

A Decade of Student Veteran Advocacy: Retrospection, Introspection, and Expectation of the Military Veterans Division

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Introduction

This retrospective article explores the conceptualization and creation of the Military and Veterans Constituent Committee (MVCC) and the ultimate founding of the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) of ASEE, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Standing up the division was a grassroots effort to develop an organization dedicated to increasing awareness and support for pedagogical, curricular, and transitional issues faced by engineering and engineering technology students who are veterans or service members. MVD advocates for student veteran professional development, support, and educational and career transition resources, while highlighting military veteran strengths. The division appeals to student veterans and active-duty service members, but more importantly, it attracts staff, faculty, and industry partners who share the same zeal and attention for student veterans and service members who are pursuing an engineering education.

A survey of past and current MVD leadership was administered and analyzed. The Methodology section details the survey process and the Discussion section draws on the constituent reflections collected in the survey, highlighting the motivations, milestones, and challenges that shaped and continue to shape the organization's mission. The responses provide rich insight into how a shared commitment to advocacy, allyship, and academic inclusion catalyzed a growing network of over 200 members across disciplines and institutions. The Conclusion section details guidance and inspiration to expand efforts in research, policymaking, advocacy, and community building around the needs of military-affiliated students in technical fields, as suggested by the survey respondents.

Methodology

Twenty-one past and current members of the ASEE MVD executive committee, representing a variety of leadership roles in the division were contacted and asked to respond to an open-ended, qualitative survey of 17 items related to the formation and founding of the MVD, and all the prompts were optional. Fourteen individuals completed the survey, including four of the paper authors. The prompts were designed to gather insights related to reflections on the past, analysis of the present, and advice and aspirations for the future. The survey questions are listed below.

Survey Questions

The survey was broken down into four sections with each section having between 3-5 open ended questions. The sections and questions utilized were:

Section 1: Background Information

- What is your affiliation with MVD?
- What is your current role at your institution?

- Military affiliation (optional):
(Veteran, Active duty, Reserve, Military family, No affiliation)
- Name
- May we quote you in the retrospective article? (Yes or No)
- May we include attribution to you when quoting your responses (Yes or No)

Section 2: Reflections on the Past

- What motivated you to get involved in the formation or support of the MVD?
- What were the most significant challenges faced during the early years?
- What was the most surprising experience you had working in the division during the early years?
- In your view, what impact has the Division had over the past 10 years on ASEE or on the broader academic/military community?

Section 3: Present Impact

- How would you describe the current role or value of the Military and Veterans Division within ASEE?
- What initiatives, programs, or efforts have had the most visible or meaningful impact?
- Share an example of how your awareness of challenges and opportunities for students who are veterans or service members has evolved because of your participation...

Section 4: Looking Ahead

- What do you see as the most pressing needs or opportunities for military-affiliated students in engineering moving forward?
- What areas should the Division focus on over the next 5–10 years?
- What advice or message would you offer to future leaders of the Division?
- Are there activities or partnerships that the Division should pursue to expand its reach and impact?

Qualitative Analysis Approach

The Analysis section details an examination of key responses to the prompts ($n = 14$), including quotes from poignant responses. Responses were analyzed using an exploratory, computationally assisted qualitative approach, whereby all response were provided to a large language model (LLM), which was then prompted to generate an initial summary of recurrent themes and topics across respondents. This process was used to support rapid synthesis of dense, qualitative input rather than perform automated coding or statistical natural language processing approaches. The LLM output was treated as primarily an organizational aid and was reviewed by the authors for face validity and alignment with the raw data.

Analysis

Respondent Background

Of the 14 respondents, three did not wish to be quoted. Nine of the respondents are currently faculty or administrators at universities, two work in industry, two are retired and one is in a

leadership position in ASEE. Five of the respondents are no longer members of ASEE. Twelve of the respondents are Veterans or Active Duty Military, one is a family member, and one has no prior veteran affiliation.

Past / Retrospective

What motivated you to get involved in the formation or support of the MVD?

The responses to this question fell into three major themes: (1) Advocacy for Non-Traditional Students; (2) Professional and Personal Connections; and (3) Mission and Vision Alignment.

Advocacy for Non-Traditional Students and a desire to support veteran and servicemember students in engineering and improve their experience on campus was the strongest response. Many respondents were driven by a desire to increase visibility and support for military-connected students within traditional academic environments. Key motivations include:

- Recognizing that veterans and service members have unique cultural reference points and challenges compared to “traditional” undergraduate students.
- Addressing a perceived gap in emphasis within the ASEE for military and veteran engineering students.
- A commitment to better serving the needs of military, veteran, and family member students alongside their civilian peers.

Personal networks and mentorship also played a significant role in the division's formation. Most of the initial leaders were recruited by peers. Others had strong institutional ties connected to military-affiliated institutions such as West Point or The Citadel.

Participants were also motivated by the specific goals and potential impact of the MVD. Early focus on the transition of service members into higher education and promoting veteran education was key.

What were the most significant challenges faced during the early years?

The overarching theme of the responses to this question was building a sustainable foundation for the division required overcoming significant administrative and recruitment hurdles. A primary struggle was growing the number of members to the minimum required to achieve official division status. Attracting new members was difficult because many potential participants preferred to stay within their existing disciplinary groups in ASEE rather than join a new, broad-interest division. Additionally, navigating the ASEE systems to extract necessary member information was a technical obstacle. Scheduling time for the members to meet was a consistent challenge.

A second, large challenge was gaining visibility and institutional recognition. Ensuring other groups recognize veterans as a distinct diversity group with unique strengths was and remains a continual challenge. One respondent noted that while veterans were de facto included in DEI and

inclusion provisos, they were not ‘overtly’ named, creating a disconnect in institutional values. The group faced challenges in positioning themselves to exert influence and in working with administrations to change policies, fees, and procedures to accommodate veterans.

The third early challenge was defining a mission and promoting scholarship. The division first had to establish its internal identity and academic purpose. Developing a clear, unified focus for the group was an early hurdle. Leaders struggled to attract and define the specific types of scholarly work the division should pursue. It was widely believed that there was a significant need to ‘educate the educators’ regarding the training, education, and overall worth of military-connected students in the classroom, which remains one of the challenges the Division addresses.

What was the most surprising experience you had working in the division during the early years?

Based on the provided responses, the most surprising experiences during the early years of the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) centered on the speed of progress, the level of community engagement, and institutional realization.

Respondents were particularly struck by the pace at which the division established itself. There was surprise regarding how quickly the division came together. One participant noted being surprised by ASEE's overall response or actions during that time as well as the initial surge of papers and general interest in the first couple of years.

The level of commitment from early members was a recurring theme. A respondent highlighted the willingness of others to get involved and contribute, but the reality is that a small core carried ongoing leadership over time. There was a sense of surprise regarding how hard individuals were willing to work for the cause. Additionally, seeing the tangible results of their efforts and being a part of the division's growth provided unexpected satisfaction.

Working within the division revealed gaps in how veterans were perceived in academia. It became apparent to some respondents that several dimensions of the veteran student experience had not been fully recognized or addressed by the broader organization. Establishing both functional capacity and organizational presence emerged as a critical and formative part of this work.

In your view, what impact has the Division had over the past 10 years on ASEE or on the broader academic/military community?

A unified theme of the respondents was that the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) has significantly impacted visibility, institutional policy, and the professional engineering community over the last decade.

The division has successfully highlighted a demographic that was previously underserved in engineering education: It has created awareness within the engineering education community regarding a significant sub-population of students that is often undervalued. The MVD brought visibility to student veterans and active duty members within ASEE who might have been overlooked despite broader diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives. It has promoted the veteran community within the broader engineering education field and revealed that veterans hold leadership positions throughout various organizations and universities.

The division's efforts have led to tangible changes in how academic institutions interact with military-connected students. A major impact was embedding military veteran-referencing language into the protection statements within the ASEE Mission, positioning the division for greater future influence. The division's influence has led more schools to consider equivalent academic credits for training and education earned during military service. It has provided a platform to educate faculty on navigating the unique challenges of veterans and supporting quick action for their needs.

The division has opened new doors for service members and those who teach them. Support from the MVD and ASEE enables veterans to realize they can successfully enroll in and complete engineering degree paths. There is an increased appreciation for the unique military perspectives that veterans bring to the engineering field. The division has also impacted educators' connections with engineering ideas and career paths, which can then be passed on to high school students.

Current State and Challenges

How would you describe the current role or value of the Military and Veterans Division within ASEE?

Respondents stated that the MVD serves as a primary advocate for student veterans, ensuring their unique needs and strengths are recognized within the engineering community. The division provides critical visibility into the specific challenges active duty military and veterans face when pursuing engineering degrees. It works to address stereotypes and preconceptions held by faculty to ensure the experiences of veterans are accurately represented in inclusivity initiatives. The MVD acts as a key division within ASEE's broader infrastructure to ensure that the military population is not overlooked in engineering education inclusivity efforts.

A core value of the division is 'Educating the Educators' to better support military-connected students. It informs academic partners on how to best support veterans and provides updates on evolving resources and constraints. The division provides a platform to recognize excellence within the military and veteran educational space. It establishes clear information and pathways for military and veteran students to achieve their career goals in engineering.

The MVD has evolved into a strategic center for professional connection and scholarly advancement. It serves as a conduit for forming research teams specifically to pursue funding for veteran educational studies. Internally, the division is viewed as a future node for collaboration projects involving infrastructure, industry, and government. The group is described as well-respected and capable of leading conversations within ASEE that bring attention to causes not limited to a single age or diversity group. It continues to provide a dedicated community for scholars and educators committed to the veteran student population.

What initiatives, programs, or efforts have had the most visible or meaningful impact?

The varied responses highlighted several key initiatives and programs that have significantly impacted the veteran and engineering education communities over the past decade.

A core impact of the division has been its focus on ‘Educating the Educators’ and student veterans through targeted sessions. Program sessions at the annual conference, including workshops and panel conversations about student veteran educational experiences, have provided increased visibility. Workshops specifically focused on transition planning and how different universities assist veterans have been meaningful and provided guidance to the greater population on what successful programs look like. Efforts to educate faculty on navigating the unique challenges of veterans and supporting avenues for quick action were cited as highly valuable.

The division has worked to embed its mission into the broader institutional framework of ASEE. The division actively works with ASEE on meaningful opportunities such as participation in energy grants and the potential for leading future grants that benefit SVSM (Student Veteran and Service Member) educational spaces and recruitment pathways are seen as essential “higher order outputs”.

The MVD has fostered a stronger sense of belonging and practical support for veterans in academia through collaboration and outreach. The division continues to create a community that has allowed for greater collaboration and partnership across different sectors. Individual initiatives, such as personal outreach programs for veterans in specific departments, have built lasting connections with students.

The division’s presence has shifted institutional perceptions and policies. MVD advocacy has encouraged more schools to consider equivalent academic credits for training and education earned during military service. Working with university administrations to change policies, fees, and procedures has ensured better accommodation for student veterans. Efforts to provide clear information and pathways regarding the GI Bill, campus support offices, and research opportunities (especially those requiring security clearances) have had a direct impact on student success. The division also created the EEVA Award to serve as a meaningful starting point for recognizing excellence in the military and veteran educational space.

Share an example of how your awareness of challenges and opportunities for students who are veterans or service members has evolved because of your participation...

Participation in the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) has led to significant evolutions in how members perceive the academic journey of military-connected students, particularly regarding institutional barriers and societal stereotypes.

Respondents reported a growing realization of the complex hurdles veterans face when entering higher education. Many members became aware that a substantial portion of military professionals' prior training and experience is often not recognized for academic credit, which can prolong education and delay entry into the workforce. Participants revealed how misinformed or uninformed many staff and faculty are regarding the veteran population, particularly on traditional campuses. Awareness evolved regarding the need to better link educational opportunities with VA benefits to maximize student experiences and reduce administrative anxiety.

Engaging with the division highlighted the negative messaging many veterans receive before even starting their degrees. One member learned that some veterans were explicitly warned against pursuing "difficult" majors like engineering, a revelation described as jarring. The Division members are collaboratively engaged in research to improve Veteran engagement through methods such as surveys of engineering faculty, which uncovered prevalent stereotypes and preconceptions held by educators regarding military students.

The value of community and shared experience became a central theme in members' evolving perspectives. Members noted that veterans highly value relationships with other veterans, as it can be difficult to relate to traditional students after serving. Participation allowed members to use the division as a platform to share their own transition experiences—both positive and negative—to help others navigate the shift from the military to academia. Members have seen firsthand how hundreds of military students excel in engineering programs and secure desired employment when properly supported.

Future Opportunities and Recommendations

What do you see as the most pressing needs or opportunities for military-affiliated students in engineering moving forward?

The most pressing needs and opportunities for military-affiliated students in engineering, as identified by the respondents, focus on institutional reform, community integration, and combating social disconnects.

A primary concern is ensuring that universities adapt their administrative and academic structures to better fit veteran learners. There is a critical need to streamline transfer credit processes so that military technical training—such as in electronics, logistics, or nuclear systems—translates into academic credit rather than prolonging a student's education.

Respondents noted a need to fix “advising mismatches” where students are steered toward “safer” (less difficult) options rather than being encouraged to pursue engineering. Opportunities exist to treat Student Veterans and Service Members (SVSMs) as “mid-career learners” through modularized pathways and competency-based checkpoints rather than treating them as remedial students or “newbies.” Universities must prioritize linking educational opportunities with VA benefits, including in-house tutoring, to reduce student anxiety over administrative and financial issues.

Building a robust support network is seen as essential for student success and retention. There is an opportunity to foster a larger community by integrating ROTC and veteran students within the higher education environment. Students need mentors who provide “tough love” and can serve as role models, helping them navigate the rigors of an engineering curriculum. Veterans should be encouraged to recognize the innate “natural problem solver” skills they bring to the engineering field.

As the general population becomes more disconnected from military experience, the division sees a growing need for advocacy. Current work reveals that traditional students, staff, and faculty still hold biases and misperceptions of veterans, often shaped by media rather than personal interaction. With the end of major conflicts like the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), there is a concern that the veteran population may “drop off the radar” and lose institutional support. Respondents emphasized the importance of addressing the disconnect between society and service members to prevent the broadening of perception gaps and the birth of new stereotypes.

What areas should the Division focus on over the next 5–10 years?

The responses fell into four major categories; (1) Institutional Advocacy and Academic Reform; (2) Professional Development and Mentorship; (3) Community and Research Expansion; and (4) Broadening Educational Reach.

Institutional Advocacy and Academic Reform.

A primary focus is the continued transformation of how academic institutions recognize and support military-affiliated students. Efforts should focus on streamlining transfer credit processes and creating a “competency crosswalk” to translate military technical training (e.g., nuclear, cyber, aviation) into engineering academic capital. It is believed that the Division should promote advising supported by position papers to prevent “advising mismatches” where students are steered away from difficult majors like engineering. A key priority is linking educational opportunities with VA benefits, such as in-house tutoring, to maximize student experiences and reduce administrative anxiety.

Professional Development and Mentorship

The Division is encouraged to expand its role in guiding students toward successful engineering careers. Again, there is a stated need for role models who provide “tough love” to help veterans succeed in rigorous engineering curriculums. Producing “best practices” or an engineering career handbook specifically for military and veteran students. Developing public/private partnerships to enable career pathways that support military modernization efforts. This is aligned with the 2022 National Defense Review that suggests the US should build enduring advantages across the defense ecosystem to include the array of private sector and academic enterprises that create and sharpen the Joint Force’s technological edge [1].

Community and Research Expansion

Strengthening the MVD’s internal structure and its role as a scholarly hub remains essential. The Division should aim to increase membership and ensure that many different types of institutions are represented. MVD is viewed as a future conduit for research teams to pursue funding for veteran educational studies. Focus should remain on “Educating the Educators” and using data-driven “counternarratives” to combat faculty bias, stereotypes, and the societal disconnect from the veteran experience.

Broadening Educational Reach

The Division has opportunities to impact students earlier and through various educational tiers. Continued promotion of programs at community colleges and trade schools, maintaining a connection to K-12 education, potentially through Department of Defense education Activity-connected schools, could support building early engineering career pathways. This effort aims to foster a larger community by integrating ROTC and veteran students within higher education environments.

What advice or message would you offer to future leaders of the Division?

Based on the responses provided, the advice for future leaders of the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) focuses on growth, sustained advocacy, and adapting to a changing military landscape.

Future leaders are encouraged to focus on the operational health and expansion of the division. Continue efforts to grow membership and ensure that a diverse range of academic institutions are represented. Set reasonable, achievable goals for increasing both membership and the number of conference papers produced. Leverage the community’s willingness to help; many members are ready to work and are simply waiting to be asked. Leaders are also encouraged to look for opportunities to collaborate with other ASEE divisions and bring military leaders (past and present) onto boards to provide university-level leadership.

Maintaining the momentum of veteran advocacy will remain a core responsibility. Continue to be strong advocates for military and veteran students, ensuring they remain visible and that their positive attributes are highlighted in both the classroom and the engineering workforce.

Recognize that mentorship for veterans returning to the classroom remains a powerful and necessary tool for student success. Ensure that veterans are overtly included in diversity and inclusion values, moving beyond “de facto” status to being explicitly named and supported.

Leaders must stay agile as the veteran population and technology evolve. As the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) era ends, leaders must navigate how the experiences of non-combat veterans differ from those of previous years and ensure this demographic does not “drop off the radar.” Leaders will need to encourage schools to be agile in creating programs—from digital badging to master’s degrees—that reflect cutting-edge, unclassified military tech areas. Future leaders will also need to explore innovative ways to keep the division relevant as societal connections to the military experience continue to change.

Are there activities or partnerships that the Division should pursue to expand its reach and impact?

Based on the survey responses, the recommended activities and partnerships for the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) to expand its reach focus on institutional collaboration, workforce development, and strategic marketing.

The Division should leverage internal and external academic networks to strengthen its presence in the following:

- ASEE Collaboration: Work more closely with other ASEE divisions to integrate veteran-focused advocacy across different engineering disciplines and constituency groups.
- Board Leadership: Seek opportunities to bring past and present military leaders onto boards, especially those who serve as university faculty or leaders.
- Resource Development: Produce a best practices or engineering career handbook specifically tailored for military and veteran students.
- ROTC Integration: Expand contact and foster a larger community of practice by integrating ROTC students alongside veteran students in higher education environments.

Expanding impact through career pathways and professional development will be a priority. Develop public/private partnerships that enable student career pathways specifically in support of military modernization efforts. Link with universities and military outlets to market to veterans and potentially establish scholarship opportunities. Continue promoting veteran-specific programs across various educational levels, including community colleges and trade schools.

The Division has an opportunity to influence how military technical experience is valued and taught. Encourage schools to develop agile programs—ranging from digital badging to Master’s degrees—that reflect cutting-edge, unclassified military technology areas. Focus on activities that translate “military technical capital” into “engineering capital” through formal competency-

based checkpoints. Position the Division to lead grants that benefit Student Veteran and Service Member (SVSM) educational spaces and recruitment pathways.

Increasing the visibility of the veteran demographic is seen as essential for growth. Utilize military outlets to actively market engineering opportunities to transitioning service members. Maintain and expand efforts to connect with K-12 education to build early interest in engineering career paths. Set reasonable goals to grow membership and ensure a wide variety of institutions are represented within the Division.

Conclusions

Over the past decade, the Military and Veterans Division (MVD) has evolved from an ambitious idea into a vital advocate for this unique and often overlooked demographic within engineering education. Driven by the personal experiences of veterans in academia and the mentorship of leaders like Grant Crawford and Robert Rabb, the division successfully navigated early administrative hurdles, such as membership growth and ASEE data systems, to establish a formal presence. By addressing the disconnect between traditional DEI initiatives and the specific cultural reference points of service members, the MVD has fostered a community of practice that validates the ‘natural problem solver’ mindset veterans bring to the classroom.

A reflection on the operation and impact of the MVD highlights the division’s response to documented needs of military and veteran students and an intentional effort to promote advocacy, allyship, and scholarly attention to military affiliated students within engineering education. Research on military-affiliated students [2] has highlighted the need for scholars and student support practitioners to develop a more holistic understanding of the challenges, needs, supports and measures of success relevant to the transition of military and veteran students to higher education, while emphasizing that some findings from studies of veteran student success and persistence do not align to key student success results once considered applicable to all students. Prior studies also demonstrate the critical role of faculty and staff in creating environments for military and veteran students that provide individualized support and opportunities for community connection beyond typical student support services [3]. The service experiences of military veterans and service members vary greatly, and the experience of GWOT-era veterans are widely different from previous generations [4]. As the demographics and experiences of the student veterans and service members in higher education continue to evolve, it is important that an organization like MVD supports and sustains active communities of scholarship and practice working to understand the unique needs and experiences of this cohort, advocating for their success.

The impact of the division is most visible in its successful integration of military veteran-referencing language into the ASEE mission and its efforts to ‘educate the educators’ regarding the unique challenges and strengths of student veterans. Initiatives like conference workshops and scholarly work have helped educate members on faculty stereotypes and highlight the need

for systemic reforms, such as better credit recognition for military technical training. The MVD has produced 89 papers since 2016, successfully integrating Diversity as a core pillar in nearly two-thirds (59) of its published work. Through persistent outreach and research, the MVD has demonstrated that supporting veterans is not just a matter of social inclusion but a strategic opportunity to enhance the engineering workforce with mid-career learners who possess significant leadership and technical experience.

Looking forward, the division is positioned to lead critical conversations on the translation of military technical capital into academic credit and the creation of nimble pathways for emerging technologies. Future leaders are advised to remain persistent in their advocacy, particularly as the Post-GWOT era shifts the demographic of the veteran population and threatens to reduce their institutional visibility. By expanding partnerships with industry, ROTC programs, and K-12 educators, the MVD will continue to ensure that military-affiliated students are not only supported in their transition but are recognized as essential contributors to the modernization and success of the engineering profession.

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