note that when survey respondents were asked whether they had any advice for other veterans considering attending postsecondary education, many recommended that veterans consider opportunities for credit recognition in their decision about which institution to attend.

The Value of “Military-Friendly” Institutions

Another common factor that student veterans considered when making decisions about where to attend was how “military-friendly” an institution was perceived to be, as 73% of survey respondents reported that this was a “somewhat important” or “very important” factor in their decision. However, student veterans who participated in focus groups described varying perceptions of what constituted military-friendly. Multiple student veterans indicated that the presence of veterans’ associations or veterans’ centers on campus factored into their perception of veteran-friendly institution and overall decision to attend an institution; more official ratings, like the [Military-Friendly badge](#), were less important. One veteran

explained that a veterans’ center employee helped them get their military benefits approved very quickly and connected them with a contact to process the related paperwork before they enrolled. This veteran reflected on this process: “*After I had that experience, I decided that I was going to [attend this institution].*” Other participants indicated that their institutions were veteran-friendly because of faculty and staff having personal military experience and therefore understanding and being responsive to their unique situations. One participant indicated that their perception of veteran friendliness came from the institution allowing veteran transfers during any semester.

“After I had that experience, I decided that I was going to [attend this institution].”

Do student veterans attempt to get credit for their military-based learning?

The survey included questions about whether student veterans attempted to get credit for their military training or their military occupation. Responses indicated that (a) a portion of student veterans do not try to get credit for their prior military learning and (b) the proportion of student veterans who try to gain credit recognition for military training differs distinctly from those who try to get credit for their military occupation.

About 1 of 5 student veterans reported not attempting to get any credit for their prior military training.

Roughly 19%, or about 1 of 5 student veterans who responded to the survey, reported that they did not attempt to get credit for their prior military training (see Figure 3). There were no significant differences among student veterans who reported not attempting credit for their prior military training by gender, race/ethnicity or military branch.

FIGURE 3. ATTEMPTS TO GET CREDIT FOR PRIOR MILITARY TRAINING AND OCCUPATION

MILITARY TRAINING



MILITARY OCCUPATION

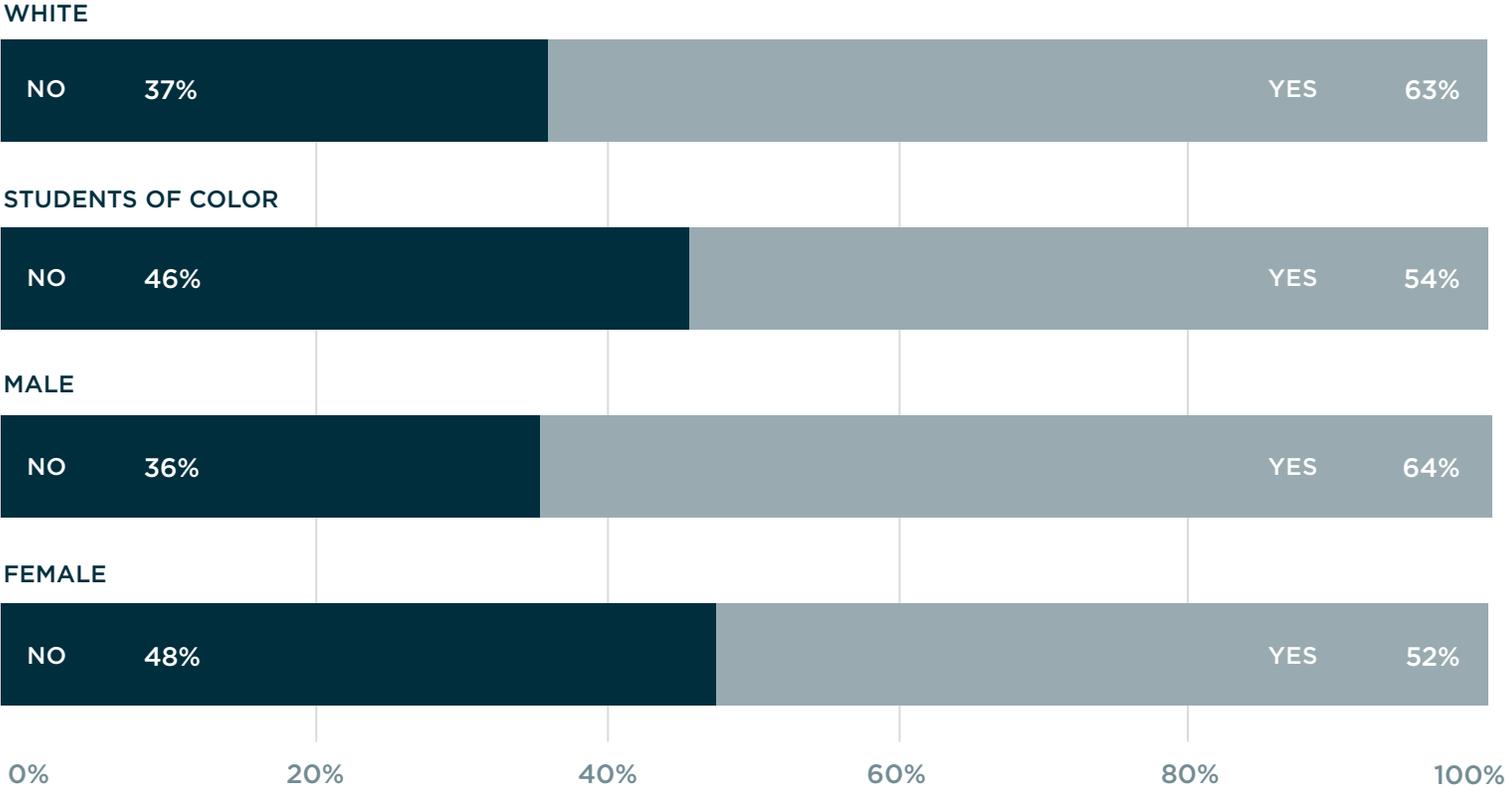


Almost 40% of student veterans did not attempt to get credit for their military occupation, and there were significant differences by gender and race/ethnicity.

The percentage of student veterans who did not attempt to get credit for their prior military occupation (39%) was about double that of student veterans who did not attempt to get credit for their prior military training (19%) (see Figure 3). In addition, we found statistically

significant differences by gender and race/ethnicity among those who attempted to gain credit for their prior military occupation (see Figure 4). Male students were more likely than female students (64% and 52%, respectively) to try to get credit for their prior military occupation. White student veterans were also more likely than students of color (63% and 54%, respectively) to try to get credit for their prior military occupation than were student veterans of color.

FIGURE 4. ATTEMPTS TO GET CREDIT FOR PRIOR MILITARY OCCUPATION, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND GENDER



What are student veterans' experiences with the process of gaining recognition of their military-based learning?

To better understand student veterans' experiences with getting credit for their military-based learning, we asked survey and focus group participants questions about the credit recognition process and the supports and challenges they faced along the way. These included both on- and off-campus-based supports and resources that helped to facilitate the process for credit recognition.

Experiences with the process of obtaining credit for military learning varied at the individual and institution levels, from simple and quick to time-consuming and challenging.

Among student veterans who attempted to get credit for either their prior military training or occupation, focus group and survey respondents had a vast range of experiences. Student veterans who described their credit recognition experiences as “simple,” “quick,” and “automatic” often credited their institutions' proactive approaches. These institutions typically began the credit recognition process during the application process. For example, one student veteran described how the credit recognition process was initiated when they selected their veteran status while completing the online application:

I again, feel like I got so lucky, because my school is so veteran-friendly. When I applied on the online application, if you select that you're a veteran, they then ask you for your DD-214, your certificate of eligibility, your JST [joint services transcript], all that stuff. . . . And so I just uploaded all of that stuff to the application, and then the admissions person in my school's office would go through the transcript, the JST, or any other transcripts that I had submitted from other schools, and then just compare that with their course catalog to decide which courses would count and stuff like that. And then they just inputted it, and then I could see what transfer classes they gave me through my student portal after that.

However, other student veterans described their experiences with their institution's credit recognition process as unclear, time-consuming, and burdensome. These student veterans described a process that often required navigating through multiple departments or involved challenges with submitting transcripts or requirements for additional paperwork, such as syllabuses. One student veteran described this process:

“I had to reorder transcripts several times and after almost 2 months, a copy was finally processed by the school. However, after speaking with admissions and the certifying official at the school who ‘vets’ the credits, none were accepted for my chosen degree anyways.”

Many students with negative experiences with their institution's credit recognition process also reported being frustrated at the length of the process, describing it as a “waiting game.” One student veteran stated that it “took years to convince [my institution] to give me credit.”

Academic advisors' familiarity with the military is key: They could either facilitate the credit recognition process or hinder it.

Student veterans' experiences with getting credit often depended on how informed their advisor was on translating prior military learning and training to applicable courses. Student veterans noted that informed and knowledgeable advisors were key sources of information or even advocates for student veterans. Other student veterans described advisors willing to advocate for them to receive credit for their military training. As one said, advisors *"have power over counting classes [in] different ways."*

However, some student veterans described frustrating experiences with advisors who were unfamiliar with military credit. These advisors could be uninformed and sometimes unhelpful. For example, one student veteran stated that they couldn't find anyone at their university who knew how to translate their prior military learning to credits, and that *"a lot of my questions throughout the university were met with, 'I don't know. Let me see if this person knows,' and then that person wouldn't know and the next person wouldn't know."* One student veteran noted an advisor's uncertainty about options: *"The academic advisor, they said that they might have a program or something where they will give you credit hours towards your degree but was unsure."* Another student veteran described the process to obtain credit being stalled because of their advisor's lack of knowledge:

I literally emailed all the exact course descriptions to my advisor, and she just literally emailed me back the next day and said, "No." It wasn't even a discussion . . . I emailed literally the head of my department, and he apparently emailed her and was like, "You deal with it," but she didn't know how, so she just told me, "No."

"[My advisor] knows the ins and outs of the veteran paperwork and what we need to go through. She's really helpful. She knows a lot about the military."

Student veterans who had negative experiences with credit recognition often described having to navigate multiple departments and staff who had little knowledge of the credit recognition process. One student veteran described this experience on the survey, *"I spoke to the VA [Veterans Affairs] lead, and . . . he didn't know how to help me. I spoke to counselors and admissions officers, and they couldn't point to anyone that could tell me which office would be receiving my transcripts."*

It is important to note, however, that advisors are part of an institution and can work only within the constraints of existing institutional policies and support. Although some advisors may have individual knowledge and information, most rely on the information, supports, and training provided by their institution, and their knowledge of the credit recognition process for student veterans is likely influenced by the policies and supports their institution has in place for advisors to support student veterans.

On-campus veterans centers serve as key resources for student veterans through the credit recognition process for prior learning.

Most student veterans went to the on-campus veterans center or veterans services department to find information about credit recognition. One student noted that the on-campus veterans services office was a key source of information because *"a lot of these student offices, even though they deal with veterans, aren't quite aware of how things work, so you need that liaison to translate it for them."* According to another student veteran, staff at the veterans service office were *"able to help navigate through the system."* And one student veteran stated that the consulting advisor from their campus VA office helped them ask the right questions about how to obtain credit while on the phone with the VA.

How Does the Joint Services Transcript Facilitate Credit Recognition?

One consistent part of the process mentioned by student veterans was their use of the Joint Services Transcript (JST) or the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) transcript for documentation of their prior military learning. Almost all students who obtained credit mentioned relying on the JST or CCAF. As one student described, “*When I spoke to the academic advisor, they told me to get my transcripts from the military, which shows which courses you have taken. It could be anything from first aid or to a mechanics class or programming flying drones.*” However, students described inconsistencies in the process of translating JST credits across institutions, as some student veterans stated their institution required stringent documentation, such as course materials.

Many student veterans found that, to obtain credit, aligning the JST with specific courses at their institution was challenging. **Student veterans described key challenge areas in detail as follows.**

- Issues with alignment to the correct level of courses. Some students stated that they struggled to obtain credit because course levels documented on the JST were incorrect or did not align with their perceived level of the course. For example, one student stated that they couldn’t receive credit for an upper-level course because the JST listed their military training as an introductory course:

The way the credits are written on the transcript is that it’s like 100 level courses, even though they’re not 100 level courses. I literally . . . pulled out my old tech school book of what we learned, and gave it to the advisor. They looked it over and they’re like, ‘They’re labeled as 100 level courses, so we can’t give you any credit for any of this.’ I was a substance abuse counselor. I was working and doing family and marriage counseling and all this stuff, upper level courses for master’s degree. They would not give me any credit for anything, because it wasn’t from a regular college. It wasn’t on a regular transcript.

- The JST recommends credits but not specific courses. Student veterans described struggling to translate credit recommendations from the JST to courses at their institution because the JST “*recommends credit hours, but it does not recommend courses,*” leaving student veterans to figure out how to match courses to those credits: “*It says three credit hours. Three credit hours of what?*”
- Translating JST credits to courses is cumbersome and time consuming. Student veterans stated that the process of translating JST credit recommendations to specific courses at their institution was “*a lot of work*” to find their previous military training materials. Some stated that the process was so cumbersome that it prevented them from moving forward: “*So, I figured, I did a cost-benefit analysis, and I figured it would put way too much effort into it for what for me was too little of an outcome, so I just put it off.*”

* Air Force service members utilized the CCAF transcript as part of the Air Force’s community college.

What, if any, credit do student veterans receive for their military training? Does the amount of credit awarded meet expectations?

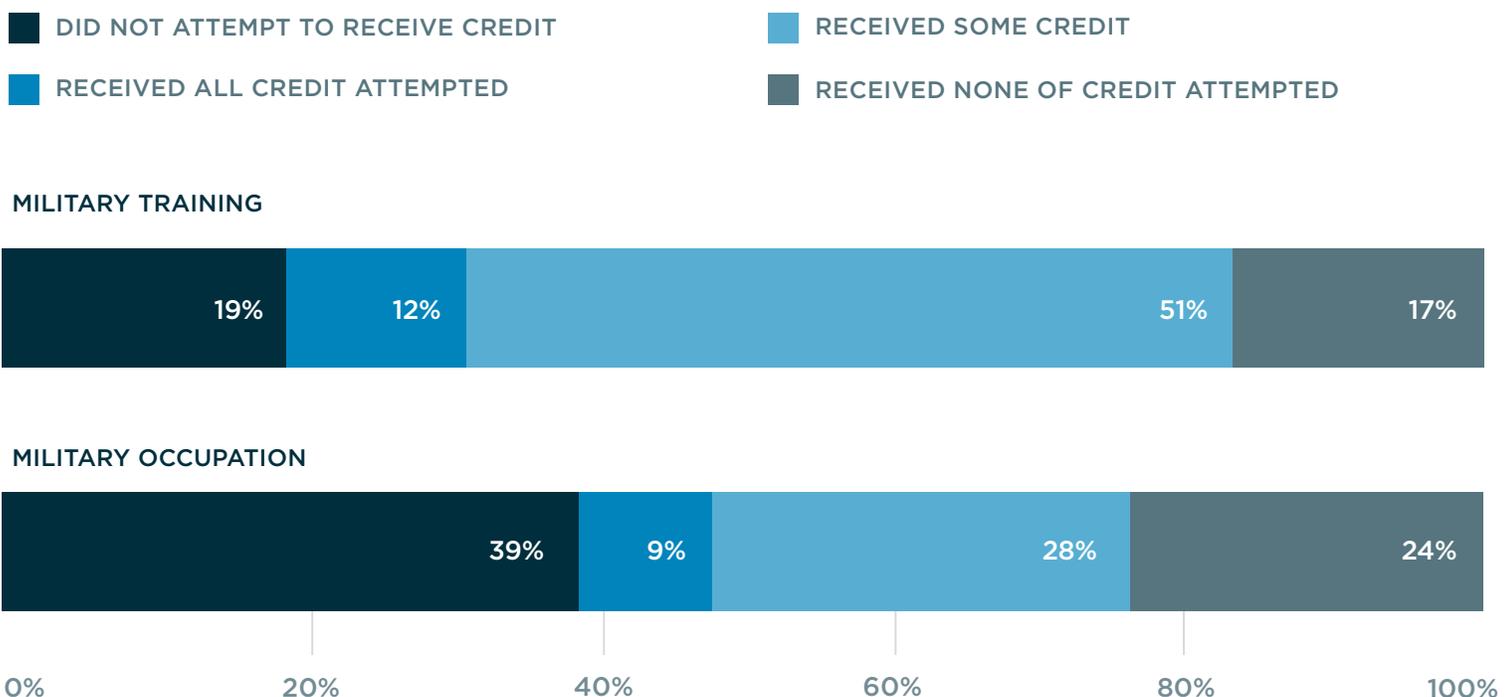
To further understand student veterans' experiences receiving credit for their military learning, we asked student veterans, who reported that they attempted to get credit for their military training or occupation to share the amount and type of credit they received. We also asked them to reflect on the process and whether their expectations were met.

The amount of credit received ranged widely among student veterans who attempted to obtain credit for their military training and/or their military occupation.

Figure 5 breaks down student veterans' attempts to obtain credit for their military training and occupation. Although 19% of student veterans who responded to the survey did not attempt to obtain credit for their military training, out of the 81% of student veterans who attempted to obtain credit for military learning, 17% received no credit, 51% received some credits, and 12% received all the credits they attempted to obtain.

Fewer student veterans attempted to obtain credit for military occupation; 39% did not attempt to get credit for their occupation. Out of the 61% of student veterans who attempted to obtain credit for their military occupation, 24% received no credit, 28% received some credits, and 9% received all the credits they attempted to obtain. Additionally, the potential importance of considering opportunities for credit recognition in choosing an institution is underscored by survey respondents' experiences with getting credit recognized. Those who reported that opportunities for getting credit for their military learning was "somewhat important" or "very important" in their choice of institution received more of the credits they attempted to get, compared with those who reported that these opportunities were not important in their choice of institution. Focus group participants had the same range of experiences, with some student veterans stating they did not receive any credit for their military training while others stated they did receive credit.

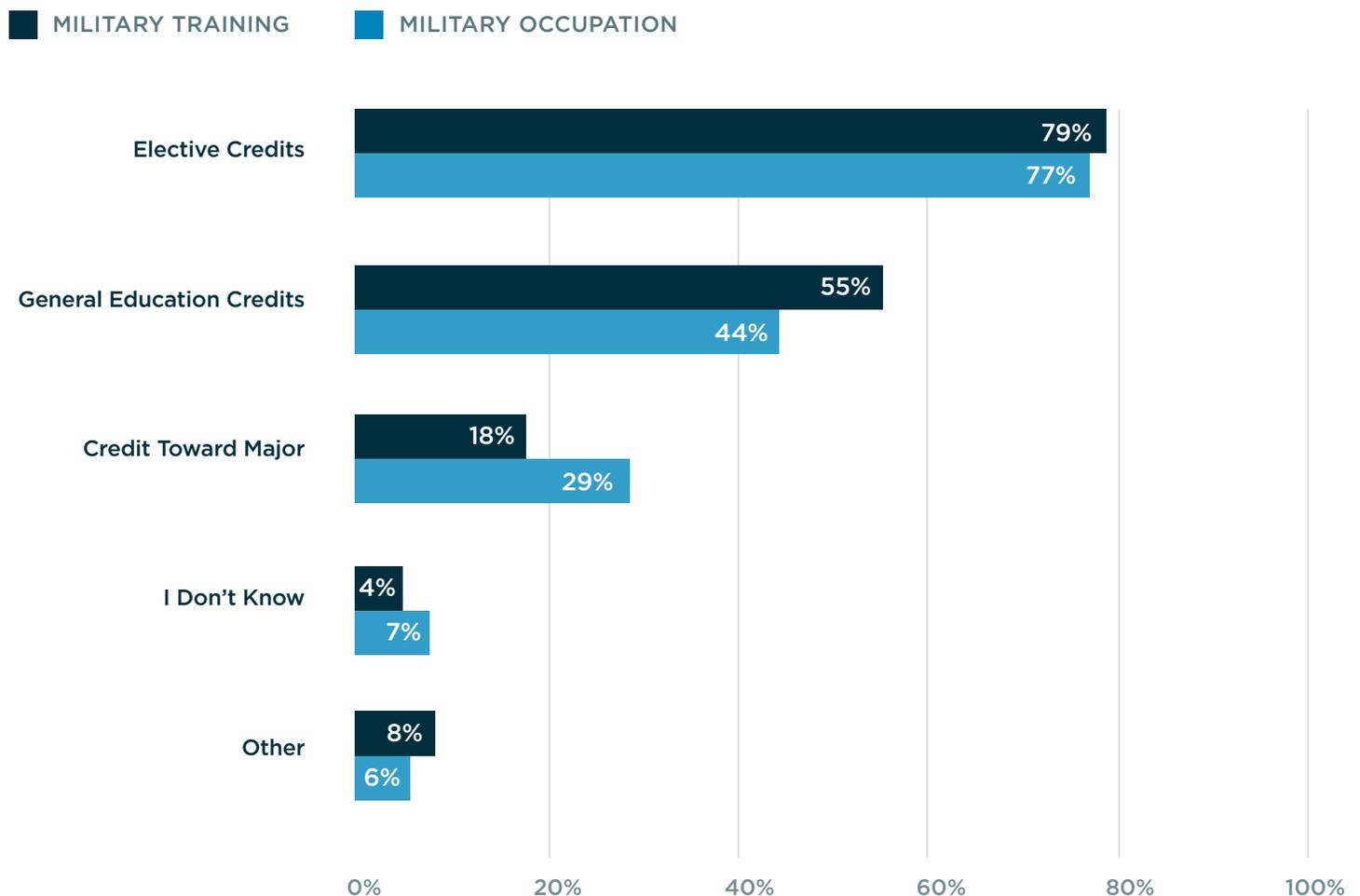
FIGURE 5. AMOUNT OF CREDIT RECEIVED FOR MILITARY TRAINING AND OCCUPATION



The survey also asked student veterans who received credit for their military learning about the type of credit they received (see Figure 6). Student veterans most often reported receiving elective credits. About 79% of those who received credit for their military training indicated as such, as did 77% of those who received credit for their military occupation. Student veterans also reported receiving general education credits, which was the case for 55% of those who received credit for their military training and for 44% of those who received credit for their military occupation. Fewer student veterans reported receiving credit toward their major, but those with credit for their military occupation appeared

slightly more likely to receive such credit. Just 18% of student veterans who received credit for their military training received credit toward their major compared with 29% of those who received credit for their military occupation. In focus groups and open-ended survey responses, some student veterans also reported receiving credits for only electives. There were no significant differences by institution type. Specifically, many students reported that they received credit or a waiver for only physical education. One focus group respondent explained, “I took 80 courses [military training]. Not one transferred. Not one class. The only thing that transferred was a gym class because you were in the military.”

FIGURE 6. TYPES OF CREDIT RECEIVED FOR MILITARY LEARNING AND OCCUPATION

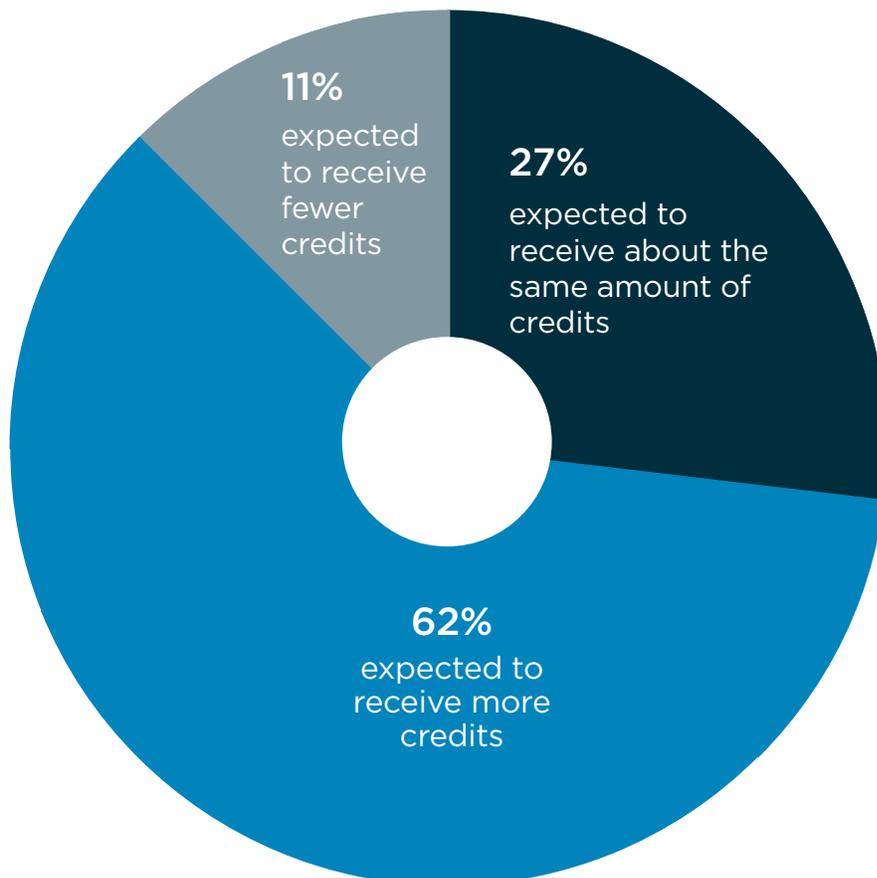


Among student veterans who expected to receive credit for their prior military learning, most indicated the credit they received did not meet expectations.

Many student veterans described a misalignment between their expectations and the actual credit they received for their prior military learning. About 60% of survey respondents reported having expectations about the credit they would receive for their military learning. Of those, 62% expected to receive more credits than they received, 27% expected to receive the same amount of credits they received, and 11% expected to receive fewer credits than they received (see Figure 7).

In focus groups, some student veterans reported that they were told by their military branch they would receive credit, but after they enrolled, their institution did not give them credit for most of their prior military learning. In addition, some student veterans noticed differences in the process for receiving credit for prior military learning across institutions. This discrepancy often added to their frustrations. For example, one student veteran who received no credit for their military learning stated, *“I have friends who went to a different university, and they are in the exact same point in their career as me. Exact same training, exact same time in, exact same experience, and they’d get, like, 19 credits. It’s very inconsistent.”*

FIGURE 7. EXPECTATIONS FOR RECEIVING CREDIT FOR MILITARY LEARNING

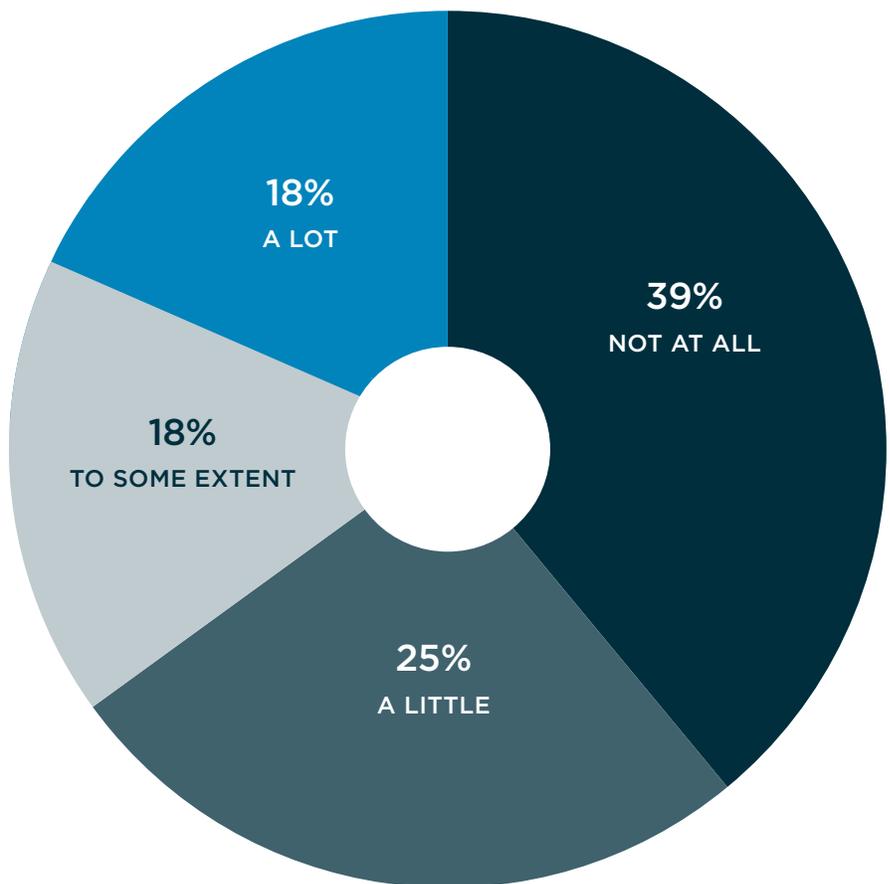


Over two-fifths of survey respondents (40%) did not expect to receive any credit.

It is important to underscore that many student veterans (40% of survey respondents) stated that they did not expect to receive credits for their military learning before they enrolled. One reason survey and focus group respondents gave for not expecting to receive credit was that their military experience and their chosen field of study did not align. Of all survey respondents, 39% said their education goals were “not at all” related to their military experience, and 25% said their educational goals were “a little” related to their military experience (see Figure 8).

There was a statistically significant relationship between expectations about credit and the extent to which student veterans’ occupation were related to their field of study. For student veterans whose fields were “not at all” related to their military occupation, 46% had no expectations about receiving credits; for those whose fields of study were related to their military occupation at least to some extent, just 36% had no expectations about receiving credits. These survey findings are consistent with findings from focus groups. For example, one student explained, “*Mechanic is a totally different job than engineer. It wouldn’t have been conducive to my education to skip out on classes that I need to know about.*”

FIGURE 8. EXTENT TO WHICH FIELD OF STUDY WAS RELATED TO MILITARY EXPERIENCE



To what extent does recognition of military learning affect student veterans' experiences in postsecondary education, both academically and nonacademically?

Finally, we explored whether student veterans' experiences with getting their military learning recognized for credit had an impact on their postsecondary experiences, both academically and nonacademically. We asked survey and focus group participants to share their experiences as they related to academics (e.g., time to degree or cost) and to sense of belonging on campus.

About 60% of student veterans reported credit recognition had an impact on their academic experience.

In the survey, 62% of student veterans reported that their experiences with credit recognition for their military learning had an impact on their academic experience while 38% reported no such impact. Focusing on student veterans who attempted to get credit (either for military learning or military occupation), 72% stated that credit recognition impacted their academic experiences and 28% reported no such impact

(see Figure 9). In focus groups, some student veterans described why recognition of their military learning did not impact their academics. These student veterans stated that the courses in their majors were courses they would have had to take anyway. For example, in one veteran's case, the courses were *"very specific to what I have to take and they're all engineering related."* Others said that having only one course waived did not make much of a difference in the long term: *"I saw that physical education [credit I received]; I just chuckled and then just went on with my day."* Male student veterans were significantly more likely than female student veterans to report an impact on their academic experience from obtaining credits in recognition for their military learning. One reason for this is that compared with male student veterans, female student veterans had lower expectations for obtaining credits and were less likely to attempt to get credits for their military learning.

FIGURE 9. IMPACT OF CREDIT RECOGNITION ON ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

OVERALL



FEMALE



MALE



ATTEMPTED TO GET CREDIT



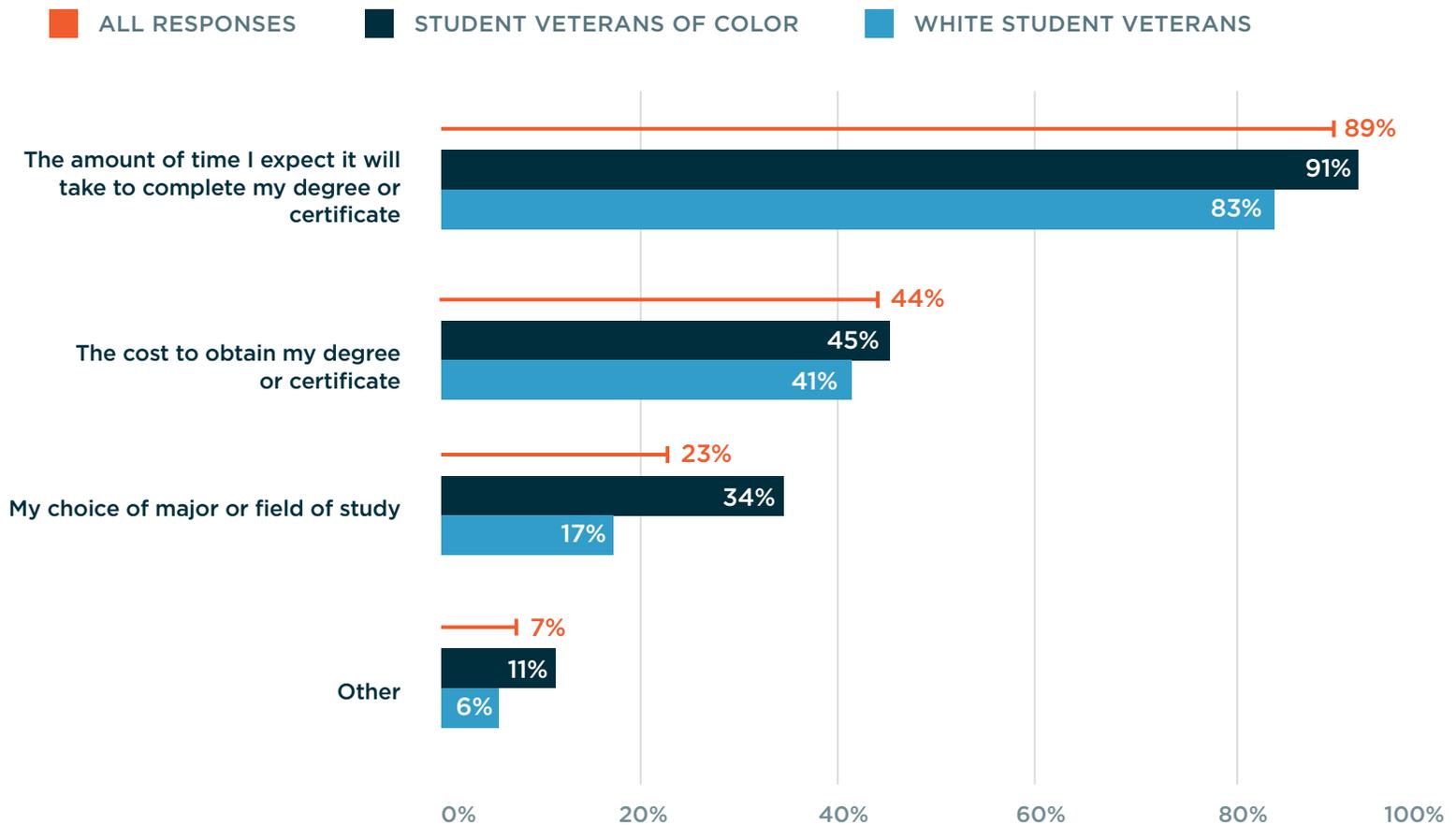
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

The amount of time expected to degree completion was the most frequently reported impact of credit recognition.

Student veterans described their experiences with credit recognition as having widely different levels of impact on their academics. Levels of impact ranged from no impact, to minimal impact on course load, to adding significant time toward degree completion (see Figure 10). Among survey respondents who reported an impact on their educational experiences from credit recognition, time to degree completion was the most frequently reported impact. About

89% reported that credit recognition impacted the amount of time they expected it would take to complete their degree, followed by cost to obtain their degree or certificate (44%) and choice of major or field of study (23%). Student veterans of color were more likely than White students to report that credit recognition impacted their academic experiences. In particular, students of color were significantly more likely than White students to report that credit recognition impacted them in terms of time to degree completion (91% vs. 83%) and choice of major (34% vs. 17%).

FIGURE 10. TYPES OF IMPACT OF CREDIT RECOGNITION ON ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES



In focus groups, time spent having to take classes in which students already had content knowledge was the most frequently mentioned impact on academics. Some student veterans stated that not having prior military learning recognized meant taking entry-level classes that were redundant with their military learning. One student veteran mentioned having to take a semester's worth of classes that felt *"like repetitious information."* Other student veterans described not getting much out of having to take courses in which they already had content knowledge from their military training or experiences: *"I mean, it was a good refresher, but I was just kind of there for the ride because I'd already gone over it and learned it before."* However, a few student veterans felt they benefitted academically from having to take courses in which the content was already familiar. One stated that *"having that extra bit of knowledge gives me a little comfort in the class . . . and then you actually wind up learning more than what you knew."*

Some student veterans stated that not having their prior military learning recognized meant having to take more courses than they felt were needed. After having already taken a full course load of more than 18 credit hours in a semester, one student veteran looked into taking summer school classes *"just to try to knock out these gen eds [general education classes] that weren't covered."* Another student echoed the same sentiment about the perception of having to take extra courses because their military learning was not recognized: *"I probably wouldn't have had to take at least half of those if I had gotten my credits applied."* Some student veterans felt that they did not receive enough credit, which

extended their time to degree completion. As one student relayed, *"[My military learning] should've cut 3 years off, and I should only have a year left, but they won't give me credit for anything I've done."* However, student veterans who received credit for their military learning reported that such credit recognition positively influenced their academic experience by significantly reducing their time to degree completion.

"Basically, that cut off a whole year of time for my 124 credits to graduate."

— A STUDENT WHO USED 30 COLLEGE CREDITS FROM THE JST

Credit recognition also impacted student veterans' cost to obtain a degree or certificate. A few survey respondents described the negative financial impacts of earning too many credits for their military training, which in some cases may be an unintended negative consequence of policies designed to support students by awarding credit. For example, being awarded too many elective credits could impact the grants for which students are eligible, and some schools imposed fees or charges for credits earned from military training. As one student described, *"They would charge me half of the amount for credits given to me, though they 'counted' the credits for their fee."* A few student veterans mentioned another potential negative consequence to receiving too many credits for elective classes: If institutions counted these elective credits toward the students' GI Bill benefits, it could limit the amount of time or credits remaining for students to take the classes they actually needed to earn a credential.

Student veterans had mixed opinions about whether their experiences with recognition of military learning was related to their perceptions of the institution overall, but there may be more indirect connections between credit recognition and sense of belonging.

Student veterans who reported that the institution met their expectations for credit recognition, reported more positive experiences on campus. Nearly half of the survey respondents (47%) reported that their experiences with getting their military learning recognized for credit affected whether they would recommend the college to other veterans or servicemembers (see Figure 11). More than two-fifths of survey respondents indicated that credit recognition made them feel like their institution had specific resources for their needs (44%); felt that credit recognition affected their perception of the campus as a safe and welcoming place (42%); connected credit recognition with feeling that their advisors, faculty, or staff understood their needs (41%); and reported that their experiences with credit recognition made them feel that the institution respected their identities (41%). We found some statistically significant differences between student veterans who reported their expectations for credit recognition were met and those who reported that they did not have any expectations or that their expectations were not met.

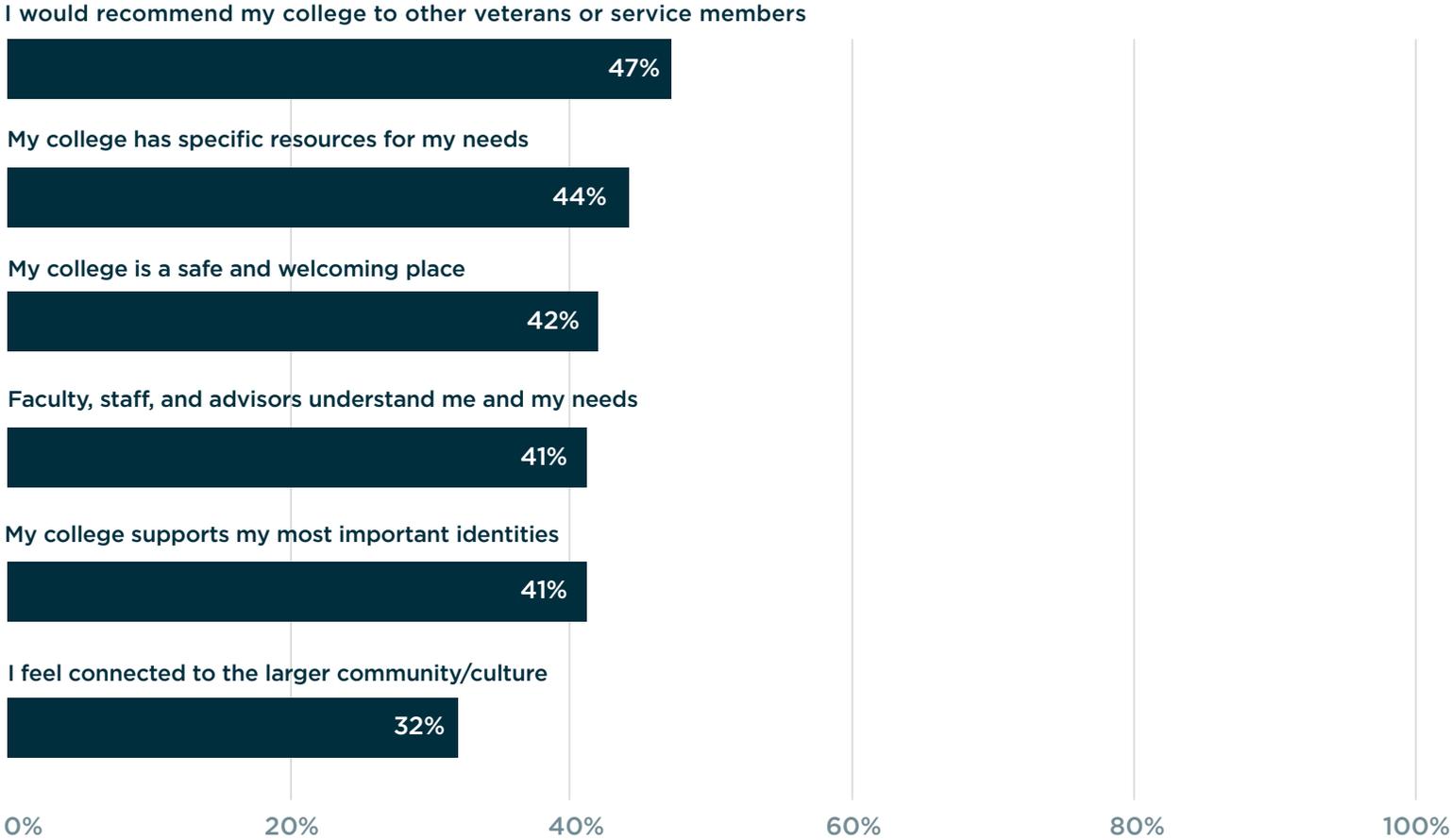
Most student veterans (68%) did not make strong connections between their experiences with credit recognition and their connections with the larger campus community. In our focus groups, however, most student veterans reported that credit recognition did not have much of an impact on their on-campus experiences, including their sense of belonging. These students tended to attribute the lack of impact to the fact that they did not have many expectations going into the credit recognition process because they didn't know any better or that they just did not think about it as much of a factor. As one student veteran described, *"I stopped thinking about it. It's not something that sticks with you, or I was disappointed. I didn't know any better. So, once they said three credits, boom, I just never thought about it again."*

However, a few student veterans stated that not having their prior military learning recognized made them feel that their institutions did not care about veterans. One student stated, *"I feel like it just makes me feel like they don't really care as much about their veterans transferring in."* Another student veteran said that although not having their prior military learning recognized did not have much of an impact on them academically, it made the transition from the military to a postsecondary educational setting even more challenging:

"I think, mostly, just psychologically, I was at one point ready to throw in the towel because I do feel like there was a lot of things that could have been recognized, and so I didn't have to do redundant things with 18-year-olds that were going through it for the first time. It was kind of like, that life experience, and then sitting through life how-to sessions and classes. It was like, really? Yeah, I would say it impacted in the sense that mentally, the transition was a bit jarring."

These findings suggest that although student veterans do not perceive a direct connection between their experiences with recognition of prior military learning and their sense of belonging on campus overall (and participants may not have given much thought to this largely academic construct), their experiences may affect some aspects of their sense of belonging.

FIGURE 11. EXTENT TO WHICH EXPERIENCES WITH GETTING CREDIT AFFECTED PERCEPTIONS OF THE INSTITUTION



Supporting Recognition of Military Learning: Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Key findings from this study suggest that, although some postsecondary institutions have support processes or resources available to military students in receiving recognition of their military learning, there is still room for improvement in meeting military students' needs. In particular, institutions and state higher education agencies could benefit from better mapping and understanding military students' paths and goals, including the inconsistencies they experience when trying to gain recognition of their credits and the way that affects their impressions and experiences of the institution. To that end and to inform institutions in taking steps to address challenges facing student veterans, we offer several recommendations for institutions:

Student veterans' paths and goals vary, and this affects their experience - institutions and those supporting student veterans should not assume a one-size-fits-all path.

Key findings from this study highlight a range of experiences that student veterans have—in terms of how they select an institution, what their goals are, the process they go through to obtain credits for their military experience, and the impact of that experience on their academics and sense of belonging. In particular, we observed differences in experiences between student veterans of color and white student veterans. For example, opportunities for recognition of military learning were more important for students of color than for white students. Student veterans of color were also less likely than white students to attempt to get credit for their military occupation, which may be related to research that shows women and people of color broadly often underestimate their qualifications. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, along with institutional stakeholders at all levels, should consider these important differences between student veterans and tailor information and supports so student veterans can access information and resources that are most relevant to their experiences and goals.

Student veterans value institutions that demonstrate familiarity with the military. Institutions should educate nonveteran students, faculty, and staff about inclusive practices related to student veterans and support on-campus student veterans organizations.

Findings from our study show that staff and faculty who are well-informed about student veterans can be key facilitators to ensure student veterans' success. Most student veterans who participated in this study described positive experiences with on-campus staff who were familiar with the military and the process of recognizing military learning, often in contrast with other staff who lacked that familiarity. Veterans' centers or even individual staff members who have experience working with student veterans are key to positive experiences—both with recognition of learning and sense of belonging. It is important to note, however, that advisors are part of an institution and can work only within the constraints of existing institutional policies and support. Institutional leaders should explore ways to build in specific supports for student veterans, both educating staff and faculty about the experiences of student veterans and ensuring that staff and faculty have access to and understand existing institutional policies and practices related to recognition of military learning. For example, they could support their advising units or admissions teams in partnering with veterans' organizations to provide educational opportunities that would increase understanding of student veterans' experiences. Institutional stakeholders who work with student veterans can also work to “make the case” to others on campus about how credit recognition affects student veterans' experiences and perceptions of institutions, including whether student veterans would recommend the institution to others.

Student veterans are adult learners who bring intersecting identities and experiences to the table. Institutions should seek to understand and support adult student veterans in leveraging their strengths.

Student veterans who participated in this study were, overall, older than traditional students and had very different life experiences. Many student veterans were caretakers, had families, and were employed while taking classes. Institutions can support student veterans by addressing their needs for flexibility and adjusting course requirements to account for prior military learning. Additionally, many student veterans relied on their own research to inform decisions about where to enroll and to understand credit recognition options at their institutions. They also described successfully advocating for themselves and often felt a sense of pride in their experience overcoming challenges and resulting self-efficacy. Student veterans should not be left to do all the work of translating their military experiences to institutions. Instead, institutions should recognize that supports they need are likely differ from those needed by traditional students. Institutional leaders can prioritize educating faculty, staff, and advisors about the unique experiences of student veterans as adult students and are equipped with the tools to empower student veterans to make informed decisions about their education. Institutional leaders also should work to address student veterans' needs for greater flexibility as adult students. For example, program leaders can revisit general education course requirements to account for prior learning or extend academic counseling hours to support those with professional or family responsibilities.

Looking Ahead

Our findings also suggest key areas for future research and understanding of student veterans' experiences as they pursue postsecondary education. The following include considerations for future research:

- **Including the perspectives of student veterans who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary institutions and have not completed a degree and those who are enrolled in 2-year postsecondary institutions:** In this study, participants were currently enrolled or had recently completed a credential, and the majority of participants were enrolled at 4-year institutions. Thus, important perspectives not captured include student veterans who (a) enrolled in a postsecondary institution but either paused their learning or left the institution without intending to return prior to completing a degree and (b) are pursuing credentials at 2-year institutions without plans to transfer to a 4-year institution. To understand how we might improve student veterans' experiences with credit recognition and postsecondary education in general and foster degree completion, future research should consider how best to include these perspectives.
- **Exploring potential implications of COVID-19:** As a result of the pandemic, postsecondary institutions experienced a widespread move to online and hybrid teaching and learning approaches—a trend that is likely to continue. Findings indicate that some student veterans have found online learning to be a barrier to making connections on campus, although others have described online programs that have facilitated connections with peers. Future research should explore student veterans' experiences and postsecondary completion in different online and hybrid learning programs and identify promising practices that might be scaled.

Appendix

Interviews and Focus Groups Sample and Administration

Researchers developed a focus group protocol based on the research literature on student veterans' experiences in postsecondary institutions and with recognition of their military-based learning. Focus groups were conducted at Student Veterans of America (SVA) National Conference (NatCon) in January 2020, and additional focus groups were conducted virtually in February and March 2020. Participants in these groups were recruited mainly via Craigslist and with the support of SVA. Other sources included social media and the research team's network of contacts at postsecondary institutions across the country. All focus groups were conducted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. On average, focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. We audio recorded all focus groups and transcribed them verbatim. Researchers read each transcript multiple times and coded responses into appropriate question banks using NVivo. After interviews were organized by protocol topic area, researchers further coded interviews and extracted themes that emerged from the data.

A total of 26 student veterans participated in the focus groups and/or interviews. Table A.1 presents sample information of the focus group, alongside data on the sample of military undergraduates from the U.S. Department of Education's nationally representative 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16), for comparison.

Survey Sample and Administration

Researchers developed a survey protocol mirroring the focus group and interview protocol in terms of structure and used feedback from the focus groups and interviews to confirm qualitative findings and identify items to further explore during survey analysis. The survey was sent to a panel of 1,517 self-selected current student veterans and alumni provided by SVA. In an effort to oversample minorities in our survey administration, the team reached out to representatives of 39 minority-serving institutions to distribute the survey among their student veterans and alumni.

The survey launched in early September 2020 and closed in late November 2020. The survey was sent to participants via email with the help of SVA and on-campus student veteran representatives. To encourage a high response rate, respondents who completed the survey were guaranteed an initial small incentive, as well as a chance to enter a drawing for bigger incentives.

A total of 486 individuals completed the survey, which represents a response rate of 31.2%. Table A.2 presents the demographic information of survey participants, alongside statistics on the sample of undergraduate military students from NPSAS:16, for comparison. Information was also collected on branch and rank. The most common branches were the Army (37%) and Navy (22%), and most participants (52%) had achieved a rank between E5-7.

TABLE A1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

A total of 26 veterans participated in the focus groups and/or interviews. Information for the focus group sample is presented alongside statistics from the sample of undergraduate student veterans from NPSAS:16, for comparison.

	NPSAS:16 Undergraduate Student Veterans (%)	Focus Group Participants (%)
CURRENT OR MOST RECENT TYPE OF INSTITUTION*		
2-year public institution	38%	4%
4-year public institution	40%	84%
Graduate or professional school	N/A	8%
Unknown	N/A	4%
RACE/ETHNICITY		
White	59%	73%
Black or African American	18%	8%
Hispanic or Latino	15%	15%
Asian	2%	4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	0%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%
More than one race	4%	0%
GENDER		
Male	75%	77%
Female	25%	19%
Transgender	Not counted	4%
AGE (IN YEARS)		
18-24	15%	31%
25-34	46%	58%
35-44	21%	8%
45 and older	18%	0%
Not reported	0%	3%

* Several participants currently attending 4-year institutions had also previously attended 2-year institutions. Although the focus of the conversations was participants' current or most recent institutions, participants also often spoke about previous experiences at 2-year institutions. Similarly, those that had recently graduated from undergraduate programs or were enrolled in a graduate program spoke about their undergraduate experiences only.

TABLE A2. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

	NPSAS:16 Undergraduate Student Veterans (%)	Survey Participants (%)
CURRENT OR MOST RECENT TYPE OF INSTITUTION*		
2-year public institution	38%	14%
4-year public institution	40%	86%
Graduate or professional school	N/A	N/A
Unknown	N/A	N/A
RACE/ETHNICITY		
White	59%	65%
Black or African American	18%	7%
Hispanic or Latino	15%	6%
Asian	2%	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%
More than one race	4%	11%
GENDER		
Male	75%	68%
Female	25%	29%
Other or not reported	Not counted	3%
AGE (IN YEARS)		
18-24	15%	3%
25-34	46%	33%
35-44	21%	29%
45 and older	18%	35%

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