

From Combat to Classroom: An Analysis of Perceptions, Challenges and Support Practices for the Undergraduate Online Military Student Population

Anant Deshpande
SUNY Empire State College

Military students enrolled in college face unique challenges as compared to traditional students. Given the nature of their military service, online education is a popular mode of study for such students. Despite the popularity of online education, there are unique set of challenges associated with it. The goal of the research was to investigate the overall perceptions of military students about online learning, the various types of challenges faced by the military students and how they overcome them and their perceptions of the practices used by faculty and staff to support their educational journey at a non-traditional institution. Limitations and future research avenues are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Military students are classified as a unique student population due to the complexities of their careers (Bonar, 2016; Brown & Gross, 2011; McBain, Kim, Cook & Snead, 2012; Machuca, Torres, Morris & Whitley, 2014). Research indicates that the military students face numerous challenges when transitioning from a military to a civilian college environment (Radford, 2009). For this population of students, transitioning to the college life is one of the most difficult adjustments to make (Kirchner, 2015). Once in college, a variety of learning modalities present unique challenges for the military students. For instance, some of the specific challenges faced by military students include feelings of isolation on campus, confusion over benefits, and lower institutional support (Fusch, 2012; Lang & Powers, 2011). Additionally, the online modality offers learners with its own set of challenges. For instance, lack of frequent interaction with the instructors, learning with a specific learning management system, technical difficulties and communication breakdown, to name a few (Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2000; Essex & Cagiltay, 2001; Lester & King, 2009). Many military personnel are stationed throughout the world and hence online education remains a popular mode of study for such students (McMurray, 2007).

Despite the popularity of online mode of study, there is evidence of high attrition rates and dropouts from the degree programs involving military students (Church, 2009; Cate, 2013). Results of a systematic research investigating the military student perceptions on the online learning and the challenges faced by military students enrolled in the online setting can provide valuable learnings that can be used to promote student retention. Furthermore, more quantitative research is needed in finding ways to understand and support military students (Kirchner, 2015; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Mentzer, Black & Spohn, 2015).

Meeting the educational needs of the military students' is vital for retention (Kuh, Curce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). This also presents challenges at all levels of an institution (Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009). Institutional commitment in form of academic support services is critical to the success of military

students (Cass & Hammond, 2015). In addition, as pointed out by Brown and Gross (2011) the institutional approach to serving military students has been more ad hoc as opposed to strategic. Overall, it is expected that the findings of the research will serve as a blueprint for the faculty, staff and administrators in augmenting the understanding of the unique needs for these students and finding ways to help them succeed in the online academic environment. Based on the above the specific research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. What are the military student perceptions on the online learning?
- RQ2. What challenges do military students face in completion of an online degree programs and how do the students overcome them?
- RQ3. What are the military student perceptions of the practices used by faculty and staff to support their educational journey?

THE STUDY SETTING: SUNY EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

SUNY Empire State College (ESC) was chosen as the setting of the study because it is uniquely positioned to cater to this student population. ESC is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system (SUNY ESC, 2020). It is the only non-traditional institution within SUNY. It caters mainly to adult students between 25 and 55 years old who are working. The college is designed to help learners create individualized degree programs within twelve broad areas which suit their academic and professional goals (SUNY ESC, 2020). The college values learning gained at workplace and follows a clear process for awarding college level credits for learning at workplace (SUNY ESC, 2020). The college serves adult students across 33 locations in New York and abroad (SUNY ESC, 2020). The learners are in charge of their learning and decide on the modality they wish to pursue. For instance, online, face to face, blended and/or residency-based learning. The college offers both undergraduate as well as graduate programs. Many students at ESC serve in the military. Online modality is very popular with ESC military students. Based on the headcount data for the Academic Year (AY) 2012-13 to 2015-16 on the ESC's decision support website, it can be seen that vast majority of ESC military students prefer the online modality (ESC Decision Support, 2018).

SUNY ESC follows a unique undergraduate mentoring model. Incoming undergraduate students including military students are assigned to a faculty mentor to work one on one with students. The faculty mentor works with the students throughout their educational journey at the college. The student and the faculty mentor collaboratively design a degree plan for the student taking into consideration the student degree goals and factoring in a variety of components such as any other college level credits the students can bring in from other institutions (if applicable) towards their degree at ESC, the credits a student might obtain for college level learning that they may have gained at their workplace and the actual credits needed at ESC to fulfill the requirements of a completed undergraduate degree at ESC. The word ESC mentor used in the paper refers to these individuals. The term instructor in the paper refers to individuals who may be such student mentors and teach classes and/or individuals who may only teach courses but not mentor undergraduate students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary source of data collection was a survey questionnaire. The survey-based questionnaire was developed based on the existing literature on online learning, online military programs, military students and online military students (e.g. Bhagat, Wu & Chang, 2016; Mentzer, Black & Spohn, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Volk, Floyd, Shaler, Ferguson & Gavulic, 2020). It included both Likert scale questions (anchored with 1= "Strongly disagree" to 5= "Strongly agree" and NA) and open-ended questions. The total number of questions were 33. Out of this 29 were Likert scale/ multiple choice questions and 4 questions were open ended. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from ESC prior to conducting the study. An invitation email was sent anonymously to all military students enrolled in at least one course having an online component (completely online courses, independent study, residency-based studies and study groups) in AY2016-17, Summer 2017, AY 2017-18, Summer 2018, AY 2018-2019. ESC Decision Support

Services helped with obtaining email addresses of students. Survey Monkey was used to administer the questionnaire online. A consent form was provided along with the survey. This invitation email included the purpose of the study, what we wished to accomplish with the research, and the reasons for selecting the students as potential participants of the study. Also, it was made clear that student participation was voluntary, and they could choose to withdraw anytime.

Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to select a checkbox that acknowledges their consent. Participant were not be asked for any data until they indicated their consent. After sending the survey questionnaire, 144 completed responses were received. Out of the responses received, after cleaning for missing data 120 responses were retained. The survey results will be analyzed using SPSS 12.0 software. The survey questionnaire also involved asking variety of open-ended questions such as: 1) What challenges have you faced in completion of your online degree program? 2)How have you overcome your challenges? 3) In what ways do you think faculty and staff can support your educational journey at ESC? The following section discusses the findings of the research.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Demographics

Majority of the survey respondents were male (approx. 73%). As can be seen from Table 1. majority of the students taking the survey were over 25 years of age and specifically within 25 to 44 age range. As can be seen from Table 2. majority of the survey respondents were Caucasian (approx. 65%) followed by African Americans (approx. 10%) and Hispanics (approx. 10%).

**TABLE 1
AGE GROUP**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 25	6	5.0	5.2	5.2
	25 to 44	71	59.2	61.2	66.4
	45 to 64	36	30.0	31.0	97.4
	Over 65	3	2.5	2.6	100.0
	Total	116	96.7	100.0	
Missing	System	4	3.3		
Total		120	100.0		

**TABLE 2
ETHNICITY**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No response	5	4.2	4.3	4.3
	Caucasian	75	62.5	64.7	69.0
	African American	11	9.2	9.5	78.4
	Native American	1	.8	.9	79.3
	Hispanic	11	9.2	9.5	88.8
	Asian	2	1.7	1.7	90.5
	Other	4	3.3	3.4	94.0
	7	7	5.8	6.0	100.0
	Total	116	96.7	100.0	
Missing	System	4	3.3		
Total		120	100.0		

The research question (RQ 1) on military student perceptions was measured using multiple items on the survey. For instance, the level of comfort in regards to accessing the resources, the overall availability of resources on the college website, ease of availability of assistance when faced with learning challenges, use of orientation sessions towards enhancing overall learning experience, increased opportunity to directly engage with other active duty military and/or veteran student at ESC, presence of opportunities to directly engage with other active duty military and/or veteran student at ESC and the presence of more direct support to enhance the learning experience.

As can be seen from Table 3. vast majority of the survey respondents (Over 80%) indicated that they felt comfortable accessing the resources available (such as information on the area of study guidelines, concentration guideline, library resource, etc) on the ESC website. Also, as can be seen from Table 4. over 65% respondents felt that the available resources on the website enhance their learning at ESC. In addition, as can be seen from Table 5. majority of respondents (Over 66%) felt that they found timely assistance from college, when faced with learning challenges. Over 42% of respondents preferred increased opportunities to directly engage with other active duty military and/or veteran students and over 38% were neutral towards such as opportunity. Over 27% disagreed (Strongly disagree and/or disagree) when asked whether they found opportunities to directly engage with other active duty military and/or veteran students on the ESC campus. Over 44% agreed that orientation sessions played an important role towards enhancing their overall online learning experience at the college. Additionally, as can be seen in Table 6. over 62% indicated that more direct support (for instance, veteran student/active duty military student organizations and veteran/active duty military student resource center) will enhance their learning experience at the college.

TABLE 3
LEVEL OF COMFORT ACCESSING AVAILABLE ESC RESOURCES

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	4.2	4.2	4.2
	Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	7.5
	Neutral	11	9.2	9.2	16.7
	Agree	40	33.3	33.3	50.0
	Strongly Agree	57	47.5	47.5	97.5
	NA	3	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 4
RESOURCE AVAILABILITY TO ENHANCE LEARNING AT ESC

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Disagree	9	7.5	7.5	10.8
	Neutral	23	19.2	19.2	30.0
	Agree	39	32.5	32.5	62.5
	Strongly Agree	43	35.8	35.8	98.3
	NA	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 5
AVAILABILITY OF ASSISTANCE WHEN FACED WITH LEARNING CHALLENGES

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	3.3
Disagree	13	10.8	10.8	14.2
Neutral	17	14.2	14.2	28.3
Agree	40	33.3	33.3	61.7
Strongly Agree	40	33.3	33.3	95.0
NA	6	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 6
LEVEL OF DIRECT SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	3	2.5	2.6	2.6
Disagree	2	1.7	1.7	4.3
Neutral	37	30.8	31.6	35.9
Agree	45	37.5	38.5	74.4
Strongly Agree	29	24.2	24.8	99.1
NA	1	.8	.9	100.0
Total	117	97.5	100.0	
Missing System	3	2.5		
Total	120	100.0		

For RQ 2, we specifically asked respondents about the challenges they faced in completion of the degree program as an open-ended question on the survey questionnaire. 98 responses were received. Six clear categories emerged as can be seen below from sample responses from respondents as follows:

Time Management

There are times when I think about my deployment to Iraq, and I become overwhelmed.

Finding time to do everything while working two jobs and also being in the military.

My first couple of years were hard due to the rotating work schedule I was on. Once I was working normal hours, I could manage my time better.

Time! 15 week classes take a long time. Based on my specific military obligations, taking more than one class at a time is impossible. 15 week courses mean I can take about 2/year. If anything comes up to prevent me from taking a class, such as deployments, or extended assignments to austere locations (like 2 years in Africa in my case), I am practically stood still. I have 10 classes left, and history shows it will still take me 5 years. That's hard.

When I first started, I had trouble getting support from my command. I would not have time to complete my assignments due to my military commitments. However, as I advanced both in my professional and academic careers, I learned how to manage my time better.

Family, Personal and Medical Issues

My daughter passed away during my final semester of undergrad which consumed me with grief and I fell behind in the course.

I had some health issues, and death in the family that distracted from my studies

Overcoming PTSD to be able to function at the collegiate level. I failed and ESC reinstated me and gave me another chance.

Technical and Internet Issues

Accessing documents in the Library and downloading reading material for the course.

I faced the issue of limited access to the online experience and endured not being able to complete the course materials.

With military training, it can be difficult to access discussions as much as some professors would like

One semester I took with Empire State College, I was on deployment and out to sea. My ship frequently lost internet connection, sometimes for weeks at a time. This made completing my assignments and staying in tune with the rest of the class challenging.

Work-Life Management

At times it has been difficult to manage work, life and school.

constant travel and long work hours

As an adult learner and military member. Online degree is our part-time obligation. There are times where I am not able to work ahead in my classes and fall behind because of the military obligations. I have had instructors that will not allow late assignment. I hope this survey would convey to the instructors that deals with military members to be flexible.

When I was completing my degree, I had was in an Active Duty position that had me on the road 180 days a year roughly. Our days started at 0600 and sometimes didn't get done until 1800. It was very difficult to complete the assignments while on the road.

College Wide Issues

I had a difficult time understanding the material in some classes and the time allotted for the material to be submitted. Some instructors didn't offer any help or concern. They were just ready to say you're late and here's 20 points off. Not caring about the situation of being deployed and needing additional time and resource to complete the work.

Constant change of mentors. One very ineffective.

Instructors not replying to preferred methods of communication. Inaccurate instructions. Disagreement with grading. Poorly written course requirements.

Financial Aid answers.

Not getting enough mentoring, billing issues and holds due to military payment on my account

The majority of the staff had no experience in the real world and were more interested in pushing their political beliefs on students.

No Challenges

Not many challenges, just time to complete course work and working full time.

I faced no challenges while getting my degree at ESC (I obtained my degree in 2017).

Consisted internet Access due to military obligations and understanding faculty

As part of the RQ 2, students were also asked how they overcome challenges as an open-ended question on the survey questionnaire. We received 98 responses. Three clear categories emerged as can be seen below from sample responses from respondents as follows:

Personal Strategies

I've learned how to take a step back, then call a friend to talk. It relaxes me.

Contact with other classmates about class issues. Online resources.

To overcome my challenges, I have contacted various departments at ESC to facilitate communication when it was lacking. After reaching out to the help desk I was always put in contact with team members that were willing to help, that offered effective resolution strategies for my concerns.

Mentoring Help and Support

I reached out to my advisor who was also my mother's advisor as we were completing our degrees together. She reached out to our teachers and we were allowed to submit work the following semester to complete our degrees. We both found this very special touch of genuine mentorship and advisement. It was nice and allowed us to graduate and still walk at commencement together which was a unique experience for a child and parent. We love ESC!!

Struggles With Challenges

Ignored the staff incompetence as much as possible.

I contacted my mentor to seek assistance and was more or less advised to curb my input.

I have had to send nasty emails, that are out of character for myself to get admin support or professor engagement- and now am 'that girl'. I would have changed colleges to somewhere that was more in support of actually learning and not just the ability to say 'we support the military'. It was a nice banner - but except for the few poster children that is on your website- is it really true? Does the college just want the tax break?

The research question (RQ 3) on military student perceptions on practices used by faculty and staff was measured using multiple items on the survey. For instance, the role of ESC mentors in enhancing the overall learning of students, instructor practices in online classrooms, the level of difficulty working with ESC online bookstore, connecting with ESC staff members and knowledgeability of the Office of Veteran and Military Education (OVME) at ESC.

As can be seen from Table 7, vast majority of the survey respondents (Over 63%) indicated that ESC mentors played an important role in enhancing their online learning experience. Also, as can be seen from Table 8, over 76% respondents felt that the instructors who they took classes with played an important role in enhancing their learning experience. Vast majority of the respondents (Over 77%) felt that instructors were very easy to communicate with. In addition, a vast majority (Over 75%) found the ESC online classrooms to be welcoming in nature. As can be seen from Table 9, close to 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the view that instructor talk about themselves and the role military experience might have played in their life and leadership experience. As can be seen from Table 10, when asked whether the instructor should set some ground rules when conducting discussions around wars, government and military the respondents were split in that close to 40% agreed or strongly agreed and over 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed and the rest remained neutral. Over 70% of the respondents disagreed with the view that they had difficulties working with the ESC online bookstore and contacting ESC staff members. Additionally, a vast majority of the participants were neutral (over 45%) when asked if instructors were knowledgeable on military culture and veteran specific issues. Additionally, over 48% of the respondents found the staff at the office of Veteran and Military education at ESC to knowledgeable on the active duty military culture and veteran specific issues.

TABLE 7
ROLE OF ESC MENTORS TOWARDS ENHANCING ONLINE LEARNING

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	8	6.7	6.8	6.8
	Disagree	11	9.2	9.4	16.2
	Neutral	18	15.0	15.4	31.6
	Agree	26	21.7	22.2	53.8
	Strongly Agree	48	40.0	41.0	94.9
	NA	6	5.0	5.1	100.0
	Total	117	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.5		
Total		120	100.0		

TABLE 8
ROLE OF ESC INSTRUCTORS TOWARDS ENHANCING ONLINE LEARNING

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	2.5	2.6	2.6
	Disagree	5	4.2	4.3	6.8
	Neutral	15	12.5	12.8	19.7
	Agree	39	32.5	33.3	53.0
	Strongly Agree	51	42.5	43.6	96.6
	NA	4	3.3	3.4	100.0
	Total	117	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.5		
Total		120	100.0		

TABLE 9
LEVEL OF INTEREST AROUND HEARING INSTRUCTOR TALKING ABOUT HIM/HERSELF AND THE ROLE MILITARY EXPERIENCE IN CLASS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	2.5	2.6	2.6
	Disagree	5	4.2	4.3	6.8
	Neutral	37	30.8	31.6	38.5
	Agree	43	35.8	36.8	75.2
	Strongly Agree	27	22.5	23.1	98.3
	NA	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	117	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.5		
Total		120	100.0		

TABLE 10
LEVEL OF COMFORT WITH INSTRUCTOR SETTING GROUND RULES IN CLASS

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	16	13.3	13.7	13.7
	Disagree	23	19.2	19.7	33.3
	Neutral	30	25.0	25.6	59.0
	Agree	25	20.8	21.4	80.3
	Strongly Agree	21	17.5	17.9	98.3
	NA	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	117	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.5		
Total		120	100.0		

In addition, an open-ended question also focused specifically on how faculty and staff can support your educational journey at ESC. Some of the sample responses were as follows:

Flexibility with deadlines for papers and assignments.

Just continue to challenge me on every level.

I would like better engagement with instructors. I found them to be inaccessible at times, and other times a little impatient.

Assigned a Primary and Secondary Mentor/ Advisor. It appears that the advisor/mentor may be overwhelmed

I would have benefited from more discussion/guidance on financial aid, especially around the impact of accepting more aid than needed. I took a lot of loans earlier for maximum amount, have basically maxed out my federal loans

Support staff should touch base with students weekly, it can give a sense of community. It will keep students connected and reminded of their academic responsibilities. What do you think?

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research was exploratory in nature. Military students form a unique student population due to uniqueness of their careers. It is important for educators across the world to understand the unique set of challenges associated with this student population. Overall, the project has informed several different aspects of our ongoing work with military students.

The results indicate that more institutional resources in form of dedicated support staff should be provided to students for effective time management and managing personal and family issues. It is important for the ESC mentors to understand that this group of students face various issues such as Post Traumatic Disorder (PTSD), isolation, etc and it important to be understanding of such issues and offer ongoing support to the students that may need support. Also, the results highlighted the need for students to develop a sense of community and the need for the institution to provide more opportunities to do so.

It is also important institutionally, to provide resources helping students manage school and work life, thereby helping them achieve the desired balance to succeed at the college. The research highlighted the need for instructors to work towards being open to modifying the course materials to fit the needs of individual students. Particularly, from an online context, it may not be always easy for military students to have internet connection when they are deployed. It is incumbent upon the instructors to understand the need to be flexible with students and handle student situations as they arise. Institutionally, more training can be provided to mentors, instructors and staff to help them manage military and veteran student related issues effectively. Each location at the college is unique. It is important to study location specific best practices for this group of students and try to adapt a uniform approach across the college that may work at all locations and for the college as a whole. For instance, there are specific financial aid sessions for prospective military and/or veteran students at certain locations. This offers an extra layer of support to the prospective students to get answers to questions on important issues such as financial aid even before they consider applying to college. As a suggestion, such as approach can be adopted across the college as an extra layer of support (in addition to the ESC financial aid office) for this group of students. The study has three major limitations. First, the study involved participants from a single college in the United States, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the primary respondents of the study were undergraduate military and/or veteran students. It will be interesting to conduct the study with graduate level (Masters and PhD. level) military and/or veteran students. It will be interesting to replicate the study in other university settings and different undergraduate and graduate programs to investigate the patterns of military and/or veteran student perception of learning. Third potential limitation is the number of undergraduate student respondents, and more data can be collected to supplement this work. Future research could investigate how specifically the online curriculum can be modified to better assist military and veteran student learners relate their on-field experiences with education. Also, more research is needed on how educational institutions can partner with various entities in the military to facilitate the educational transition of the military students.

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