

A Critical Discussion of Student Ethical Responsibility and University Militarism

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Introduction

The purpose of this critical theory paper is to problematize the existing relationship between engineering programs in the United States and militarism, or the influential presence of military values in an institution. Engineers in the U.S. enable many of the top military contractors—engineering students should therefore have an active and informed interest for the applications of their technology and for public welfare as a whole, which the university should help foster. Ongoing research shows that student opinions are complicated by conflicting views on moral good and personal financial stability when describing their views of militarization in engineering education [1]. Using a Decolonial and anti-imperialist framework that negatively views profiteering from violence, our analysis understands militarism within engineering programs as harmful to public welfare for how it serves the military industry, and we seek to challenge it at both the theoretical and practical levels.

In this work, we also problematize disengagement among engineering students and the ways that universities leverage militarized engineering opportunities to sate students seeking economic stability. This sociopolitical disengagement is an observed issue among engineering undergraduates [2], and we argue that the normalization of military contractors as an uncontroversial career choice negatively contributes to this phenomenon. The way that military contractor careers are advertised to working-class students and Students of Color is especially scrutinized, as we claim that wielding a career within the military-industrial complex as a mechanism for socioeconomic upward mobility reinforces global oppressive systems. Work needs to be done by university administration nationwide to challenge their complicity in racial capitalism by reevaluating their military contractor partnerships—a first step being to reevaluate the language used around supporting military agencies and contractors.

Positionality of the Authors

The first author, Brandon, is an undergraduate student studying mechanical engineering and physics at California State University (CSU), Los Angeles, where the second author, Corey, is an Assistant Professor of Engineering Education. We write from our perspective as thinkers, learners, and community organizers in an underfunded and systematically disenfranchised, inner-city, public higher educational setting. While the locus of our focus may seem a sort-of outlier in the space of the literature on engineering education, we instead will strive to position our institution - one in which nearly all students are People of Color [3], most live off-campus with their families, and the majority are

eligible for Pell-Grants - as a *normal* university. From our vantage point, predominately white, exclusive, research institutions are elitist outliers within the context of the lived realities of racial capitalism in the United States. Thus, although neither of the authors identify as People of Color themselves, and Corey lives a relatively newfound privilege as a member of the ruling class supported by her tenure-track professorship, we believe that the physical and social location from which we speak has much to contribute to the conversation on ethical disengagement in engineering education. Importantly, this is due not only to the marginalization of our community within the structure of American society, but also to the historical and ongoing strength of resistance. From the organizing work of the Brown Berets and the impact of the Chicano Moratorium in opposition to the Vietnam War to the present day organizing of the Los Angeles Tenants Union and Rapid Response efforts to protect our beloved community members from ICE terrorism, the fabric of Los Angeles is steeped in mobilized opposition to state-sponsored violence. We are proud to learn, grow, and act as members of this community.

University Militarism

Militarism is the influential presence of military values in a society or institution such that they take precedence over civilian interests and authority [4], [5]. In an institution afflicted with militarism, those with institutional power will undemocratically align its values, practices, programs, and culture to fulfill military goals [5], [6]. That process of alignment and fulfillment can be referred to as militarization, and militarism is its result. Notably, this conceptualization of militarism is *not* congruent with military service, so a discussion of militarism in higher education extends far beyond considerations of the military-related status of members of the university community.

Let us briefly consider some different forms of university militarism. Militarization of campus administration occurs, for example, when high-ranking representatives from defense contractors receive campus advisory positions, where partnerships for student recruitment and college fundraising can be streamlined between the military industry and campus (e.g., CSU Long Beach's Engineering Dean Advisory Council [7]). Militarization of student opportunities is seen when a college administration platforms amoral opportunities to students (e.g., MIT inviting Lockheed Martin to their career fair amidst the contractor's participation in the Gazan Genocide [8]). Militarization of the curriculum occurs when engineering programs incorporate projects with military contractors as a part of a course or degree capstone (e.g., CSU Los Angeles' platforming of Boeing & RTX capstone projects). Militarization of research is seen when government interests and funding urge military research (e.g., the \$5.6 billion in U.S. Department of Defense - now more honestly named Department of War - and military industry research grants provided to University of California campuses from 2005 to 2025 [9]).

From an anti-imperialist lens, the militarization of higher education is not in the interests of students and/or global public welfare. From critical perspectives, campus militarism in the United States is problematic for two reasons: 1) it preys on working-class students, and 2) it enables a country that extends military might for imperialist gain. By taking steps to militarize programs, opportunities, curriculum, and culture present on a campus, the university takes advantage of the popularity of engineering as a profitable field and skews student outcomes towards what functionally serve U.S. imperial might, even if that is not the earnest interest of the student [1]. Our theory holds global public welfare as paramount and views the U.S. application and sale of military industry products as largely antithetical to that welfare. It therefore sees engineering programs actively proliferating this industry as obstructive to global public welfare.

Historical Context

Over the course of the last century, the U.S.' military industry has enmeshed itself in higher education. Although the military did consult scientists during the First World War, entanglement with universities began in earnest during early World War II through the creation of the Office of Scientific Research and Development to coordinate military research projects including guided missiles, radar, and the first atomic bombs [10]. The Cold War era saw further normalization of university participation in military research projects: an explosive increase in Department of Defense research was felt at the university level through the National Defense Education Act in 1958, allocating \$450 billion to educating and training college students for the sake of the "security of the nation" [9]. Following 9/11 into the modern era, we see an increase in federal scholarship programs, grants and other initiatives in order to attract students for career opportunities pertaining to national security and intelligence [5]. As these eras in American history occurred, countless students, faculty, and scientists enlisted themselves to what was surely described as patriotic research [11]. Ultimately, the engineered products the academic community produced would (depending on the era or conflict) leave thousands to millions of civilians dead [11], [12]. Universities today, however, fail to acknowledge this history when they platform the responsible military contractors.

The prevailing culture of engineering education in the United States is and has been largely "silent" on issues of militarism and warfare [11], [13]. As Vesilind wrote in *Engineering Peace and Justice: The Responsibility of Engineers to Society*:

"The effect of military research at engineering schools has largely been ignored by the disciplines that study engineering and engineering education...[despite its key role in] the greatest single decision engineers have to make—whether or not to work in the armaments industry" [13, p. 151].

However, there have been sects of students, staff, and faculty throughout the history of STEM higher education who have actively opposed US imperialism and their universities' integration of military interests and business. Some of the first nationwide anti-militarism university campaigns were those against the Vietnam War, in which hundreds of universities each saw thousands of students in the '60s and '70s rally and strike to end military recruitment, research, and financial ties on campus [14]. Again in the '80s, students protested national and university complicity in South African apartheid, leading to over 150 universities ending their involvement before South African divestment was codified into law in 1986 [15]. Most recently, students have again organized to advocate for divestment from military contractors tied to Israel's genocide in Palestine since 2024 [16].

It should not be the responsibility of students to act against university silence and complicity in U.S. war profiteering—campus administrations have a moral imperative to challenge their complicity they carry through partnerships with military agencies and contractors. If the structures existed to have meaningful dialogues between a campus community and its administration, students would not feel the need to form so-called “radical” action groups. Therefore, we argue that universities have a responsibility to produce shared-governance groups to ideate on how to divest from militarism. Challenging complicity can also take the form of changing the narrative around student engagements with military contractors on campus, bringing us to the topic of student ethical disengagement.

Engineering Student Motivations and Disengagement

In December 2025, just eighty-one days after the October 9th Israel-Hamas ceasefire was ratified, the Pentagon announced Boeing would receive a nine-year \$8.6 billion contract for the production of up to fifty new F-15 warplanes to support the Israeli Air Force [17]. Over these eighty-one days, nearly a thousand Israeli ceasefire violations killed over four hundred Palestinians and injured over a thousand more [18]. The contract was not impeded by the hundreds of ceasefire violations, nor was it impeded by the record low support for Israel's military operations among U.S. adults [19]. With the warplanes to be constructed in St. Louis, the machinist union local president praised the contract, stating, “I hope that Boeing keeps getting contracts and keeps hiring more people for us. It's good for the economy. It's good for St. Louis,” [20].

Much like the quoted union representative, engineering students can be motivated by the high-demand and high-paying engineering roles in the military industry. We theorize that the importance of financial success outweighs moral qualms for a significant percentage of engineering students. We attribute this to the way many engineering students are attracted to the field: for the earning potential. Careers in the military industry are

generally understood to not only be high-earning but accessible, with the U.S. hosting several of the most profitable weapons contractors in the world [21].

Supplemental to this argument is existing research detailing conflict and disengagement in the values of engineering students as they complete their degrees. There are a handful of contemporary studies demonstrating some moral conflict among students, in which students may acknowledge that unethical situations and practices exist in the aerospace industry but argue them to be necessary or justifiable within the field [1]. Some longitudinal studies argue that student values decrease as they progress through their undergraduate engineering programs. One such study demonstrates consistent decreases in public welfare beliefs from various engineering institutions, such as the importance they place on professional and ethical responsibilities [2]. Another longitudinal study suggests that institutions can exacerbate the gradual decline in attitudes towards helping society, as seen in the examples of a military academy, a private engineering college, and a technical public college surveyed [22].

To be clear, we place fault for ethical disengagement not on students but on the systemic incentive placed on participation in the military-industrial complex by the university. Employing critical theoretical frameworks, analysis is on the level of the greater system, and power is not shared equally in its establishment or operation. This is not to say students are purely victims here—they are not. Many students will become engineers that enable the military industry. It is a core part of this theory that the normalized militarization of universities (by partnering with and platforming military contractors) is a more blatant threat to global public welfare than the students who accept the military industry in the way the campus sells it to them: as a profitable and respected application of engineering expertise that is worthy of their labor.

The “Equity Ethic” vs. Racial Capitalism

We argue that there is a unique conflict between military interests and the interests of engineering Students of Color. Studies show that racially underrepresented STEM students are more likely to be motivated by social justice and helping society (McGee’s “Equity Ethic” [23]), which is, from an anti-imperialist lens, at odds with working within military institutions and contractors that benefit from violence. However, due to the correlation between race and wealth in the U.S., Students of Color have less material privilege with which to act on their moral values when advancing their careers. This conflict between moral interests and necessity for financial stability especially among Students of Color is an integral part of why the platforming of military industry within higher education is problematic.

There is a hypocrisy present in platforming military opportunities to Students of Color. The U.S. military industry has materially supported the wartime efforts of our country

and its allies, especially when there are geopolitical or ideological benefits to the United States. Some notable involvements include the U.S.'s history of proxy wars (e.g., in Vietnam, Korea, Yemen, Lebanon, etc.) and our contemporary material support of Israel. Virtually every direct or indirect military involvement the U.S. has had in its lengthy repertoire includes categorical devastation faced by the non-white civilians on the receiving end of weaponry produced by U.S. contractors. This makes the platforming of military contractor opportunities to engineering Students of Color especially concerning, as the foreign racial marginalization our military industry creates is advertised as a good career pathway to students who are racially marginalized domestically. However, with less material privilege, Students of Color may be pressured to disregard their “Equity Ethic” or their individual complex perspectives on the U.S. military industry for the sake of economic stability [1], [23].

It is with the acknowledgement of institutional disregard for the “Equity Ethic” that we can begin to talk about racial capitalism. Critical Black Studies scholar Dr. Burden-Stelly characterizes U.S. racial capitalism as “a racially hierarchical political economy constituting war and militarism, imperialist accumulation, expropriation by domination, and labor superexploitation,” with anti-Blackness and anti-radicalism serving as “legitimizing architecture,” i.e., the methods of systemically normalizing racial capitalism [24]. We agree with this characterization of our economy and argue that engineering students are being encouraged to reinforce these systemic injustices within militarized educational systems. University platforming of military contractors as a valuable career option is a tacit endorsement of their actions in materially enabling the imperialism and domination that Dr. Burden-Stelly speaks on. More covertly, the university’s lack of conversation about that imperialism and domination plays into the tenet of anti-radicalism. In our context, we see anti-radicalism in that aforementioned disregard of “Equity Ethic” or personal sentiments regarding military contractors. We argue anti-radicalism especially benefits the military industry, as a loyal and uncritical workforce can ensure engineers will not defect when U.S. weaponry is deployed in the deliberately devastating and inhumane manner it often is. Much like how we argue for shared-governance groups to materially and financially divest from war profiteers, here we see the need for divestment from the culture of silence regarding the injustices the military industry enables. This cultural divestment could take the form of engineering courses or dialogues where engineering students have to contend with the realities created by the military industry and the application of its products [12].

Accessible vs. Exclusive Campus Militarism

We’ll next consider how disengagement (anti-radicalism) and complications with the Equity Ethic appear in accessible and more exclusive universities. We find the (closest) epitome of accessible higher education in the U.S. to be the California State University

(CSU), as its large student population of nearly half a million is reflective of the largely working-class, Pell-grant receiving, and racially diverse college student population in the U.S. [3], [25], [26]. As a university system serving working-class students, the CSU has a stated emphasis on upward mobility and ensuring financial stability post-graduation [27]. CSU engineering students receive this stability in part through the presence of weapons contractors, from contractor-funded laboratories [28], representatives in steering positions [7], or connections that otherwise support student-to-contractor pipelines, as some campuses tout [29], [30]. At CSU, Los Angeles, this platforming is primarily seen through donations and capstone projects from weapons contractors (Boeing, Northrop Grumman, RTX) and events such as an annual Boeing-led youth outreach and networking event. Interestingly, this program's lead planning officer makes explicit the economic stability an engineering career can offer while eschewing the truth of the tangible impact of engineered (Boeing) products: "STEM careers change lives and provide a good path to do amazing things" [31]. Applying our critical framework, students within an "economic mobility" university should not have to accept reductive stances about the impact of militarized engineering work to ensure their economic security, yet the above perspective is safe and normalized in academia. The lack of transparency about the human consequences of Boeing's military production enables the student disengagement that keeps the military contractor staffed - including by CSU, Los Angeles alumni. The aforementioned "Equity Ethic" further complicates this perspective, suggesting that a moral compromise occurs for the sake of economic mobility especially among engineering Students of Color, which the CSU demonstrably serves.

While the accessible (teaching-focused) university demonstrates militarism primarily through opportunities that move working-class students into financial stability under contractors, the exclusive (research-focused) university shows militarism in the research interests funded by investors. Consider the nine undergraduate-serving campuses in the University of California (UC) system—six have less than a fifty percent acceptance rate while all have at least double the cost of CSU tuition [32]. While the campuses of the CSU do receive corporate sponsorship from military contractors, the UC sees vastly larger research sponsorships from both contractors and federal agencies. UC Irvine, for example, was provided ~\$85 million in grant funding from the Department of Defense/War for projects in engineering and computer science since 2016 and has continued to bolster its federal defense agency connection through a \$27 million microelectronics research hub in 2023, supporting companies such as Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and RTX [33]. The principal investigator for this research hub gives a depressing but normalized motivation: "We have no choice but to advance the weaponries and the equipment of defense that is used to maintain the security of the United States. The most vital equipment of defense and war are heavily using aspects of [this] high tech" [33]. This framing is explicit in acknowledging the scholar's role in upholding military production, but unfortunately plays into the phenomenon of

disengagement among students. From the vantage point of the researcher, it claims that whether or not you ideologically align with the U.S. military, our military industry, or who we support or sell to, it is in your best interest to use your position as a scholar to enable the oppressive system.

It is in the hands of the campus decisionmakers that enable these research hubs and these contractor outreach events to reevaluate the explicit and implicit ways we endorse and promote labor for military industry. Cultural divestment from the military industry means providing engineering students the geopolitical frameworks to critically grapple with the perspectives of so-called “radical” student groups, anti-imperialist organizers, and communities in the Global South.

Conclusion and Required Work

Campus militarism is harmful to global public welfare through enabling the U.S. military industry, which proliferates weaponry with devastating humanitarian consequences, especially for Black and Brown civilians in the Global South. This militarism is generally not aligned with student interests, instead serving as a normalized path to financial stability, even if it means ethical values are compromised in the process.

Challenging this path that encourages military industry participation has multiple necessary steps. At the most basic level, universities need to systematically increase transparency about the humanitarian crises caused by products of U.S. military contractors, as there is a widespread silence in academia on their role in genocide, displacement, and environmental devastation [13]. This could be enacted through courses on engineers’ roles in current geopolitical events throughout the engineering curriculum. The intended consequences of increasing transparency are to combat the observed trend of engineering student disengagement and establish societal ethics as a core component of engineering education and practice [12]. Less trivially, engineering programs must both divest from warfare [34] and reinvest in socially-responsible partnerships and opportunities.

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