



FALL 2025

MISSIONWISE.CO

OUR GUIDE TO MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FOR LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CONTENTS

MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: A PRIORITY	02
OUR METHODS: UNDERSTANDING THE MCS POPULATION	04
MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: DEMOGRAPHICS	06
MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: PERSONAS	10
NAVIGATING THE PERSONAS	14
A MORE INFORMED APPROACH	30
ENSURING A MORAL AND FINANCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT	34

©2026 MISSIONWISE. All rights reserved.

All content, research, design elements, and trademarks in this booklet are the property of MISSIONWISE.
No part of this publication may be copied, shared, or reproduced without written permission.

MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: A PRIORITY

VALUE PROPOSITION

Military Connected Students (MCS) are often overlooked by higher education institutions or are seen as deserving of charity, and not as a population that is worthy of targeted investment. Investing in recruiting and retaining MCS is not only an honorable mission, but can play a significant role in an institution's growth. Doing this well requires institutions to take a different approach.

Military-connected students bring tremendous potential to campus, yet they have unique needs. Without intentional support they are at risk of being overlooked, underserved, and ultimately leaving before completing their degrees. When this happens, these students lose access to the brighter futures they seek, while institutions miss out on the contributions of this diverse population.

Ensuring a moral and financial return on investment requires more than good intentions. **It requires a deep understanding of a very diverse population, with a variety of needs and perceptions.** Only by understanding these nuances can institutions support MCS in a way that leads to increased student enrollment and positive outcomes for both the institution and the students it serves.

MISSIONWISE KNOWS MCS

By combining a wealth of broad and deep primary data, a team of “insiders,” and communication and service design expertise, we guide and partner with learning institutions to help them understand their unique military connected students and build tailored ways to serve them.

OUR METHODS: UNDERSTANDING THE MCS POPULATION

A VERY DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Nationally, student veterans are more racially and ethnically diverse than the non-military student population. However, this is not well appreciated across institutions. Pop culture has often portrayed MCS through a narrow lens; most often as a single white and younger male who “looks” the part. Often missing is an accurate picture of a population that includes many women and is more likely to consist of Black and Hispanic students, more likely to include first-generation students, and much more likely to include those that have taken unconventional paths to higher education. **The truth is, MCS are not a monolith.** By seeking to understand and acknowledging the differences within the MCS population, institutions can provide more authentic, focused services that lead to greater student satisfaction, increased recruitment and graduation rates, and a positive ROI.



STEREOTYPES TO OVERCOME



THE SUPERHERO

Strong, tough,
always courageous



THE VICTIM

Physical wounds, mental
challenges, homelessness



THE FIGHTER

Rifles, tanks,
fighter jets



THE ROBOT

Follows orders,
not creative

THE TRUE MCS POPULATION



SUPPORTS A FAMILY

MCS are almost twice as likely to have a spouse, children, or someone in the household whom they support. Many MCS are children or spouses of veterans/servicemembers.



STARTING OVER

Most MCS are not looking to advance along a career path related to what they did in the military, but are in many ways starting over.



FIRST GENERATION

The majority of MCS are first generation college students.



YEARS AWAY FROM HIGHER ED

Student veterans often enroll in school after many years of working in non-traditional settings and being away from higher education.

MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: DEMOGRAPHICS

OPPORTUNITY IN DIVERSITY

Veterans and military family members have always been part of the higher education landscape, but the advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill® has created a pathway for many more of these students to continue their education. Unfortunately, many universities do not recognize the breadth and diversity of this population and instead view them through the lens of common stereotypes.

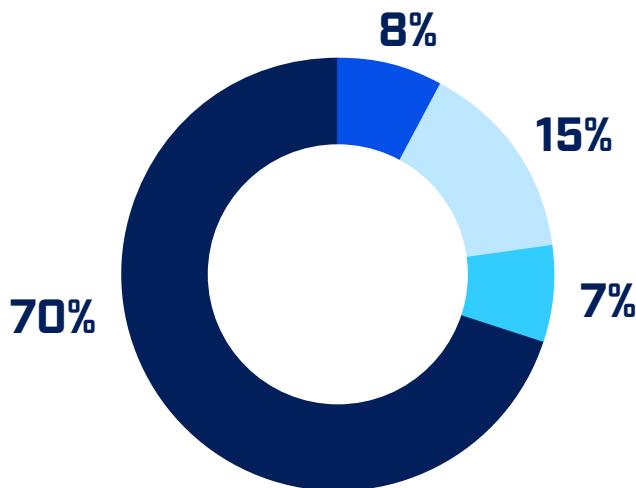
TYPES OF LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

MissionWise has studied and designed services for MCS across a range of institutions, including online/hybrid schools focused on adult learners, flagship state universities, arts and design schools, military schools, and traditional liberal arts colleges.

All enroll MCS, but the demographics of MCS subpopulations across these schools vary greatly and emphasize that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to military students is never appropriate. But the range of backgrounds of MCS can seem complicated. From service member, spouse or dependent status — to whether or not someone served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Space Force or Marines — to whether they still serve on active duty or are still in the National Guard or are retired — all of this can be confusing for those trying to design services that authentically serve this population.

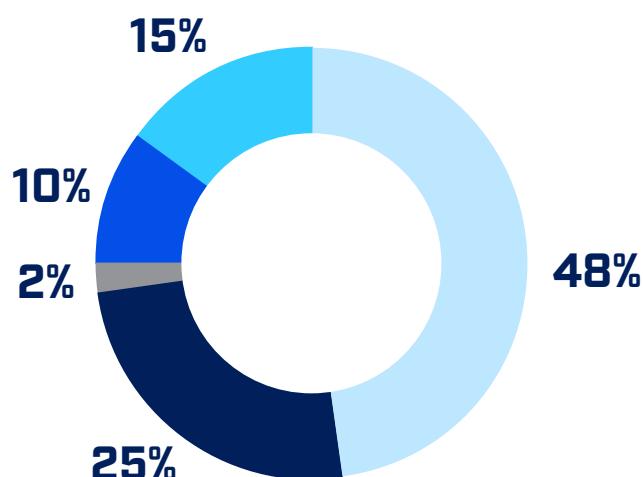
STUDENT VETERAN BRANCH DISTRIBUTION

From Partner Institution



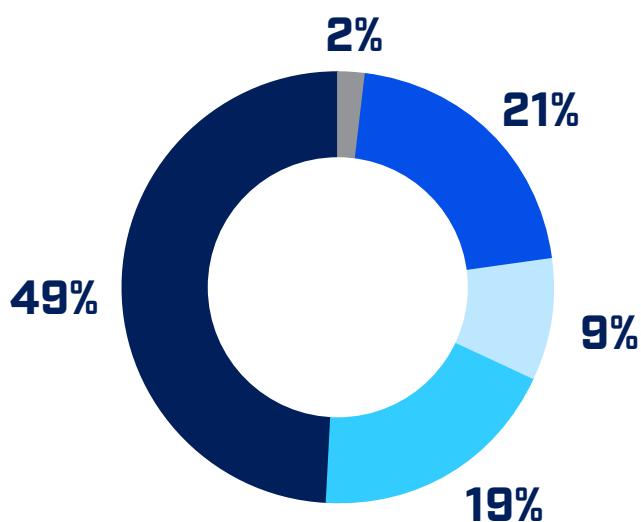
STUDENT VETERAN BRANCH DISTRIBUTION

From Partner Institution



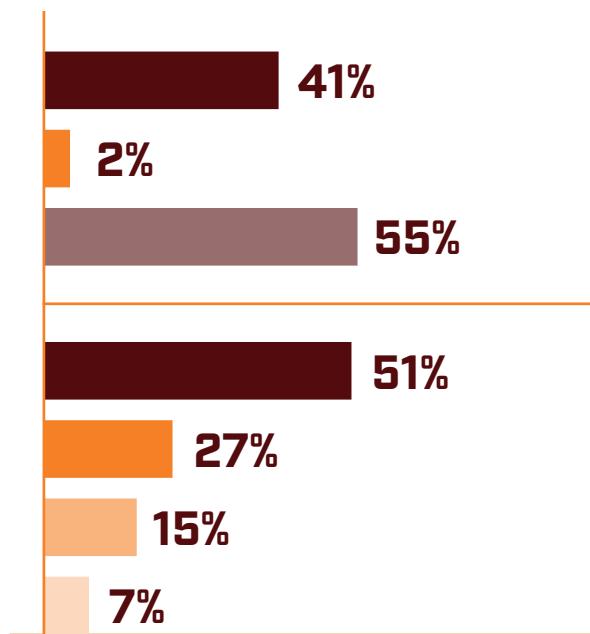
STUDENT VETERAN BRANCH DISTRIBUTION

From Partner Institution



MILITARY CONNECTED POPULATION

Examples from Partner Institutions



Army

Air Force

Marines

Coast Guard

Navy

Veteran

Dependent

Guard

Spouse

Active

DIFFERENCES ACROSS SCHOOLS

Each learning institution possesses its own unique student body. Students from one learning setting do not necessarily look like those from another; they vary in interests, goals, and demographics. The MCS at each institution are no different. Effectively serving MCS requires a nuanced understanding of the unique subset of students who show up at each school.

THE MISSIONWISE DIFFERENCE

MissionWise has developed a tailored approach to learn about these unique, institution-specific MCS populations. We stand on a body of broad and deep research that has led us to a much deeper understanding of the diversity of MCS.

METHODS FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

To better understand the population, we investigated the attitudes and characteristics of MCS via mixed methods primary and secondary research. Notably, this effort builds on previous research from the US Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Experience and Innovation offices. These offices sought to deeply understand veterans and the journeys that brought them to the military, the experience of their service, and how they dealt with post-service life. The VA spoke with veterans from across the country, across many eras of service, and all walks of life; in their homes and at their work and schools in order to determine how to better serve them. This research revealed common themes and outlooks regarding personal identity, motivations, perceptions, and emotional obstacles.

MissionWise research expands on this body of knowledge by looking more closely at members of the military community who choose to pursue higher education.

COMBINING BROAD AND DEEP RESEARCH

The team at MissionWise designed and deployed surveys to capture broad trends and patterns within the MCS population. The data from these surveys provide a rich overview of MCS demographics and educational journeys. We complemented this survey research with qualitative interviews to draw out richer contextual insights into sub-population characteristics. The synthesis of these two methods provide deeper, more holistic, and nuanced insights. The result is a grouping of the MCS population into some common ‘types’ of MCS that can be found in most schools.



MILITARY CONNECTED STUDENTS: PERSONAS

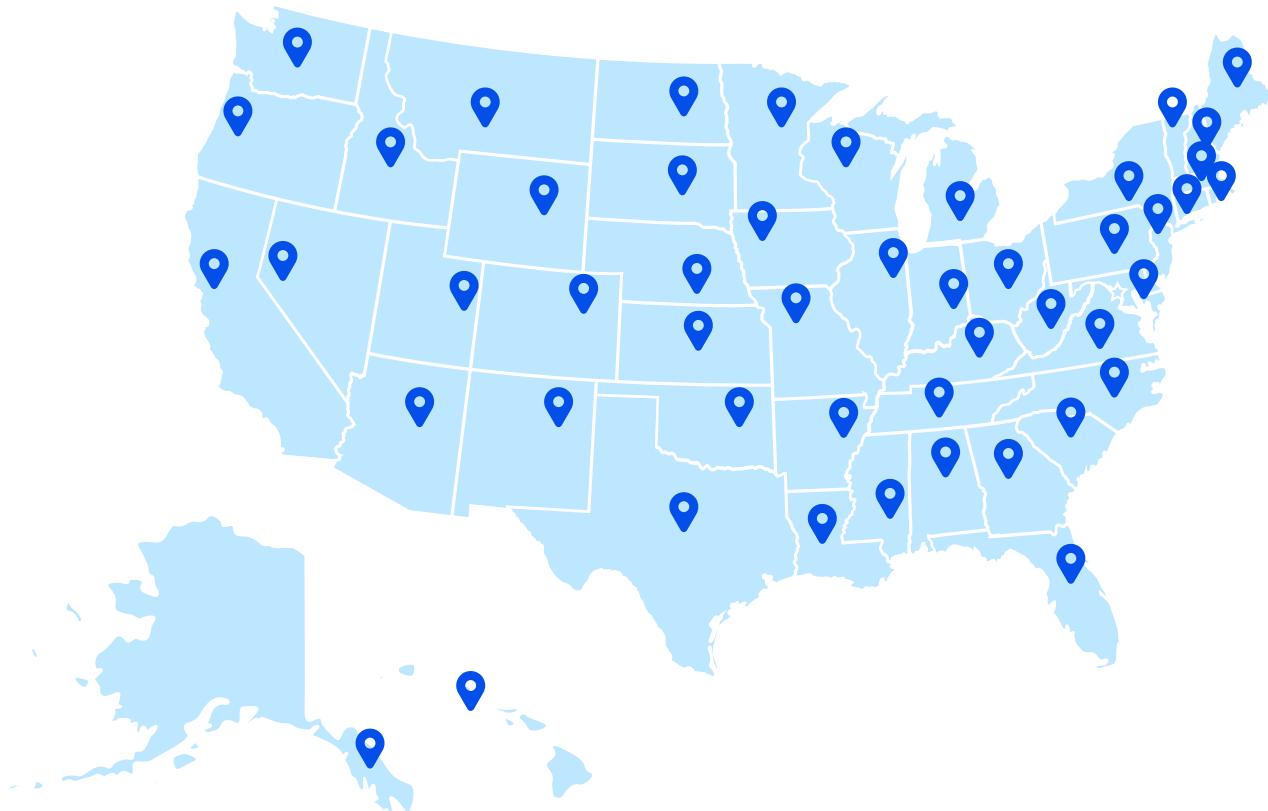
A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Higher education leaders need to take a different approach to making authentic connections with MCS. The first step is to abandon existing stereotypes and recognize the diversity of this population. And while an understanding of MCS demographics is essential, institutions must understand the motivations and outlook of the specific MCS subpopulations at their school. Done correctly, this allows for tailored services that best fit the needs of these students and propels them to graduation and successful civilian careers. Personas are a tool to help us understand MCS subpopulations: their goals, sense of identity, motivations, preferences, and barriers to success. It is through this approach that we are better equipped to design solutions to establish authentic connections and best support them on their journeys.

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS BASED ON REAL PEOPLE

These are composite portraits designed to represent MCS who are currently enrolled or seeking to enroll in higher education. They are built from aggregated themes and patterns observed across multiple higher education institutions. These personas function as stand-ins, helping us understand the perspectives and needs of these students. By understanding different 'types' of MCS, we are better positioned to support them in ways most meaningful to them, instead of projecting our own assumptions onto them.





INTERVIEWS ACROSS THE U.S.

The personas that follow were built from a synthesis of our primary and secondary research. Along with survey results we've gathered from 1,743 MCS across the US, we conducted individual interviews with MCS and those who support them (e.g., faculty and staff, military veterans, spouses, and their college-aged children) to build a rich portrait of MCS and to draw out common challenges and opportunities faced by this population.

These personas are meant to be living tools, ever evolving as the characteristics and experiences of the MCS population change over time. We apply these personas to the development and revisions of services, products (things like a website, app, paper and digital forms), and physical spaces within a university system. We imagine how each persona interacts with the university — according to their unique needs — so we can understand where each persona will run into obstacles that may hinder engagement and student receptivity. Through imagining and running through scenarios with the personas, we design better methods for engagement, spaces, and products that can serve this unique population.



NAVIGATING: THE PERSONAS

★ THE VETERANS



MIGUEL

STRONG VETERAN IDENTITY
WITH AN IMAGINATION GAP

Needs: **Consistency**
Risks: **Imagination**
Identity: **Military Proud**



ZOE

EMBRACING UNIQUENESS,
ARTISTIC, & VETERAN IDENTITY

Needs: **Self Actualization**
Risks: **Alienation**
Identity: **Embracing Self**



SILAS

TECHNICALLY A VETERAN,
BUT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT

Needs: **Inclusivity**
Risks: **Support**
Identity: **Discovering**

★ THE MILITARY KIDS



ARRINGTON

THE MILITARY KID
THROUGH AND THROUGH

Needs: **Community**
Risks: **Dropout**
Identity: **Military Family**



KAT

THE UNNOTICED
MILITARY KID

Needs: **Guidance**
Risks: **Course Alignment**
Identity: **Civilian**

★ THE SPOUSES



TAMARA

MILITARY SPOUSE,
FIRST & FOREMOST

Needs: **Communication**
Risks: **Criticism**
Identity: **Proud**



CHLOE

MILITARY HASN'T REALLY
FIT, STILL PROUD

Needs: **Navigation**
Risks: **Engagement**
Identity: **Former University**

MIGUEL: STRONG MIL/VET IDENTITY AND AN IMAGINATION GAP

Miguel retired from the military after a distinguished career as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) and decided to go back to school. In between deployments, he attended online schools that eventually granted his associates degree. Now that he's out of the military, he has a desire to finish his bachelor's degree. He's the first in his family to have any higher education under his belt. And while he knows a few from the military who have gone back to school, he's not in close contact with colleagues.

Miguel is a go-getter and feels comfortable in unfamiliar situations, but school feels different to him. He doesn't really know what he wants to do next with his life but he feels that by at least going to school, he's moving in the right direction. Deciding the next step on his journey may take time and multiple touch points, which may feel very foreign to him.



NEEDS: CONSISTENCY

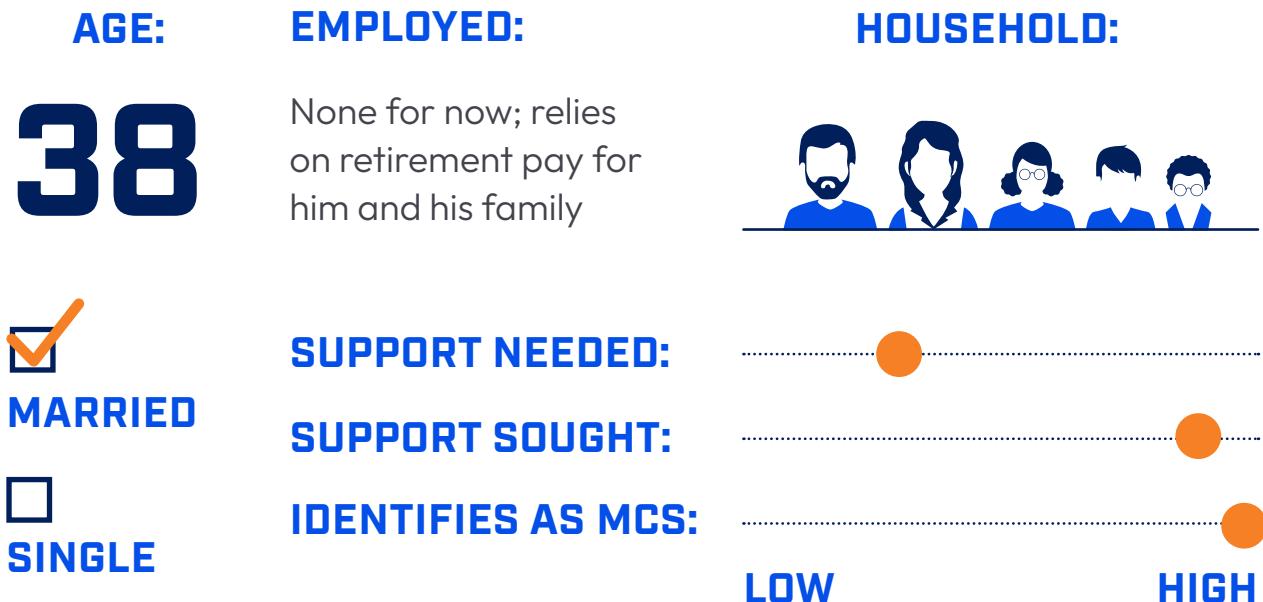
Miguel is someone who will succeed. He needs support from the institution that will help him imagine what's next and design an actionable plan for achieving his goals. He'll need support that stays relevant and consistent. He won't have a personal network of family and friends who have gone on to higher education to rely on for advice and support. He'll need to build that support structure from scratch while at school. Traditional methods of outreach to the military community will be familiar and welcoming to him.

RISKS: IMAGINATION

While Miguel is the kind of guy who will likely succeed in any environment, he will be faced with new struggles unless he's paired with the right team that can help him imagine his next chapter (often one that looks very different from his past military chapters). The right support will help him realize his next calling.

IDENTITY: MILITARY PROUD

Miguel has known the military life for a long time and it has been profoundly formative for him. He proudly leads with his military and veteran identity.



ZOE: EMBRACING VETERAN IDENTITY ALONGSIDE OTHER IDENTITIES

Zoe never expected to find herself serving in the military; it just kind of happened. She never really had a plan for life after high school and became nominally attracted to the steadiness and direction of the military. During her time in the military she discovered that culturally there wasn't a lot of space for her other interests, like art. She hid her hobbies and vowed to pursue them more when she was out of the military. Upon entering university, it was the first time in her life where she began to feel there was space for all of the parts of her: her veteran identity, her artist identity, and more. It felt like a huge relief; finally, she could breathe and openly explore. But how?



NEEDS: SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Zoe is excited to be more of her true self, but realizing how she can do that still feels like a mystery. She'll need exposure and support through this process of becoming. For Zoe, it's less about checking the box toward graduation and more about self-actualization. Zoe is proud to be a veteran but will need outreach that acknowledges the other aspects of her identity. It will need to look non-traditional.

RISKS: ALIENATION

Traditional veteran outreach may alienate Zoe and turn her away from military education benefits and protective mil/veteran communities.

IDENTITY: EMBRACING SELF

For Zoe, this is the first time she can embrace her “veteran-ness” and her “otherness.” While in service she’s had to tuck away the other aspects of her life: queer, woman, artist. She’s finding out she has permission to embrace and care about all of her identities.



SILAS: TECHNICALLY A VETERAN, BUT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT

Silas got out of the military as a junior captain and after four years of service. He joined the military through a commission at his hometown university having never really considered military service until they offered him a scholarship. Silas feels proud of his military service but never really felt like he was the “military kind.” Upon exiting the military, he has no real desire to show off his veteran identity, and, further, doesn’t really consider it a part of his identity. It’s not really that it makes him uncomfortable, it’s more that it just doesn’t resonate. He’s excited for his next chapter at school and beyond. He has a lot of ideas about careers from his pre-military life.



NEEDS: INCLUSIVITY

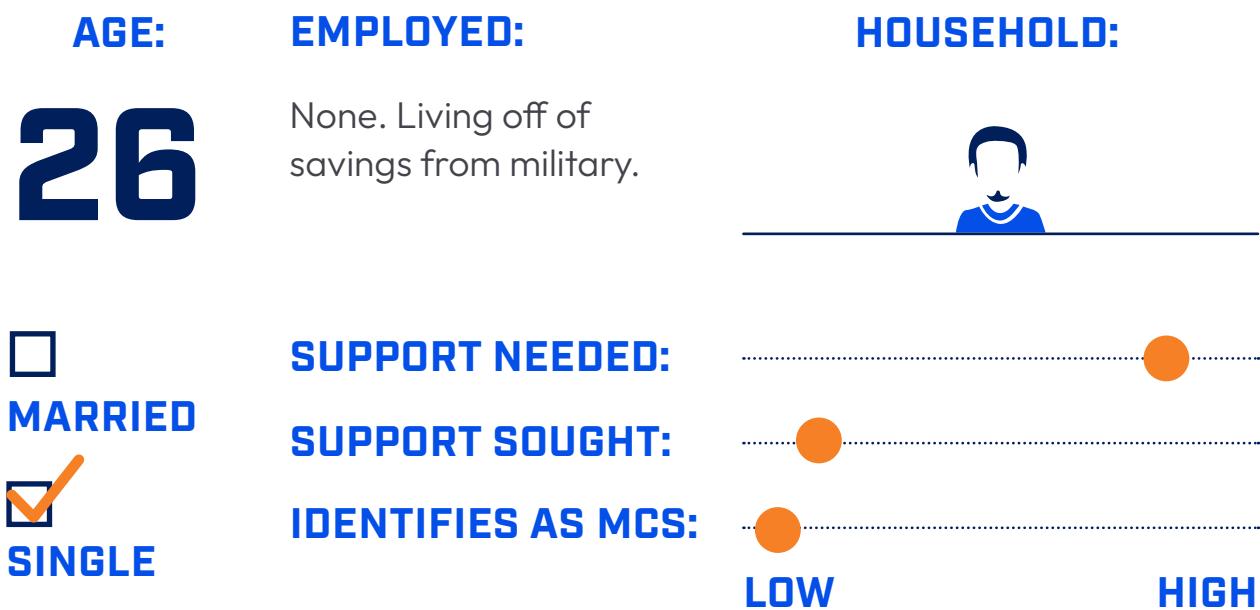
Institutions likely won't be able to get Silas's attention through traditional outreach and engagement. He isn't drawn to the same language, visuals, and opportunities. He'll need something that looks different so he can also self-identify. Silas won't attend military related events. Engaging him will require fresh approaches to community building, ones that are inclusive of many ways to interpret expressions of military service.

RISKS: SUPPORT

When he's in need of support and because Silas doesn't turn up in traditional veteran circles, it doesn't trigger support systems that are more finely tuned to help him. Mainstream support ecosystems will need to be specially equipped with "sensors" that can identify his military background and connect him with available support systems as needed.

IDENTITY: DISCOVERING

Silas doesn't feel like a veteran. He feels like someone who, for a period of time, was in the military. He had a strong sense of self prior to joining the military and that really never altered. He's happy to reengage that pre-military identity as he goes back to school.



ARRINGTON: THE MILITARY KID: THROUGH AND THROUGH

Arrington has only ever known a life within an extended “military family” context having been raised by his parents who both served full careers in the military. Growing up, he and his siblings frequently moved to new Army bases and he is familiar and comfortable with being “the new kid.” He feels at home around military people and their unique vernacular.

Now, on his own in a university setting surrounded by non-military people, he finds himself experiencing a new loneliness and growing anxiety. He’s proud of his military lineage but struggles to connect with others who share his experiences.



NEEDS: COMMUNITY

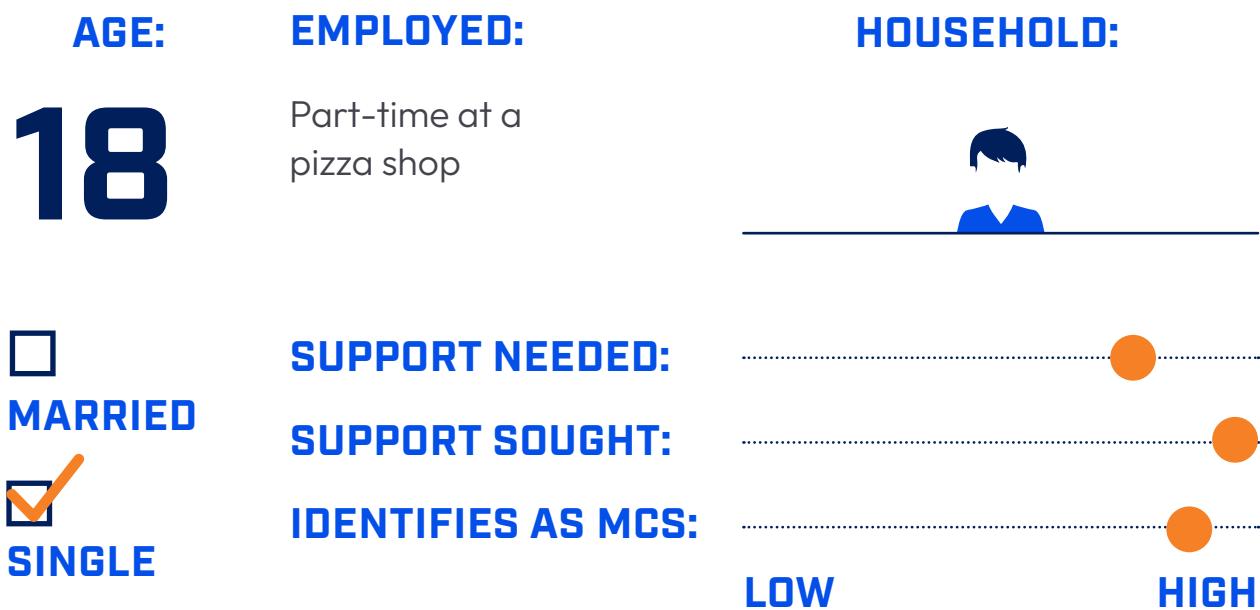
From his parents, Arrington has inherited military benefits for school but he needs high-touch guidance to navigate the complicated processes. Ideally, this guidance stems from a military connected touch point. It's critical that he has points of meaningful connection with other MCS (digitally and in-person), as well as with his benefits counselor. Arrington seeks community, creativity, and quality time that connects to his identity.

RISKS: DROPOUT

Without a set of familiar touch points, Arrington is a great risk of feeling unmoored. And while he may be able to find support in non-MCS spaces, without MCS connections he trends toward higher risk of dropping out. Those like Arrington and students from Gold Star Families may benefit from mental health focused touch points to help ease complicated stress.

IDENTITY: MILITARY FAMILY

Arrington identifies strongly with his family's military history and it deeply inhabits his personal history. He's forthcoming and proud to talk about it. At university, he's looking forward to his next chapter, as long as it incorporates where he's from.



KAT: AN UNNOTICED MILITARY KID

Kat was six years old when her father retired from the military. She's the youngest of four and while she remembers some parts of growing up around the military, her experiences are largely shaped within the community her parents chose for their retirement. While she feels a distant respect for her father's military service, it doesn't have an intimate place in her daily life. His service afforded her with military-related benefits to pay for her higher education. And while she's thankful for the help, having the benefits feels more transactional and logistical than having any bearing on her culturally and socially. When she gets to university, she immediately dives into art clubs and plays soccer in a pick up league with her friends from high school.



NEEDS: GUIDANCE

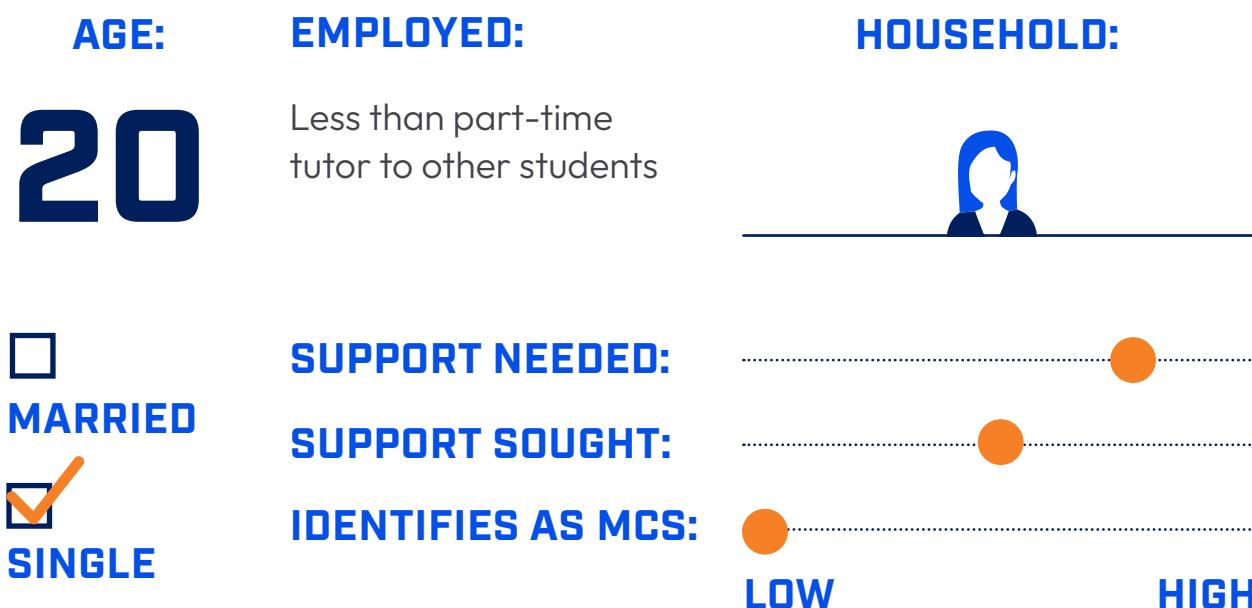
Kat has inherited military benefits for school but she needs high-touch guidance to navigate the complicated processes. Her touch points for benefits counsel and guidance may require a more transactional approach and suite of offerings since she's not seeking community through this interaction. She doesn't want to attend military-related events and outreach as she doesn't feel comfortable or identify with them.

RISKS: COURSE ALIGNMENT

Kat could use a partnership between her school counselor and a MCS-focused student success coach to ensure there are no seams between her course plans and requirements to maintain military benefits.

IDENTITY: CIVILIAN

For Kat, her military connected background is something that just doesn't occur to her. It's never been something she identifies with and so while she doesn't choose to hide it, she doesn't lead with it either. For her, she just feels more like the rest of her classmates: civilian.



TAMARA: MILITARY SPOUSE, FIRST & FOREMOST

Tamara loved the military for how she was able to provide for her family; it was a sense of job security for her husband, her community, and it was her sense of adventure. That's not to say it wasn't without hardship but she's found it has been worth it. Plus, she regularly leaned on her extended military family during deployments, field exercises, and more. She has held active volunteer roles in groups on base and feels like it took her no time at all to really embed into the community after, yet another, change of duty station. Her children are a bit older now and will be out of the house soon and so she's had a desire to go back to school and earn her master's degree on her way to figuring out what's next. She's nervous but ready.



NEEDS: COMMUNICATION

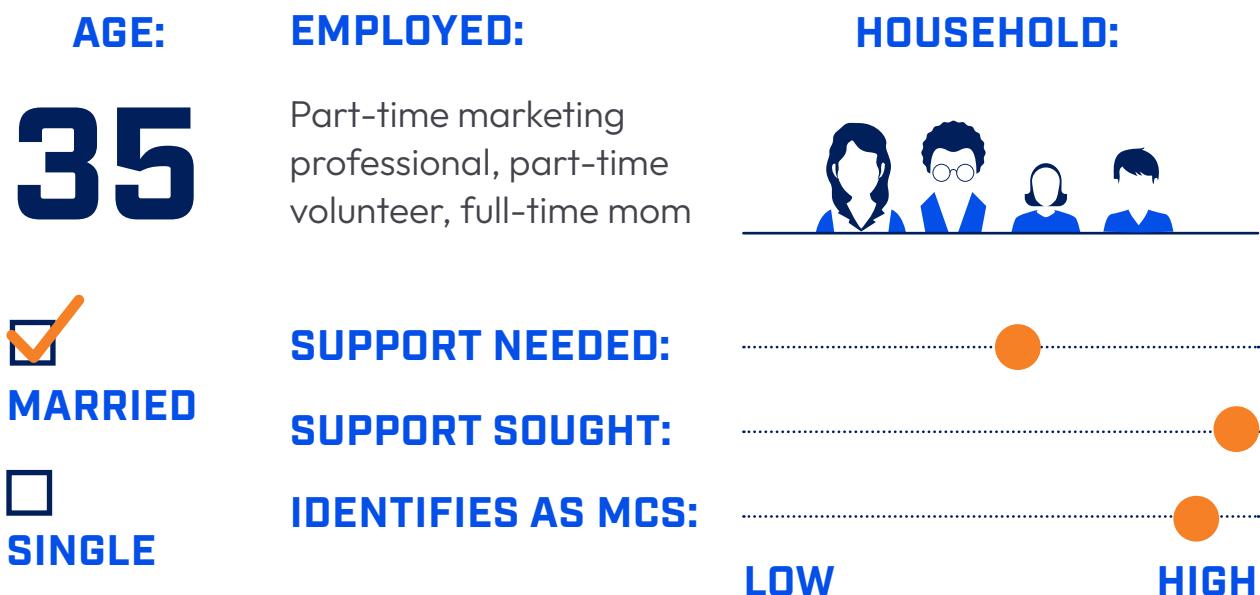
Tamara is a woman of action, she just needs to know the steps and bounds. This includes low-touch guidance for how to activate her husband's transferred education benefits. She likely doesn't need a ton of follow up to make it happen, but emotionally, it's nice. She appreciates meaningful outreach and authentic military-related connections. Tamara responds well to communication and creative assets that resemble military family culture, such as Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) communication tools on base.

RISKS: CRITICISM

Tamara must have an MCS community around her—people who speak the “military lingo” and have similar military-related experiences. Otherwise, she runs the risk of feeling too alienated to stay in place and pursue her degree. She may find it more reasonable to change schools if she finds a community more suitable. Moreover, she is totally turned off by anything critical of the military.

IDENTITY: PROUD

Tamara leads with her military related identity. She is extraordinarily proud of all her family has been through and sacrificed for this country. There is an expectation that she/they are recognized for this duty.



CHLOE: THE MILITARY HASN'T REALLY FIT, PROUD NONETHELESS

Chloe married her college sweetheart and together they launched into the military life after his commissioning. When she landed at their first duty station she quickly found herself feeling alone and had a hard time identifying with the other military spouses. She felt different; she liked different things, had different hobbies, and, until her husband, didn't know anyone who had served in the military. Chloe decided to go back to school as a way to advance her career and spend the extra time she had on her hands. She thought it might also provide an opportunity to meet some new people.



NEEDS: NAVIGATION

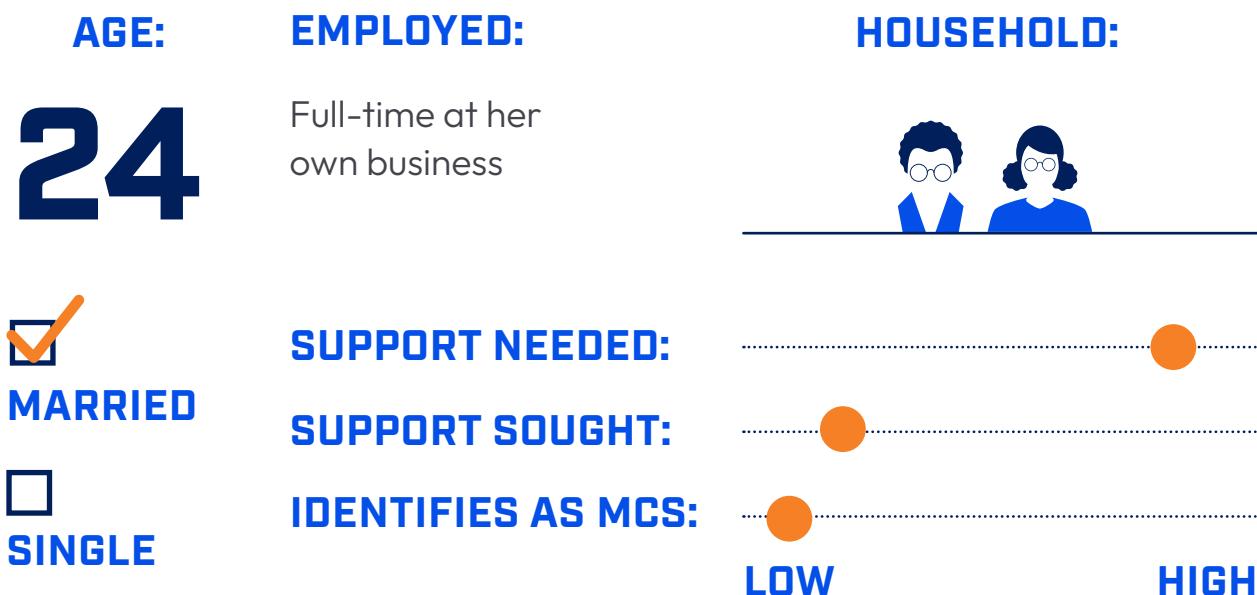
Chloe will need help navigating and translating “mil speak” and process in order for her to access, use, and maintain her husband’s education benefits. Likely medium to high touch support but it will need to look wholly different in language and points of connection as compared to other MCS. Chloe is unsure about how military life impacts her life. She would benefit from “in the know” counsel and imaginative guidance that helps her realize her full potential, in the midst of military constraints.

RISKS: ENGAGEMENT

Without the right engagement, Chloe runs the risk of missing out on benefits (timelines and options). She won’t likely resonate with military-branded communications. Instead, programming that is predictive and responsive to a variety of MCS “types” is key to meaningful engagement with Chloe.

IDENTITY: FORMER UNIVERSITY

Chloe doesn’t feel connected to the military culture and community. She doesn’t understand it and has no real desire to. She’s proud of her husband’s service but feels separate from it. Instead, she feels like a civilian; connected to her former university, hometown, and community from her past.



A MORE INFORMED APPROACH

BESPOKE + DATA-DRIVEN MARKETING

Through deep understanding of MCS segments, MissionWise designs creative and tailored assets, language, and channels that reach MCS in the ways they need to be reached and supported. We develop living messaging frameworks that evolve with continual testing and evaluation.

FLEXIBLE + TAILORED PROGRAMMING

One size does not fit all. MissionWise designs programs that are specific to MCS subpopulations and tailored to unique populations at each higher education institution. Programs address each groups' cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences.





NON-TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY BUILDING

MissionWise assumes a multi-cultural-first, community-focused, and outcome-driven approach to engaging the many segments of MCS. We tap into trusted voices and culturally resonant messaging to meet these students where they are.



MY RECOMMENDATION TO ANY OTHER DEAN WHO WANTS TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE THE VETERAN POPULATION IS TO BE VERY INTENTIONAL, STRUCTURED AND RESPONSIVE. THE INFORMATION THAT MISSIONWISE PROVIDES IS CRUCIAL, BUT THAT'S ONLY ONE PART. THEY ARE EMPATHIC, PATIENT AND KNOWLEDGEABLE WHILE REACHING OUT AND BEING PRESENT FOR STUDENTS.

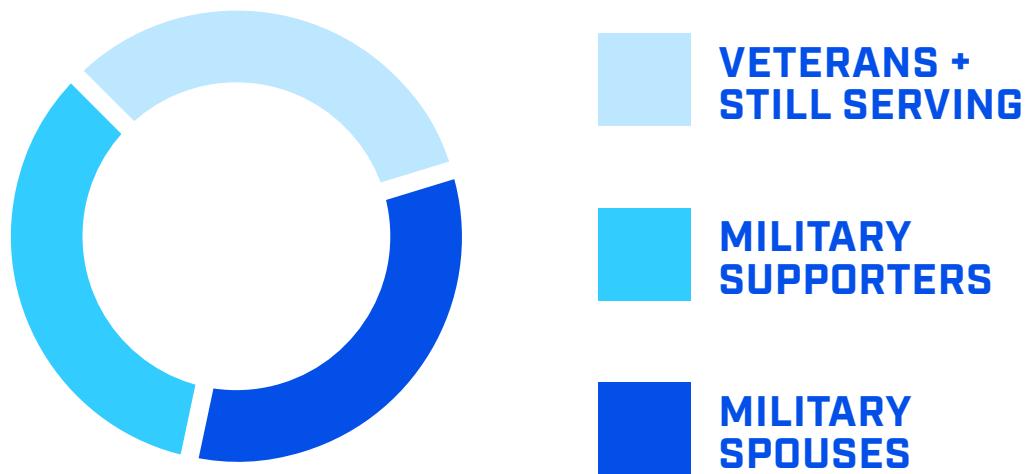
A DEAN OF UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS
AND MISSIONWISE CLIENT

INFORMED GUIDES + CREATIVE LIAISONS

MissionWise team members are unique in that they are creative, marketing and school counseling professionals that come from the military community they serve. They tap into insights and share evolving best practices across all of MissionWise's networked institutions.

They lean on this broad and deep knowledge base to work with institutions to develop creative approaches to serving a diverse and unique subpopulation of students.

THE MISSIONWISE TEAM POPULATION



MEASUREMENT + EVALUATION

MissionWise evaluates new programs, marketing and creative assets, and new product ideas against metrics like community informed desirability, viability, and feasibility.

We execute KPI measurement via regular surveys, evaluative and qualitative interviews, and marketing analyses.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

MissionWise measures meaningful progress through the lens of the MCS community and their senses of value. This, combined with assessments of the institutional financial perspective, provides the school a true sense of the ROI that can come with recruiting and better serving this population.

ENSURING A MORAL & FINANCIAL RETURN

Ensuring a moral and financial return on investment requires more than good intention. It requires a deep understanding of a very diverse population, with a variety of needs and perceptions. Only by understanding these nuances can institutions support MCS and see positive outcomes for these students combined with sustainable financial impact.

PARTNERSHIP

MissionWise wants to partner with you to develop a bespoke understanding of your institution's military connected students and apply our approach and team to tailored outreach, engagement, and community-building for your unique learning situation.



WE LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH YOU