Research on Improving the Efficiency of College Student Conscription in Nanjing Universities from the Perspective of Collaborative Governance

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Abstract

Conscription of college students constitutes a key component of national defense manpower recruitment. College-based conscription involves multiple stakeholders including military service authorities, institutions of higher education, students' families and social-market entities. The overall efficiency of conscription directly hinges on effective collaboration among these diverse actors. Adopting collaborative governance as an analytical perspective, this paper draws on 3,238 questionnaires from enrolled college students in Nanjing universities, 25 questionnaires for conscription practitioners, and conscription statistics spanning 2015-2018. This study sorts out the current status of multi-agent collaboration in college student conscription in Nanjing. It identifies bottlenecks in institutional, informational, resource-based and cognitive dimensions of collaboration. Furthermore, it constructs a four-in-one collaborative governance framework of "government-university-family-society". Practical approaches to boosting conscription efficiency are proposed in terms of improving institutional coordination, facilitating information sharing, strengthening resource integration and expanding social collaboration. This study provides decision-making references for local authorities to optimize college-student conscription work.

Keywords

College-student conscription, Universities, Collaborative governance, Multi-stakeholders

Introduction

Research background and significance

A strong military hinges on capable personnel. Against the backdrop of the strategies of strengthening the military through science and technology and talent-driven military development, recruiting high-quality college-student servicemen has become vital to the modernization of national-defense and the armed forces [1]. Across the globe, highly educated high-quality youth have long been prioritized for military recruitment. In developed countries, active-duty officers mostly hold bachelor's or higher degrees, while soldiers generally have at least a high-school education. Highly educated service members form the backbone of military modernization.

In China, pilot conscription targeting full-time college students was launched in 2001. Full-scale recruitment of college students began in 2009. In 2013, the conscription cycle was shifted from winter to summer-autumn, creating a direct "campus-to-barracks" pathway for college students. A three-tier national-provincial-municipal policy system has gradually taken shape. As a major education hub, Nanjing hosts dozens of higher-learning institutions with a huge, enrolled student population, making it a core source of college-student recruits in Jiangsu Province.

Nevertheless, well-crafted policy texts do not guarantee desired implementation outcomes. In policy-implementation research, it is widely acknowledged that policy design accounts for merely 10.00% of goal achievement, whereas effective execution accounts for the remaining 90.00%. University conscription in Nanjing has achieved generally positive outcomes. Even so, several practical challenges remain. These include weak internal coordination within universities, disjointed collaboration between military recruitment authorities and higher education institutions, insufficient family-

based mobilization, and inadequate social support. A paradox emerges: "Military-service authorities are highly motivated while some university departments remain passive. Universities run vigorous publicity campaigns, yet some families and students show little enthusiasm". Spanning civil-military sectors and multiple administrative branches, conscription is inherently a governance undertaking requiring multi-party participation. Progress can hardly be achieved by a single department alone [2]. Against this backdrop, analyzing collaborative bottlenecks among diverse stakeholders and exploring pathways for efficiency improvement from the collaborative-governance perspective bears great practical value.

Theoretically, existing conscription research mostly focuses on policy documents, individual enlistment willingness or single-department university management. Few studies systematically assess multi-agent cross-sector interactions using the complete collaborative-governance framework. Treating conscription as multi-actor governance, this paper applies collaborative-governance theory, broadening its application in university conscription research and delivering an empirical analytical tool for comparable cities. This study uses first-hand questionnaire and interview data. It objectively assesses multi-agent collaboration in university conscription in Nanjing, identifies collaborative bottlenecks, and puts forward practical recommendations for military recruitment authorities and universities. It fulfils delivery requirements for project completion and offers practical insights for peer cities nationwide.

Review of domestic and international research

Under the volunteer military-service system abroad, military recruitment is largely a socialized undertaking. Foreign studies analyze collaborative recruitment mechanisms among government-run recruiting agencies, universities and social organizations. They highlight the utility of economic compensation and educational subsidies and examine how families and communities shape young people's enlistment decisions. For instance, the United States "College First" program gives eligible youth the option to pursue studies either before or after military service. Grants enhanced service allowances and student-loan repayment assistance and lowered opportunity costs of enlistment. Empirical evidence demonstrates that educational benefits and veteran welfare policies significantly raise college-youth enlistment inclination. Foreign research features quantitative empirical analysis and socialized recruitment frameworks. However, given fundamental institutional differences from China's compulsory-service system, its analytical logic may serve for reference.

Domestic scholarship falls into three main strands. First, studies on university conscription administration note that many university conscription teams are ad-hoc with high staff turnover, and national-defense education often remains superficial, undermining performance. Scholars urge universities to assume fuller responsibility and formalize internal armed-forces-related offices. Second, research on determinants of college-student enlistment identifies personal-development aspirations, family attitudes, economic incentives and academic anxieties as pivotal factors. Some preferential policies carry high eligibility thresholds and prove hard to implement on the ground. Third, research on military-service institutions and policy documents traces national and local preferential-policy evolution. It points to fairness concerns stemming from uneven benefits across regions, noting that many provisions remain principled without detailed operational rules, hindering grassroots implementation [3]. Additional scholarship addresses post-return support for veteran college students and veteran-affairs safeguards, advancing understanding of the full conscription lifecycle.

Overall, most existing domestic studies center on single stakeholders. Empirical municipal-level assessments grounded in the full collaborative-governance framework remain relatively scarce. Deep investigation into real-world frictions such as departmental barriers, information silos and deficient incentive-restraint mechanisms are still lacking - this constitutes the entry point of the present paper.

Research methods and innovations

This study employs literature review, questionnaire-and-interview research, and systematic analysis. The literature review sorts out the Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China, Jiangsu Provincial Regulations on Conscription Work and relevant Nanjing municipal policy documents to map out the policy landscape [4]. This study adopts questionnaire and

interview methods. Building on previous project outcomes, the research collected 3,238 valid questionnaires from enrolled students at multiple universities in Nanjing. The valid return rate reached 97.00%. Another 25 valid questionnaires were completed by conscription practitioners from military recruitment authorities and universities. Interviews were conducted with undergraduate students, returning veteran students, student-affairs administrators and conscription-office personnel. The systematic-analysis method conceptualizes conscription as an integrated governance system to summarize achievements, problems and root causes from multi-agent collaborative dimensions and propose improvement strategies.

Three major innovations characterize this paper. First, perspective innovation: Departing from conventional policy-implementation models, conscription is framed as multi-stakeholder governance, with emphasis on actor interactions, barriers and collaborative mechanisms. Second, content innovation: This research investigates university-local government, intra-university, home-school and societal collaboration. It addresses efficiency losses caused by misalignment among stakeholders despite sound policies, reflecting real-world practice in people's armed-forces work. Third, application-oriented outputs: Countermeasures are practically actionable and directly usable for military-service organs and universities, satisfying requirements for project-result transformation.

Core concepts and theoretical foundation

Core concepts

University-student conscription refers to the state's recruitment of full-time undergraduate and junior-college students and graduates for compulsory military service [5]. It examines the full workflow of conscription. This process includes publicity and mobilization, registration, physical examination and political vetting, troop assignment and dispatch, in-service follow-up, as well as post-service study resumption and employment support.

Multi-stakeholders refer to all participants involved in conscription. They include government and military recruitment authorities (municipal and district conscription offices), universities (People's Armed Forces Departments, student affairs offices, academic affairs offices, finance departments, university hospitals, and secondary colleges), students and their families, as well as social actors such as employers, media outlets, and communities.

Conscription-work efficiency encompasses not only final enlistment numbers but also comprehensive outcomes including publicity effectiveness, full-cycle service quality, recruit quality, protection of veterans' rights and social recognition.

Collaborative governance means that public-affair governance is no longer dominated by a single authoritative actor [6]. Diverse stakeholders, including governments, public institutions, social-service organizations and families pursue shared objectives. Through institutional arrangements, information sharing and resource integration, they break down barriers and divide responsibilities to maximize governance benefits. Its core components include shared goals, multi-party participation, information exchange, institutional safeguards, and incentive-restraint mechanisms.

Applicability of collaborative-governance theory to college-student conscription

Collaborative-governance theory emerged in the late 20th century. As public affairs grew more complex and specialized, governments alone could hardly address social-governance challenges [7]. Collaboration among governments, market entities and social organizations became a prevailing trend. Collaborative governance stresses dismantling departmental and sectoral fragmentation. Under shared objectives, stakeholders integrate resources and share responsibilities to boost public-affair governance performance [8]. Its effective operation generally relies on three prerequisites. First, goal consensus: Participants agree on what needs to be accomplished and why. Second, mechanistic safeguards: institutions define powers and responsibilities and standardize collaborative workflows. Third, information and resource sharing: unobstructed communication channels and resource consolidation.

College-student conscription pursues two intertwined shared objectives: Recruiting high-quality college-student servicemen while safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of students throughout enlistment, active service and post-service transition [9]. Military-service authorities oversee task allocation and recruitment standards; universities deliver mobilization, preliminary screening and academic-status guarantees.

Families shape students' enlistment decisions. Society furnishes employment opportunities and a supportive public opinion environment. Stakeholders belong to distinct systems with overlapping powers and duties, which may lead to fragmented operations. For example, military-service authorities and universities each have defined responsibilities, yet overlap exists in cross-regional political vetting, preferential-benefit implementation and post-veteran support. Collaborative frictions may trigger buck-passing without coordinated mechanisms. Collaborative-governance theory offers an analytical lens for multi-party coordination failures and underpins the construction of systematic operational mechanisms for conscription.

Multi-stakeholders and current collaborative status of university-student conscription in Nanjing

Roles and responsibilities of multi-stakeholders

Municipal and district military recruitment authorities undertake several core tasks. They allocate conscription quotas, organize physical examinations and political vetting, coordinate the implementation of preferential policies, mediate civil-military relations, and offer professional guidance to universities.

Within universities, division of labour is clear-cut: The People's Armed Forces Department takes overall lead and liaises with military-service authorities. Secondary colleges and counsellors conduct front-line outreach to students, gauge enlistment intentions and communicate with families. Academic-affairs offices handle academic-status retention, resumption of schooling, credit recognition and major-transfer formalities. Finance departments process tuition-fee compensation and subsidy applications [10]. University hospitals assist preliminary physical-examination screening.

Among students and families, students constitute target beneficiaries, and family attitudes strongly influence enlistment choices. Social stakeholders include communities assisting political vetting. Human-resources agencies, state-owned enterprises and public institutions delivering veteran-targeted job openings, and media conducting patriotism-and-military-respect publicity.

Preliminary achievements in collaborative governance

First, a university-local government collaborative framework has taken initial shape. Nanjing has established interaction mechanisms between military-service authorities and universities, featuring regular conscription-work deployment conferences and professional-training sessions for task assignments. Statistics indicate that between 2015 and 2018, the total number of university student recruits from Nanjing universities was 1,568, 1,946, 1,713 and 2,105, respectively. Of these recruits, 810, 894, 928 and 1,077 were students enrolled in Nanjing at the time of recruitment. These figures correspond to proportions of 51.66%, 45.84%, 54.17%, and 51.16%. Local-campus recruits trended upward year-on-year with overall conscription volumes rising steadily. In 2018, roughly 15,000 new-recruit applications were submitted in Jiangsu Province, 58.00% of college students. Of the final 2,050 inductees, college students made up 82.00%, reflecting growing student enthusiasm for military service.

Second, basic intra-university division of labour has been established in most institutions. Conscription leading groups have been set up in many universities, with People's Armed Forces Departments coordinating student-affairs, academic-affairs and finance departments to implement preferential policies. Among Nanjing's 54 universities, 29 are provincial-affiliated (53.70%), contributing the largest share of recruits (64.89% in 2018). Vocational-colleges and general undergraduate universities supply most recruits, representing 46.84% and 45.42% respectively.

Third, conscription practitioners are generally well-qualified. According to the 25-practitioner sample, 62.50% hold postgraduate degrees, 25.00% bachelor's degrees and 12.50% junior-college diplomas. 87.50% have received professional training; 50.00% report thorough policy mastery. Every relevant department employs full-time conscription staff, laying human-resource foundations for joint work.

Fourth, combinations of policy instruments are beginning to function. Economic allowances, further-education incentives and employment preferences are deployed together. In 2019, the maximum total income package for Nanjing enlisted college students and returning veterans reached approximately RMB 280,000, exceeding RMB 260,000 in Beijing and RMB 270,000 in Shanghai. Competitive local benefits generate tangible incentives for students.

Fifth, selected social actors have joined conscription efforts. Returning veteran students deliver campus testimonials. State-owned enterprises and public institutions roll out designated recruitment quotas, fostering a gradually more military-respectful social climate.

Existing problems and root-cause analysis from the collaborative-governance perspective

Institutional collaboration: Ambiguous power-responsibility boundaries and incomplete assessment-incentive regimes

First, power-responsibility divisions between local military-service organs and universities lack granularity. Military-service authorities assign tasks while universities bear heavy mobilization and document-submission burdens. Boundaries remain blurred for cross-regional political vetting and off-site preferential-benefit verification, creating buck-passing risks. Among the 25 practitioner questionnaires, 37.50% respondents rated inter-agency cooperation as "average", signalling substantial room for improvement.

Second, intra-university assessments prioritize quantitative enlistment outcomes over procedural quality. Metrics focus heavily on recruitment numbers, with low weighting for post-enlistment follow-up and post-service support. Some secondary colleges treat conscription exclusively as the People's Armed Forces Department's mandate and show limited initiative.

Third, institutional guidance for family- and societal-actor participation is absent. Current regulations mainly bind governments and universities, lacking institutional arrangements for mobilizing families and society.

Informational collaboration: Prominent information silos and deficient sharing channels

First, university-government informational barriers persist. Military-service-authority systems and university student-management platforms operate independently. Real-time interoperability for student academic records, household-registration data and enlistment intentions is absent. Political vetting for non-local-household-registration students relies on manual document mailing, which is time-consuming and labour-intensive.

Second, internal university data remain fragmented. The People's Armed Forces Department holds data on students with enlistment interest, yet academic-affairs and finance systems cannot synchronize academic-status and subsidy information in real time. Students must repeatedly submit identical paperwork for tuition-fee compensation and academic-status retention.

Third, home-school information transmission breaks down. Publicity primarily targets students. Few formal channels deliver policy information to parents. Many parents have limited awareness of preferential policies, weakening family-level collaborative engagement.

Resource collaboration: Uneven resource allocation and inadequate full-cycle services

First, large inter-university resource disparities exist. Some universities maintain independent, well-funded People's Armed Forces Departments with dedicated staffing. Many others lack dedicated armed-forces units and rely on part-time seconded staff, resulting in manpower shortages, high personnel turnover and poor operational continuity.

Second, resource allocation favours pre-enlistment recruitment activities, while in-service follow-up and post-service support are under-resourced. Heavy investment goes into registration and troop dispatch, yet mechanisms for university-to-military communication during active service, plus academic support for returning veterans, remain insufficient, breaking the full-cycle service chain.

Third, social resources are insufficiently mobilized. Job openings and publicity platforms controlled by enterprises and communities are not systematically integrated. Social-sector participation remains ad-hoc and spontaneous.

Cognitive collaboration: Divergent sub-goals among stakeholders

While all stakeholders share the overarching objective, their respective sub-priorities diverge. Military-service authorities emphasize recruitment quantity and quality. Some university secondary-college administrators view conscription as a short-term campaign task. Students and families frequently prioritize material benefits over national-defense obligations, and partial social misconceptions persist regarding college-student soldiers.

Survey data show that 49.94% of students believe military service makes "great contributions" to national-defense modernization. Enlistment motivations include personal-capacity enhancement (88.94%), patriotism

(68.80%) and admiration for military careers (66.98%). Only 48.31% rank financial benefits as a major driver. Student national-defense awareness is generally positive. Still, 37.37% worry that military service will adversely affect academic progress. Academic- and career-related opportunity costs constitute major concerns. Among practitioners, 87.5% judge Jiangsu's conscription policies capable of meeting intended objectives yet acknowledge practical collaborative hurdles in implementation.

Root-cause analysis of the problems

First, insufficient institutional supply. Existing laws and regulations broadly define responsibilities for military-service authorities and universities but lack detailed cross-department collaborative rules and unified operational norms. Evaluation frameworks are imperfect, and incentives for family-and-social-actor participation are missing.

Second, lagging digital-governance development. There is no unified integrated information platform exists. Manual offline workflows predominate, sustaining information silos.

Third, unbalanced resource guarantees. Large gaps exist across universities in institutional setup, staffing and funding. Resources dedicated to end-to-end service delivery remain inadequate.

Fourth, perceptual divergence among stakeholders. Differing institutional standpoints and partial sub-goal misalignment undermines coordinated collective action.

Pathways for improving university-student conscription efficiency under collaborative governance

To resolve the above-mentioned collaborative bottlenecks, a four-in-one "government-university-family-society" collaborative-governance model should be constructed. Improvements must be advanced along institutional, informational, resource-based and cognitive dimensions, transforming conscription from a narrow quota-fulfilment task toward end-to-end multi-stakeholder collaborative governance.

Strengthening institutional collaboration: Clarifying powers and duties and refining incentive-assessment mechanisms

First, formulate detailed university-government collaborative implementation guidelines. Led by the Nanjing Municipal Conscription Office, a conscription-work guidance document for local universities shall be issued. It shall specify duty inventories for military-service authorities, universities, public-security organs and human-resources departments regarding political vetting, preferential-benefit execution and veteran-employment security. Ambiguous responsibility zones shall be eliminated, and workflows for cross-regional political vetting standardized. Drawing on the "3+2+1" conscription framework concept, provincial conscription offices and education-administration bodies provide macro guidance. District-level conscription offices and universities act as front-line implementers. Joint coordination groups and service platforms shall deliver one-stop services covering registration, physical-medical examination, political vetting and post-service settlement, with streamlined green channels for students.

Second, optimize intra-university assessment systems. Assessment should no longer centre solely on enlistment numbers. Indicators covering publicity quality, in-service-student follow-up and post-return-student support shall be incorporated. Secondary colleges and counsellors must be held accountable to end over-reliance on the People's Armed Forces Department alone.

Third, complete positive incentives and constraint mechanisms. Authorities should commend units with outstanding collaborative performance. They also need to oversee entities that fail to deliver preferential policy entitlements. Institutionalized outreach mechanisms can spread conscription policy information to families.

Advancing informational collaboration: Dismantling information silos and building multi-party communication channels

First, promoting authorized university-government data sharing under personal-privacy safeguards. Military recruitment information systems and university student management platforms should achieve interoperability. This enables the exchange of enlistment intention and basic academic record data. It reduces redundant paper document submissions, streamlines online workflows for political vetting of non-local student recruits, lowers transaction costs, and shortens conscription cycles.

Second, smooth internal university data flows. Data interfaces linking the People's Armed Forces Department, student-affairs, academic-affairs and finance departments shall reduce student paperwork

burdens for academic-status retention and tuition-fee compensation.

Third, building home-school information channels. Policy briefings for parents shall be distributed via parent-meetings, new-student admission-packet inserts and WeChat push notifications to close family-side information gaps. Survey evidence confirms family attitudes strongly shape enlistment willingness. Among students willing to enlist, 53.33% are only children. Gaining family support represents a vital lever for lifting conscription performance.

Deepening resource collaboration: Allocating human, financial and material resources and delivering full-cycle services

First, balancing conscription-related resources guarantees across universities. Universities shall be urged to establish formal armed-forces-related posts. Institutions without independent People's Armed Forces Departments shall assign permanent full-time conscription staff with secured budgets to mitigate continuity risks stemming from temporary part-time assignments.

Second, extend resource coverage across the "pre-enlistment - active-service - post-service" continuum. Beyond recruitment-and-dispatch operations, regular university-to-enlisted-student contact mechanisms should be instituted. Upon returning to campus, veterans should receive academic tutoring, major-transfer opportunities and employment support to complete the full-cycle service chain. Since 37.37% of students fear academic setbacks from military service, robust post-service academic readjustment and psychological support address tangible student-and-family worries and raise enlistment willingness.

Third, mobilizing diverse social resources. Human-resources authorities, state-owned enterprises and public institutions shall consolidate veteran-targeted job quotas. Communities and media shall jointly promote military-respect-and-patriotism messaging. Veteran-student associations and veteran-lecturer teams shall be leveraged to integrate societal forces into conscription collaborative systems and build society-wide support for college-student military service.

Consolidating cognitive collaboration: Forging shared value consensus across stakeholders

First, delivering professional training for government and university practitioners to align understandings. Staff must recognize that conscription pursues not merely quota fulfilment but also student-right-protection and national-defense objectives, enhancing practitioner commitment and professionalism.

Second, implementing differentiated student-targeted publicity and national-defense education. Outreach should not overemphasize material rewards alone but integrate national-defense-awareness building. Tailored mobilization strategies shall be applied for central-affiliated universities, general undergraduate universities and vocational colleges. Central-affiliated universities exhibit notably low enlistment proportions (7.02%, 5.60%, 7.06%, and 6.18% from 2015-2018), largely due to high academic opportunity costs. For these groups, emphasis should fall on development-oriented incentives such as post-service further education and research pathways to alleviate concerns.

Third, fostering a military-respect-oriented public atmosphere among families and society. Publicize outstanding college-student-soldier role models to counter one-sided stereotypes that military service offers limited prospects. Efforts should be made to build broad societal consensus. Meanwhile, authorities can improve the identification of target groups and encourage their participation.

Conclusion

College-student conscription exemplifies multi-actor public governance. This paper adopts collaborative governance theory as its analytical framework. It examines the responsibilities and collaborative status of four types of stakeholders: military recruitment authorities, universities, student families, and social actors. The analysis relies on 3,238 student questionnaires, 25 questionnaires completed by practitioners, and Nanjing conscription statistics from 2015 to 2018.

Nanjing builds a foundational university-local-governmental collaborative framework with steadily growing recruitment volumes and competitive preferential-policy packages. College-student national-defense awareness is generally sound. Even so, several collaborative bottlenecks remain. Ambiguous institutional power and responsibility boundaries, information silos, uneven resource allocation, and cognitive divergence among stakeholders jointly

constrain overall performance. Vague demarcation of duties leads to buck-passing between departments. Fragmented information systems increase administrative costs for vetting and paperwork. Imbalanced resource investment undermines full-cycle service provision. Perceptual discrepancies hinder coordinated collective action.

Accordingly, improving conscription efficiency cannot rely solely on fine-tuning preferential policies. Institutional, informational, resource-based and cognitive collaboration must all be advanced. A four-in-one "government-university-family-society" collaborative-governance system shall dismantle stakeholder barriers and drive the transition from isolated quota completion toward holistic multi-agent collaborative governance. These reforms will continuously improve recruit quality and safeguard college-student-soldier legitimate interests. Stakeholders need to pursue shared objectives, with clearly defined roles and smooth interaction. Only in this way can college student conscription policies deliver their full potential and provide high-calibre young talent for the modernization of national-defense and the armed forces.

Research limitations and outlook

This study mainly employs questionnaires and interviews. Interview samples from enterprises and community actors remain limited. Long-term follow-up data measuring post-implementation effects of collaborative mechanisms are absent. Future research should expand interview scope and track long-term developmental outcomes for returning veteran students as well as on-the-ground mechanism-implementation effectiveness. As digital-governance advances, big-data-enabled multi-stakeholder conscription collaboration merits further exploration to generate richer empirical evidence for performance enhancement.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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