

Are Student Veterans Going to be Denied Access to CARES Act Emergency Relief Funds?

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act [authorized](#) more than \$6 billion in emergency cash grants “to students” enrolled in campus-based postsecondary education, to be distributed by their colleges. On April 9, 2020, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos [wrote](#) to college presidents that they had “significant discretion on how to award this emergency assistance to students... which may include distributing the funds to all students or only to students who demonstrate significant need.” On April 21, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued updated [guidance](#) restricting the aid to students eligible for Title IV federal student aid. College administrators and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators immediately [noted](#) that having a student’s FAFSA on file would be the only practicable way for an institution to determine that a student is Title IV-eligible and therefore eligible for the cash grants. The California Community Colleges [sued](#) ED for excluding more than half of their students from the cash grants, including student veterans. This fact sheet examines the impact of ED’s guidance on student veterans.

At issue is which students are eligible for the cash grants. If ED maintains its April 21 guidance restricting the aid to students eligible for Title IV, and if institutions interpret this to exclude students who have not filed a FAFSA, many student veterans will be left out. According to ED survey data, undergraduate student veterans are less likely than non-veterans to file a FAFSA. In academic year 2015-16, 36 percent of undergraduate student veterans did not file a FAFSA, compared to 29 percent of non-veterans (see figure). The generosity of the Post-9/11 GI Bill likely contributes to this disparity. However, the generosity of the GI Bill does not mean that campus-based student veterans were not affected by the disruptions caused by coronavirus, which is the [stated reason](#) for the grants.

The proportion of undergraduate student veterans who did not complete a FAFSA application in 2015-16 varied by institutional sector. Thus, almost half of undergraduate veterans at 2-year public colleges did not file a FAFSA, compared to 35 percent at 4-year nonprofit schools, 33 percent at 4-year public institution, and only 21 percent at 2- and 4-year for-profit schools. The sector disparity regarding FAFSA completion rates reflects tuition differences, particularly the high cost of for-profit schools and the low cost at community colleges. Our January 2019 [report](#) on veteran student loan debt found that a higher proportion of undergraduate veterans at for-profit schools had federal student loan debt compared to other institutional sectors.

Not included in ED’s survey data are military-affiliated students going to school on a Reserve Officer Training Course (ROTC) scholarship and military students using the Department of Defense Tuition Assistance program. Additionally, ED’s survey would not have captured veterans not using the GI Bill unless they self-identified.

