

# Exploring the Library Experiences of Military Dependents

Sarah LeMire

## Abstract

College and university library programs and services for military-affiliated populations are typically aimed at student veterans and service members and not their spouses or children who are also students. However, librarians organizing programming for student veterans and service members often receive questions about also including other military-affiliated groups on campus, such as ROTC cadets or military dependents, the spouses/children of veterans who are using educational benefits, in their programming audience. This study explores the potential relevance of targeted library support for veterans and service members to military dependents. Findings suggest that incoming dependents' demographics and experiences with libraries are similar to those of other first time in college students. When designing programming and services for student veterans and service members, librarians should think critically about whether those programs and services are also appropriate for military dependents before expanding the target audience.

## Introduction

Colleges and universities have been embracing their military-affiliated students and developing resources to support their academic and social needs (McBain et al., 2012). However, which students are included under the umbrella of military-affiliated or military-connected students remains inconsistent. Many colleges and universities include dependents, along with student veterans and service members, in their military-affiliated student service populations. In the military, the term dependents typically refers to the spouses and minor children of military service members, regardless of their employment status. In higher education, the term dependents commonly includes the adult children and spouses who may be using their veteran parent or spouse's educational benefits. For example, a husband who is using his veteran wife's GI Bill benefits would be considered a dependent. At many colleges and universities, the number of military dependents far outstrips the number of student veterans and service members themselves. The student body at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas includes thousands of military dependents; military dependents outnumber veterans and service members by a ratio of approximately 2.5:1.

The Texas A&M University Libraries has identified student veterans as a targeted outreach population for the last several years. The author, a military veteran and dependent herself, has served as the Libraries' liaison to the campus Veteran Resource & Support Center for that period. Student veterans and service members were targeted for specific library support because they are often nontraditional students who may be returning to school (and academic libraries) after a gap, and they often experience circumstances associated with attrition (LeMire, 2017; Molina & Morse, 2015). The University Libraries' outreach efforts have included such activities as jointly-sponsored panel discussions and displays, resource tabling events, and veteran-specific library spaces. Recently, the University Libraries partnered with the Veteran Resource & Support Center (VRSC) to develop a library orientation for student veterans. Assessment feedback from student veterans who participated in the orientation included recommendations to expand the orientation to include military dependents as well.

Though this suggestion was fairly easy to implement, it led to some questions. Should the library extend its services and resources intended to support veterans and service members to dependents as well? For example, should dependents be granted access to the library's student veteran study room? Though reaching a larger group of students is often desirable, it is also important to think about the reasons that libraries are providing resources and services for veterans in the first place. Student veterans and service members often experience gaps in library use and experience (LeMire & Mulvihill, 2017). Do military dependents experience these same gaps?

This study is an initial step to identify the library experiences of students who are military dependents in order to better understand if library programs and services aimed at student veterans and service members are also appropriate for this student population. The research questions for this study are:

- How do incoming college students who are military dependents perceive libraries?
- How do incoming college students who are military dependents perceive their previous experiences with libraries?

## Literature Review

College and university libraries have increasingly recognized student veterans as a unique population on campus. Librarians have developed targeted approaches to engaging these populations. Common approaches include developing specific displays (Hildebrandt et al., 2019), appointing veteran liaisons (Samson, 2017), and hosting outreach programming such as panel discussions (Rutledge & LeMire, 2015). Libraries have also developed targeted instruction for veteran-specific courses (LeMire & Mulvihill, 2017; Fawley & Krysak, 2013) and orientations for veterans (Atwood et al., 2016, LeMire et al., 2020). Another common approach is to make the library space more friendly for veterans, by creating veteran study rooms (Samson, 2017) or lounges (Natal & Atwood, 2017) or maps that highlight spaces recommended for veterans (LeMire, 2015).

Although the library literature has thus far focused its military connected programming on student veterans, college and university campuses often extend some of their student veteran programs to include military dependents as well. For example, textbook lending programs at Texas A&M University and Western Kentucky University allow dependents as well as veterans to check out textbooks (Aggie Shields, 2020; Western Kentucky University, 2020). Military dependents typically include the spouses and children of service members and veterans. While these dependents may not have served in the military themselves, their educational opportunities and experiences have been affected by their family member's military service. The employment challenges of military spouses are well documented; military spouses are more likely to be unemployed than their civilian peers and to earn less when they are employed (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; Sonethavilay et al., 2018). Military spouses also may have had limited opportunities to pursue higher education due to frequent moves, cost of child care, or limited access to family support (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017). Children of service members and veterans may have experienced frequent moves and other family instability that may have interrupted their educational progress (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017). Indeed, many of today's military-connected college students have only ever experienced the United States as a nation at war and may have been directly impacted by a parent's deployment(s) to a combat zone.

Though the life and educational experiences of dependents are tied to those of veterans and service members, there is a gap in the literature on the specific library experiences of dependents. Previous

research indicated that, despite prior college experience, student veterans have low levels of familiarity with academic library resources and services (LeMire et al., 2020). It is unclear whether dependents have experiences with libraries that more closely approach those of veterans and service members, or of their civilian peers. If dependents' library experiences parallel those of student veterans and service members, then expanding libraries' outreach to military populations to include dependents is an important next step. However, if dependents' library experiences more closely match those of traditional incoming student populations, then outreach aimed at nontraditional students like student veterans may not be a good fit for this population. This study is a first step toward identifying the needs and experiences of dependents in academic libraries.

## Methodology

In order to get feedback from a large number of military dependents, the author decided to implement a survey of incoming dependents. Military veterans and service members, as well as dependents using a sponsor's veterans or military educational benefits, take part in a specific Veteran Resource & Support Center (VRSC) briefing as part of their New Student Conferences. During this briefing, student veterans and service members are asked to fill out a one-page VRSC questionnaire located in their new student folders. The Veteran Resource & Support Center offered to include a separate library survey in the new student folders that dependents would complete at the same time student veterans and service members were completing their VRSC questionnaire.

After receiving a determination of not human subjects research by the Institutional Review Board, the author distributed several hundred print surveys to the Veteran Resource & Support Center to insert into the dependent new student folders for New Student Conferences. During the summer of 2019 and spring 2020, incoming dependents completed the surveys, which did not track any personally identifiable information, during New Student Conferences. After New Student Conferences, the surveys were returned to the author for analysis.

Survey data was transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Multiple-choice, multiple-answer, and Likert-style questions were analyzed for frequency of response. Short-answer questions were coded thematically to identify response patterns.

## Participants

Over the course of the two semesters, the author received 391 surveys from military dependents, of which 50 were dropped because respondents indicated that they were under the age of 18, leaving 341 total valid surveys. Though the precise response rate is unclear, it is likely that the large number of responses is attributable to having the surveys embedded within the VRSC's folders and program. The majority of the responses were from dependents who identified themselves as the child of a service member or veteran (Figure 1). Due to the small number of dependents who identified as the spouse of a service member or veteran, the responses will not be broken out by type of dependent (spouse or child).

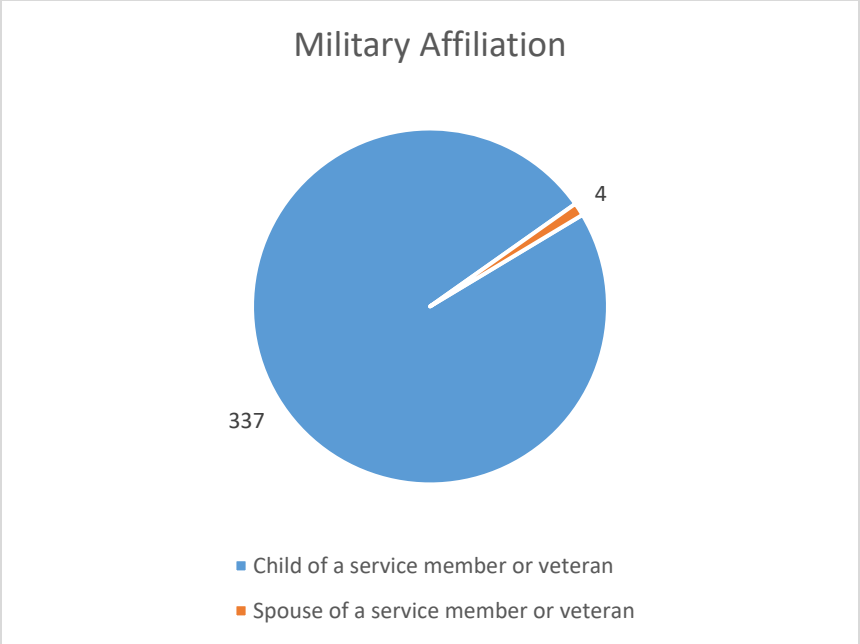


Figure 1: Participants' Military Affiliation

Because it was a print survey, it was possible to skip questions, select multiple responses, or write in additional responses in the margins. Therefore, the number of responses to demographic questions does not match the number of respondents in some categories.

First, respondents were asked two demographic questions related to their sponsor’s military service. Responses indicated that military dependents at Texas A&M University have ties to all of the military branches, including the Coast Guard (Table 1). The largest number of respondents selected the US Army as their affiliated branch of service. Most respondents reported that their sponsor had at least some service on active duty; only 33 (10%) reported a parent who was in the Reserves/National Guard exclusively.

Table 1. Branch of Service

Branch Code Selected	Branch Name	Number of Respondents
USA	US Army	138
USAF	US Air Force	95
USCG	US Coast Guard	7
USN	US Navy	55
USMC	US Marine Corps	48

Another key demographic question related to the dependents’ age group. The majority (320, or 94%) of respondents were in the 18-20 age bracket.

## Results

In addition to demographic questions, the survey asked dependents some multiple-choice questions about their library usage patterns, Likert-style questions about their comfort levels using libraries, and a

free-text question about their experiences using libraries. The results for these questions are summarized below.

First, dependents were asked how often they had visited a library of any type (e.g. public, academic, school, military, etc.) over the past five years (Figure 1). Dependents reported frequent library usage, with the most common answers being once a week or more (93, or 27%) and once a month (143, or 42%). Very few respondents selected the least frequent options; 12 respondents (4%) reported visiting a library only once in the last five years, and only two (<1%) indicated that they had not visited a library at all.

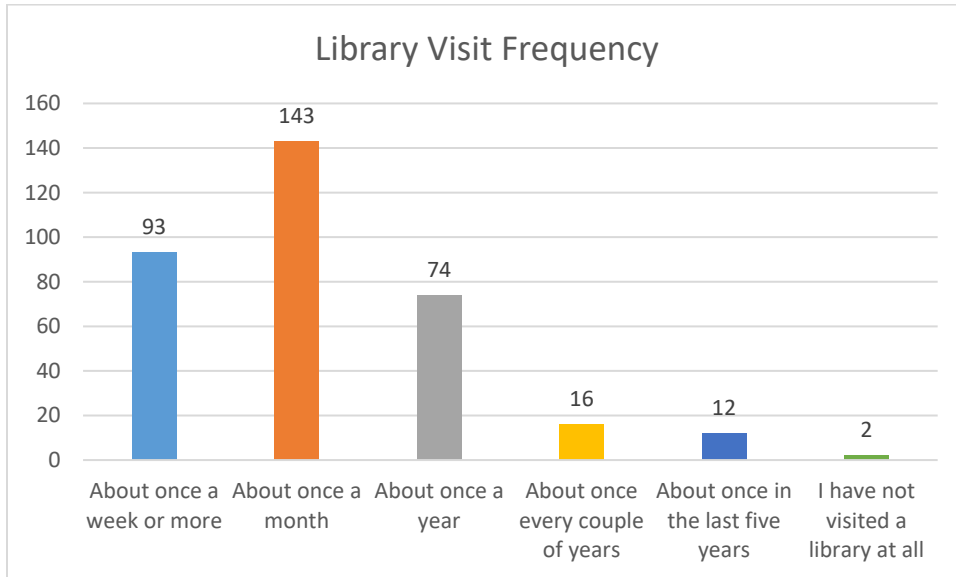


Figure 2: Library Visit Frequency

Respondents were also asked about the types of libraries that they used in the last five years (Figure 2). Many respondents selected multiple library types, with high school libraries (278, or 82%) and public libraries (174, or 51%) as the most common option. A substantial number of respondents (124, or 36%) also indicated using a college or university library. Interestingly, very few (11, or 3%) reported using a military library in the last five years.

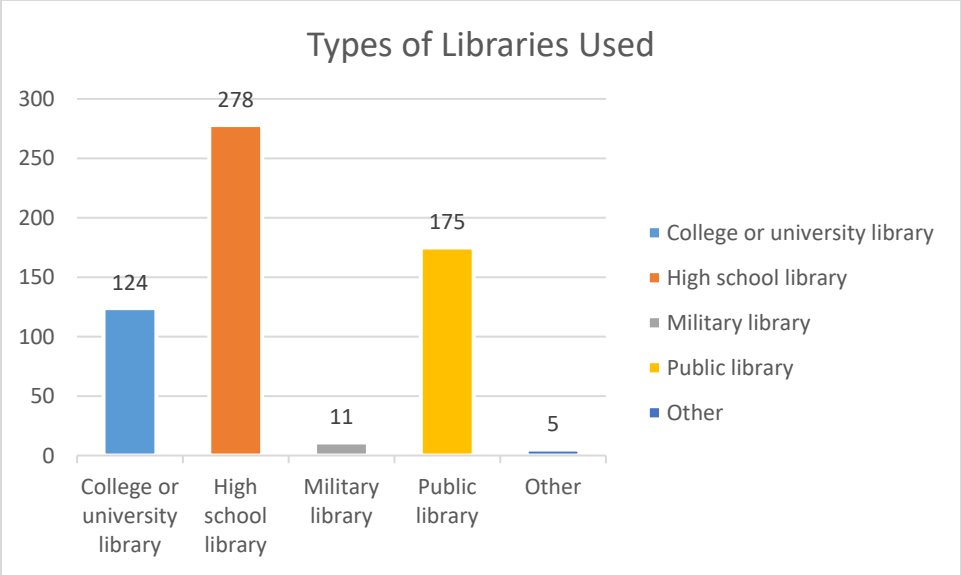


Figure 3: Types of Libraries Used

In addition to asking about dependents’ library usage, the survey asked dependents to indicate their levels of agreement with 5 Likert-style statement pairs about their comfort level with libraries and their sense of preparedness for using academic libraries. Each pair was intended to lead respondents to consider their library comfort and confidence levels in the same area from two different angles. Responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Comfort and Familiarity with Libraries

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>I feel comfortable using libraries</b>	167	154	14	5	1
<b>I feel nervous about using libraries.</b>	1	6	27	145	161
<b>I feel prepared for college-level research</b>	44	182	82	29	3
<b>I find the idea of doing college-level research intimidating.</b>	11	113	86	95	36
<b>My past interactions with librarians have been positive.</b>	149	152	35	5	0
<b>I don't want to ask questions at the library because I feel like I should know this stuff already.</b>	3	34	68	169	67
<b>I'm worried that my professors will assign a research project and I won't know where to start.</b>	18	88	98	110	27
<b>I am confident in my ability to do research for my upcoming research papers and projects.</b>	61	185	68	25	2
<b>I'm concerned that I won't know how to use the library because so much has changed since I last used one.</b>	2	25	49	165	100

<b>I feel confident that I have up-to-date research skills.</b>	59	172	81	25	4
---	----	-----	----	----	---

Respondents reported feeling very comfortable using libraries, with 167 (49%) strongly agreeing and 154 (45%) agreeing and low levels of nervousness. Respondents were more mixed in their perceptions of preparedness for research. Though most (226, or 66%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt prepared for college level research, a substantial number (124, or 36%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt intimidated by doing college-level research. And though most (246, or 71%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident in their ability to research, many (106, or 31%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were worried about not knowing where to start with a research project.

Finally, dependents were asked to respond to the free-text question “How would you describe your experience using libraries?” Participants interpreted this question in very different ways, so the author coded their responses into two primary groups, attitudinal and experiential comments. Attitudinal comments included participant responses that reflected participant attitudes about the library (e.g., “positive” or “helpful”). Experiential comments reflected participant perceptions of their prior experiences with libraries (e.g., “I used them for high school and college research”). Within these two groups, participant comments were coded into the 18 categories listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Dependents’ Experiences using Libraries

Code	Example Comment	No. of Responses
<b>Attitudinal Comments</b>		
<b>General positive</b>	Awesome!, Beneficial, Positive	197
<b>Helpful</b>	Helpful, useful	38
<b>Neutral</b>	Adequate, Pretty average	20
<b>Qualifier</b>	Helpful but not an ideal study place for me personally	21
<b>Confident</b>	I can find anything I need pretty easily	14
<b>Easy to use</b>	It's easy and straightforward	13
<b>Comfortable</b>	Quiet and comfortable experience	11
<b>General negative</b>	A bit confusing, Frustrating	7
<b>Experiential Comments</b>		
<b>Research</b>	I have used them for high school and college research	33
<b>Limited experience</b>	Relatively minimal, Slightly inexperienced	26
<b>Study space</b>	Enjoy going between classes to study	24
<b>High experience</b>	I used my high school library constantly for school projects	15
<b>Librarian help</b>	The librarians are very helpful and answer my questions to the best of their abilities	10
<b>Available resources</b>	Plenty of resources available	10
<b>Moderate experience</b>	I've traditionally used it on a casual basis	3
<b>Computers</b>	Mostly use libraries for computer labs etc.	5
<b>Limited resources</b>	Sometimes the resources run out/aren't enough	3

The largest response group was the attitudinal group. Within that group, participant comments frequently fell within the general positive category, in which respondents indicated in some way that

they have had positive experiences using libraries in the past. Indeed, 197 respondents (58%) mentioned in some way that they enjoyed using libraries. Other common positive responses to libraries included that they were helpful (38, or 11%) or that they were easy to use (13, or 4%). Though less frequently, respondents also indicated negative experiences with libraries in the past. Respondents indicated that they had a generally negative experience with libraries (7, or 2%) or that they had limited resources available to use (3, or 1%). Some respondents indicated a mixed experience using libraries by adding a qualifier to an initial positive statement (21, or 6%). For example, one respondent described their experience with libraries “Helpful but not an ideal study place for me personally.”

The experiential group of comments was considerably smaller than the attitudinal group. Within that group, participants most commonly described using the library for research (33, or 10%). Concerningly, a number of participants indicated that participants had limited experience using libraries (26, or 8%).

## Discussion

Military and veteran dependents are a large population with an age range that includes infants all the way up to senior citizens (Sonethavilay et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). However, this study’s findings suggest that, at Texas A&M University, the dependent population is similar in age to a traditional college student population. The vast majority of the participants (94%) fell in 18-20 year age range. This suggests that the military dependents enrolling at Texas A&M University are likely to be traditional college students, at least in terms of age.

Demographic results also revealed that the vast majority of dependents were the children of service members or veterans. Recent iterations of the GI Bill enabled service members to pass their educational benefits to their dependents, and it is unsurprising that many service members opted to pass those benefits to their children. Service members have access to some educational benefits while serving in the military, and Texas veterans in particular have access to additional state educational benefits that they could use for themselves or pass to a child (LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017). There are fewer educational benefits available to military spouses, though as indicated previously, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs statistics indicate that approximately 25% of GI Bill benefit transfers in 2018 were to spouses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). Given this statistic, it is surprising that so few respondents are using a spouse’s educational benefits to attend Texas A&M University.

Respondents’ age range combined with the heavy response rate from the children of service members and dependents suggests that librarians should expect outreach to dependents to reach a very traditional service population. Military spouses are likely to be less traditional, but because they are such a small percentage of the incoming dependents, mass messaging to all enrolled dependents is unlikely to be an effective strategy for communicating with military spouses. Instead, efforts to reach military spouses specifically will have to be very carefully targeted to reach their mark.

The respondents’ reported experiences with libraries also appear similar to what might be expected of civilian peers. Research on library use by high school students suggests that they are likely to be regular library users (Zickhur et. al, 2012). Although some participants commented that they had limited library experience, overall survey responses indicate that these military dependents are frequent library users, with most using the library once a week or once a month. The most common type of library used is a high school library, followed by a public library. Unlike many military service members or spouses, who may have made heavier use of the on-base library at their military installation, very few respondents



reported using a military library in the last five years. Though it is unclear why so few used military libraries, it is likely that access was easier to libraries in their schools or outside the military installation's gates. Respondents' reported library usage pattern indicates that librarians might expect that outreach and instruction to military dependents should look very similar to offerings to traditional student populations.

Dependents reported feeling very comfortable and confident in using libraries, both in their Likert-style responses and their free-text responses. Respondents most strongly agreed with the statements "I feel comfortable using libraries" and "My past interactions with librarians have been positive." They disagreed most strongly with the statements "I feel nervous about using libraries" and "I'm concerned that I won't know how to use the library because so much has changed since I last used one." Their free-text responses commonly included effusive statements describing their experiences with libraries as "A positive and enlightening experience that was very beneficial" or "Efficient, needed, and wanted." Dependents' positive associations with libraries suggests that they may not experience high levels of library anxiety upon starting college.

It is important to recall that positive feelings about libraries may not correlate with information literacy skills and expertise (Mahmood, 2016; Molteni & Chan, 2015). Although a number of students commented that they had experience using the library to do research, many respondents agreed with or had a neutral response to the statement, "I'm worried that my professors will assign a research project and I won't know where to start." This may suggest that dependents are less confident in their research skills than they are with recreational library use. Additional research is necessary to understand the specific information literacy skills of dependents.

Dependents' demographics and experiences with libraries closely align with what librarians would expect to see from other incoming first time in college students. Based upon this initial survey, dependents' educational experiences with libraries do not seem to vary considerably based upon their sponsor's military service. Librarians providing targeted library services and programming for student veterans and service members should carefully consider the effectiveness of including dependents in their outreach to student veterans and service members. Student veterans and military dependents alike may benefit from expanding the audience of some library programs to specifically include dependents as well as veterans and service members. A more inclusive approach to displays or panel discussions about life in the military can benefit all participants. However, programming aimed at student veterans as nontraditional students with significant gaps in their educational experiences may not be appropriate for the dependent population identified here. One important caveat is that the small number of military spouse respondents made it impossible to analyze their experiences with any degree of validity. It is possible that spouses' experiences are more akin to those of veterans and service members than are their children's. Additional research is necessary to determine whether including military spouses in library programming and services for student veterans and service members is likely to be appropriate and useful.

## Limitations and Next Steps

This study has several limitations. This survey was disseminated only at Texas A&M University, and its results cannot be generalizable to other institutions. Additionally, the surveys were not distributed in a controlled environment. Students completed them as part of their orientation folders, and some may

have received assistance from parents in completing the survey. Finally, while this survey establishes a baseline of dependents' library comfort and familiarity at Texas A&M University, it does not compare those results to other incoming student populations, especially student veterans and service members.

Additional research is needed in order to fully understand the library experiences of military-affiliated populations, including student veterans, service members, and military dependents. In particular, further investigation into the library experiences of military spouses is key to deeper understanding of the dependent population. Additionally, better understanding of the information literacy skills and behaviors of the veteran and military-affiliated communities is necessary in order to identify ways to provide more complete support of military-affiliated patrons as students and as scholars.

## Conclusion

Dependents are a large population on many college campuses that likely far outstrips the population of student veterans and service members. Although dependents' educational experiences may have been impacted by their sponsor's military service, it appears that dependents' experiences with libraries are likely to be similar to those of their civilian peers. Librarians developing programming for student veterans and service members should be cautious when considering whether to expand their audience to include dependents as well. Librarians may be able to easily adapt some programs and resources, such as panel discussions or print collateral, to better meet the needs of the entire veteran and military community. However, librarians trying to reach student veterans and service members as a nontraditional population with gaps in their library experience may find their messaging ill-suited for dependents who report frequent and recent use of their high school libraries. Finally, librarians should continue to work with patrons and strategic partners on their campuses to improve library programs and services for military-affiliated students. By better understanding the library knowledge and experiences of veterans, service members, and dependent spouses and children, librarians will be able to continue to improve the effectiveness of the programs and services they offer for these populations.

## References

- Aggie Shields. (2020). *Our purpose*. <https://www.aggieshields.org/>
- Atwood, T., Farmer, M., McDonald, K., Miller, B., Theodore-Shusta, E., & Wood, E. J. (2016). On the front lines: Serving Ohio's best. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 42(2), 172–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.12.011>
- Council of Economic Advisors. (2018). *Military spouses in the labor market*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Military-Spouses-in-the-Labor-Market.pdf>
- Fawley, N., & Krysak, N. (2013). Serving those who serve: Outreach and instruction for student cadets and veterans. In D. Mueller (Ed.), *Imagine, innovate, inspire: The proceedings of the ACRL 2013 conference* (pp. 525–531). Association of College and Research Libraries. [http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/FawleyKrysak\\_Serving.pdf](http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/FawleyKrysak_Serving.pdf)

- Hildebrandt, B., Knight-Davis, S., Pionke, J. J., & Cougill, A. (2019). Designs of duty: Using exhibits to build partnerships. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 26(1), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2019.1582394>
- LeMire, S. (2015). Beyond service: New outreach strategies to reach student veterans. In D. Mueller (Ed.), *Creating sustainable community: The proceedings of the ACRL 2015 conference* (pp. 66–71). Association of College and Research Libraries. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2015/LeMire.pdf>
- LeMire, S., & Mulvihill, K. J. (2017). *Serving those who served: Librarian's guide to working with veteran and military communities*. ABC-CLIO.
- LeMire, S., Graves, S.J., Buckner, S., Freeman, D.D., & Smith, G.L. (2020). Basic training: A library orientation designed for student veterans. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41(4), 102137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102137>
- Mahmood, K. (2016). Do people overestimate their information literacy skills? A systematic review of empirical evidence on the Dunning-Kruger effect. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 10(2), 198-213. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2016.10.2.24>
- McBain, L., Kim, Y.M., Cook, B.J., & Snead, K.M. (2012). *From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/From-Soldier-to-Student-II-Assessing-Campus-Programs.pdf>
- Molina, D., & Morse, A. (2015). *Military-connected undergraduates: Exploring differences between National Guard, Reserve, active duty, and veterans and in higher education*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Military-Connected-Undergraduates.pdf>
- Molteni, V. E., & Chan, E. K. (2015). Student confidence/overconfidence in the research process. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41(1), 2-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.11.012>
- Natal, G., Atwood T. (2018). Cover Me, I'm going in: Exploring the needs of student veterans. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 25(4):335-349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2018.1514285>.
- Rutledge, L., & LeMire, S. (2016). Beyond disciplines: Providing outreach to underserved groups by demographic. *Public Services Quarterly*, 12(2), 113–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2016.1157565>
- Samson, S. (2017). Student veterans in the academic library. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 24(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2015.1125318>
- Sonethavilay, H., Maury, R.V., Hurwitz, J.L., Linsner Uveges, R., Akin, J.L., DeCoster, J.L., Strong, J.D. (2018). *2018 Blue Star Families military family lifestyle survey: Comprehensive report*. Blue Star Families. <https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018MFLS-ComprehensiveReport-DIGITAL-FINAL.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Defense. (2018). *2018 demographics profile of the military community*. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2018-demographics-report.pdf>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans Benefits Administration. (2018). *FY 2018 annual benefits report—education section*. <https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2018-education.pdf>

Western Kentucky University. (2020). *Textbooks for troops*.  
<https://www.wku.edu/veterans/textbooksfortroops.php>

Zickhur, K., Rainie, L., Purcell, K., Madden, M., & Brenner, J. (2012). *Younger Americans' reading and library habits*. Pew Research Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537514.pdf>