

Cyber-school students: Pentagon snubs our service

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Jarad Dennis, 18 , logs onto his school website in his home in Lexington, S.C. Saturday, May 7, 2011. Dennis, who will graduate from the South Carolina Connections Academy virtual school this June, was told by an Air Force recruiter that he would need to complete one year of college-level classes before he could join. Students graduating from the growing ranks of online high schools are running into a hurdle if their goal is to join the military: The Pentagon doesn't want many recruits from alternative or home schools. (AP Photo/Mary Ann Chastain)

(AP) -- Students graduating from the growing ranks of online high schools are running into a hurdle if their goal is to join the military: The Pentagon doesn't want many recruits with non-traditional diplomas.

Many would-be soldiers like Ryker Packard, 17, of Fassett, Pa., say they weren't aware the armed services have a policy of not taking more than

10 percent of recruits with a non-traditional [high school](#) diploma. Critics, including some in Congress, say the military is behind the times and point to the growth on online teaching and testing at all levels of education, including college degrees.

"It just grinds my gears," said Packard, who wants to become an Army diesel mechanic after graduating from Pennsylvania's Agora Cyber Charter School in June.

Packard said his conversation with an Army recruiter came to a brusque end after he told him he was due to graduate from a virtual school. "He just wouldn't talk to me," said Packard.

Packard's mom, Sherri, said her son switched to online classes after floundering in a geometry course at his brick-and-mortar school. Once he got the attention of online teachers, his grades improved, she said.

Packard said her son's school is fully accredited by the state of Pennsylvania, which requires students to pass the same tests and meet the same curriculum requirements as those in traditional schools.

"It's part of the public school system," said Sherri Packard, 43. "It's considered one of the best in the state."

Job prospects amid the rolling hills and farms of northern Pennsylvania are slim, Ryker said. "My options are to work for the gas company or on a pig farm," the dejected teen said in a telephone interview.

Ryker and his family unknowingly ran into a policy the Department of Defense has that ranks graduates of traditional high schools as "Tier 1" and those from alternatives as "Tier 2" status. Tier 1 graduates now make up 99 percent of all recruits for all military branches, according to [Pentagon](#) spokeswoman Eileen Lainez. The secondary status includes

virtual and homeschoolers, as well as those who've left high school and earned a GED or General Education Development certificate.

Lainez said the Department of Defense limits all branches of the military to accepting no more than 10 percent of recruits with what is known as an "alternate high school credential."

Those who've opted out of the traditional educational system just don't stick with military service, she said. That includes students from what she called "any computer-based, virtual-learning program."

"Years of research and experience show recruits with a traditional high school diploma are more likely to complete their initial three years of service than their alternate credential-holding (Tier 2) peers," Lainez said. Data collected since 1988 shows only 28 percent of graduates with traditional diplomas leave military service before their first three years in uniform, while those with non-traditional backgrounds have a 39 percent attrition rate, she said.

It comes down to money because it costs \$45,000 to replace someone who hasn't met their full term, she said.

But some members of Congress and supporters of online schools say the Pentagon should reconsider, in particular given the military's penchant for computerized weaponry and cyber warfare.

"We are dealing with new technology," said Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., head of the House Armed Services subcommittee on personnel. "We just need to keep adapting."

Former Marine and Rep. Duncan Hunter, Jr., R-Calif., who is the only member of Congress to have served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, said it's unbelievable that potential recruits are being turned away during

wartime.

"Their level of education is often right on par with traditional public school graduates," said Hunter.

The congressman, who serves with Wilson on the Armed Services and Education Committees, said he doesn't want to tell the military whom to recruit, but he thinks it will have to broaden its thinking when an improved economy starts pulling applicants into the job market.

Their subcommittee has inserted language into its portion of the Pentagon fiscal year 2012 budget bill instructing the military to treat students from online high schools equally if the schools are in line with state education laws. The full committee is due to take action on the bill on May 11.

One of the main backers of virtual schools says it has been seeking a change in the military's policy because the number of students attending online is growing.

Peter Groff, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said his organization estimates 168,310 students attended virtual schools in 2009-2010. They know of 219 charter schools that are purely online, and 134 that are a hybrid of bricks-and-mortar and virtual schooling, he said.

Projected enrollment is expected to increase next year by 7,000 students, Groff said.

States such as Minnesota have had programs for 20 years, while Utah, Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania also have seen strong growth, he said. In all, 40 states and the District of Columbia have some form of charter school program allowed, he said.

Jared Dennis, Lexington, S.C., said he was devastated when he sought out an Air Force recruiter, but was told he was in "Tier 2" status. He was told he could enlist only after he took about a year of college-level classes.

"It was heartbreaking to say the least," said the 18-year-old, who said he wants to follow a family tradition of joining the service and become a military policeman. He is set to graduate from the Connections Academy in Columbia in June, one of South Carolina's five virtual public charter schools.

Dennis's mother, Alice, said she sought out the virtual charter school after her son was barred from returning to his public school on a weapons violation. He left a pocket knife in his jacket, violating the school system's zero-tolerance policy. They sought an alternative where Jared could continue with honors-level classes, she said.

In California, 19-year-old Mandi Jenkins of Long Beach, said she gave up trying to join the military after graduating last year from Connections Academy in San Clemente. The message she got was the same as that given to Dennis: Go get some college credit.

Attending a virtual school fit Jenkins' schedule because she played competitive tennis. Now, she is thinking of becoming a professional tennis player instead of donning an Army uniform. Heeding her experience, Jenkins said her 17-year-old brother is staying in his local traditional high school because he wants to join the Marine Corps.

Jenkins said she's upset with the idea that students with a cyber-education are considered less capable of fitting in or following commands.

"You still have to get your work in, you have to turn it in on time," she

said.

One student who was able to get the military's attention is 20-year-old Greg Bush, who is attending Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, on a four-year Army ROTC scholarship.

The Delaware, Ohio, native said he thinks attending Ohio's Virtual Academy was a plus, both academically and socially. He was able to take Advanced Placement courses in English and literature and was able to feed an interest in military history and earned a 3.7 grade point average.

"I was a very introverted person, and doing so much course work on line drove me to reach out" to make friendships, he said. "It really benefited me."

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