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STUDENT VETERAN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS SUPPORT

# STUDENT VETERAN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS SUPPORT

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By  
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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## **Abstract**

College poses many challenges to the average population, however, there are additional challenges for different populations. For example, completion rates of nontraditional students are 33.7% (New, 2014), and for student veterans there are additional barriers to completing their college degree. Despite a variety of obstacles, veterans who were active duty after September 2001 have college completion rates of 51% (Cate, 2014). With this in mind, this exploratory study examined student veterans from Western Oregon University (WOU) overall wellbeing (moods, satisfaction with life, social integration) in association with the campus services and culture. Results show that when support from others is high there is an increase in positive attitude towards WOU. Results also showed that there was a significant association between the culture at WOU and positive moods.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>STUDENT VETERAN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS SUPPORT .....</b>	<b>6</b>
SUPPORT AND VETERAN'S WELL-BEING.....	8
<b>METHOD.....</b>	<b>9</b>
PARTICIPANTS.....	9
MEASURES .....	10
<i>Moods</i> .....	10
<i>Satisfaction with life</i> .....	10
<i>Social integration</i> .....	11
<i>Campus support</i> .....	11
PROCEDURE.....	11
<b>RESULTS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>APPENDIX A .....</b>	<b>19</b>
THE PANAS .....	19
<b>APPENDIX B .....</b>	<b>20</b>
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE (SWL) .....	20
<b>APPENDIX C.....</b>	<b>21</b>
THE SOCIAL PROVISIONS SCALE .....	21
<b>APPENDIX D .....</b>	<b>23</b>
PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS SERVICES .....	23

## **Acknowledgements**

Serving in the military is a task that my family has taken as tradition. While growing up, I was surrounded by veterans attempting to return to who they were and how they lived before they were deployed. Not only did I witness my own family returning home from active duty, but also my close friends. What always astonished me was the difficulty veterans had returning to higher education, not because school was hard, but because of the way they were perceived.

Loren King, a close family friend and admired basketball coach, had a direct connection to the response of the American people to their returned troops. After he served in the Vietnam War he returned home to attend college, but life was not the same and college was harder. Not because the classes became tougher or grading became stricter, but because teachers refused to teach or grade assignments by “professional killers” or people with “blood on their hands.” King is not the only veteran to have to deal with this attitude. At Portland State University, for example, where King attended, there were specific classes for veterans. King was enrolled in a class with a professor who had an older son that was killed in Vietnam. She understood how the Vietnam War affected people, and she cared about those who got to come home from the war - so she took all the veterans into her class. Seeing this kindness in a professor showed King, that despite everything he had gone

through and the negativity he had previously experienced with past professors, there were other professors who were willing to help veterans return to society as educated individuals. Support for student veterans, much like the above example, should be easily accessible and on all campuses.

At any given time, student veterans make up about 5% of Western Oregon University's student population. Every veteran has their own reason for discontinuing their education and The Veteran Resource Center at WOU is working hard to understand why to then lower the percentage. They have found that the main reason for veterans to disenroll is because they cannot connect with the university or their peers due to their military experiences. The Veterans Resource Center is hoping that with their programming they can reduce the dropout rate to zero percent. It is my hope that this research will help provide the center with specific information about the veterans they are working with as well as feedback about their current programming.

I am very grateful for Western Oregon University Veteran Resource Center and their willingness to share their experiences. Additionally, to Andrew Holbert, the Director of this center, for his patience and dedication to this project.

## Student Veteran's Perceptions of Campus Support

While college poses many challenges to the average population, for student veterans there are additional barriers to completing their college degree. There are approximately one million student veterans in the United States, attending college using their GI Bill benefits (VA Campus Toolkit); however, this number does not account for veterans that are attending college without the GI Bill or other military benefits. This is a large portion of college students in the United States, therefore it is important for universities and colleges to create an environment that is military-friendly and provides the services that veterans need while transitioning back into society and back into school. By doing this, universities can ensure the success of all their students.

Graduation completion rates for veterans have dropped drastically in the past two decades. Veterans serving on active duty from the end of the Korean Conflict had college-completion rates of 68%, and this rate has remained relatively stable for the next 46 years (Cate, 2014), yet, those reporting for active duty after September 2001 were found to have college-completion rates of 51% (Cate, 2014).

Veterans are often considered nontraditional students which adds another layer of complexity for these students. A study by Horn (2016) describes seven characteristics that classify nontraditional college students:

delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, having dependents, single parent, and/or did not receive standard high school diploma. Using these classifications and data collected by the US Department of Education, Horn (2016) found that nontraditional students were less likely to finish their college degree in five years and were more likely to never complete their degree. Completion rates for nontraditional students (33.7%) are significantly lower compared to traditional students (54.1%; InsideTrack, 2014). This indicates that college completion is affected by demographics that are correlated with being a nontraditional student. Student veterans are a unique set of nontraditional college students, because they may also be adjusting back into civilian life and/or have the additional barriers of combat related injuries. With this mind, universities must have in place programming that helps accommodate nontraditional students and student veterans.

It is important for universities and colleges to create an environment that feels military friendly and provides the services that veterans need while transitioning back into society along with transitioning back into school. A study by Newbury (2016), asked a sample of 46 student veterans at California State University San Marcos to complete a 35-item questionnaire to gather demographic information, perceptions of military services on campus, satisfaction with services, and barriers to services. Their study concluded that



financial issues and class availability were barriers that were inhibiting veterans from completing their degree. This study showed how crucial having adequate services for veterans is in successfully completing their college degree.

### **Support and Veteran's Well-being**

Because so many veterans are balancing multiple responsibilities, they often feel disconnected (cite). This is of concern particularly because recently loneliness is being considered a health epidemic by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2016); consequently, it is critical to examine social integration (e.g., strong bonds, support) among our veterans to ensure that they are not experiencing loneliness. A close examination of the the quality of their relationship to their community and how positive those relationships are can offer more information on possible success in college or pitfalls. Moreover, research has demonstrated that whether individuals belong to a group and have stable, positive social relationships is a key predictor in well-being (Keys, 1998). Additionally, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) posit that students that are highly socially integrated within the academic and social life of a university, are more likely to continue their education. For veterans, they have diverse and unique experiences; thus, it is critical understand the influence of campus culture and whether they can feel integrated and highly supported.

Along with social integration, assessing student veteran's well-being is key. Research has already demonstrated that psychological well-being is key. Specifically Pritchard and Wilson (2003) argued that well-being is paramount to students success. The combination of integration (e.g., support and strong social bond) and well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life, positive moods) may provide an additional psychological strength. Since veterans are already addressing many unique factors in their life, adding this type of psychological buffer may be an integral tool in their success as a student.

Therefore the present study posited that focusing on aspects of well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life, positive moods) and social integration (i.e., strong bonds, support from others) would enhance their mental health and the learning experience. The goal in the present study was to examine possible associations between campus culture and moods, social integration and satisfaction with life. This is a first step in understand how culture is associated with veteran's well-being and social integration.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Fifty-one participants were recruited to participate in this study. Of those, one did not consent to participation and seven did not complete the entire survey, and their answers were omitted. Participants were all self-

identified veterans at Western Oregon University and were not compensated for completing the research study. The participants were 85% Caucasian, 68% male, and the mean age was 37.5 years ( $SD = 11.09$ ). Sixty-six percent had been deployed overseas during their military service, and 52% had sustained injuries during their enlistment.

## **Measures**

**Moods.** The Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; see Appendix A) was used to measure the participants moods. PANAS is a scale that consists of different words describing feelings and emotions such as “Interested”, “Active” and “Ashamed”. Participants were asked to rate the extent that they had felt that emotion that day on a 5-point Likert type scale from 1 (*Very Slightly/Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). The positive moods had high internal consistency with  $\alpha = .92$  and negative moods also had high internal consistency,  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Satisfaction with life.** Participants completed the Satisfaction with Life (Diener, et al., 1985; see Appendix B) was used to measure the participants life satisfaction as a whole. This is completed by reading five statements and rating whether they *agreed* or *disagreed* with the statement using a 7-point scale. Example statements included “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” Cronbach’s alpha was acceptable at .88.

**Social integration.** This scale was used to measure how the participants social relationships provided social integration. Twenty-four items were used to measure social integration from Cutrona and Russell's Social Provision Scale (1987; see Appendix C). Example items included "In the last week, my competence and skills were recognized." and "In the last week, there were people I could count on in case of an emergency." A 4-item scale was used from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was acceptable at .80.

**Campus support.** Finally, the participants completed a modified version of the Perceptions of Campus Services (Newbury, 2016; see Appendix D) to assess how participants viewed their campus culture. This checklist probed a variety of questions about their perception of the college campus, such as, "I believe WOU is a military friendly campus". Responses were on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). This measure was not used as a whole, but rather the researchers selected specific subcategories for the participants to complete: culture, service, transition, and satisfaction. This was because it was a checklist, and internal consistency was not a factor.

## **Procedure**

This study was approved by the IRB Board, #980. Then, student veterans at WOU were recruited by the Veterans Resource Center through an

email sent to any student who had identified as a student veteran at WOU. Once participants received the email, that included information on how to locate and complete the survey, they used this information to complete the survey. In the survey, first, participants read the informed consent statement and indicated that they agree to participate or did not agree to participate. Subsequently, participants filled out a survey investigating variables including: demographic information, positive and negative affect, social provision, and perceptions of campus services. Finally, participants were given a debriefing form, which informed them of the purpose of the study and thanked them for their participation. There was no further contact with participants.

## **Results**

First, we examined the association between the culture at WOU and feelings of having strong bonds and support from others. We found a significant relationship between these two variables ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ) suggesting that when support from others is high there is an increase in positive attitude towards WOU (e.g., feeling like they can talk to professors, feelings of support from WOU). Interestingly, there is also a positive and significant association between the culture at WOU and positive moods ( $r = .32, p = .003$ ) but not with satisfaction with life ( $r = -.43, p = .003$ ). There was no association with negative moods.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to assess possible associations between campus culture and student veteran moods, social integration and satisfaction with life. Millions of veterans have returned to higher education and thus make up a large percentage of the college population. Just as it is important to examine other sub groups within a college population, such as nontraditional students, it is important to examine student veterans. It is important, in order to create better support services to increase graduation rates and improve campus environments.

Results of this study showed that there were significant correlations between the culture at WOU and positive moods as well as the feeling of strong bonds and support from others. This suggests that when bonds are strong positive moods are higher. While this is an association, it is reasonable to suggest that campuses need to actively create and keep strong relationships with the veteran students.

While, campus culture was negatively associated with satisfaction with life. This could be because when they begin to strengthen the bonds and support system around them, they are future thinking. As students, their life satisfaction may not be based on their schooling as much as it is on their family and jobs that they might be holding.

Despite collecting data from about thirty percent of WOU's student veteran population, it was still a small sample size. Due to this limitation, it is possible that a Type II error was being committed. In other words, it is possible that there are associations that we were not able to detect. Future research should incorporate a larger sample to better represent the general population of student veterans. Also, the demographics were not evenly distributed and may not generalize to female veterans or non-Caucasian veterans.

Additionally, because the participants were all WOU student veterans we cautiously advise individuals that the generalizability is limited. Future studies should examine multiple colleges and universities across the United States to help determine if there is more that the military could do to create better campus cultures and military friendly schools around the United States. Not only would it be beneficial to examine colleges and universities around the country, but it would also be beneficial to compare more traditionally liberal and conservative areas to see if political environment has an effect on veteran student success and military-friendly campus cultures.

While this study had limitations, it does offer us some insight on veteran's unique perspective of being a college student. This work is a starting point in which others could build upon.

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## Appendix A

### The PANAS

Instructions: This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. **Indicate to what extent you have felt this way today.** Use the following scale to record your answers.

1= Very Slightly/Not at all

2= A Little

3= Moderately

4= Quite A Bit

5= Extremely

1. Interested
2. Distressed
3. Excited
4. Upset
5. Strong
6. Guilty
7. Scared
8. Hostile
9. Enthusiastic
10. Proud
11. Irritable
12. Alert
13. Ashamed
14. Inspired
15. Nervous
16. Determined
17. Attentive
18. Active
19. Afraid
20. Angry
21. Lonely
22. Grateful

## Appendix B

### Satisfaction With Life (SWL)

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

7 - Strongly agree

6 - Agree

5 - Slightly agree

4 - Neither agree nor disagree

3 - Slightly disagree

2 - Disagree

1 - Strongly disagree

\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent.

\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.

\_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

## Appendix C

### The Social Provisions Scale

Please think about your current relationship with friends, family members, coworkers, community members, and so on. Please tell us to what extent you agree that each statement describes your current relationships with other people. Use the following scale to give your opinion. So, for example, if you feel a statement is very true of your current relationships, you would tell mark “strongly agree”. If you feel a statement clearly does not describe your relationships, you would respond “strongly disagree”.

- | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------|----------------|
| 1                 | 2        | 3     | 4              |
1. In the last 7 days, I felt that there were people I could depend on to help me if I really needed it.
  2. In the last week, I felt that I did not have close personal relationships with other people.
  3. In the last week, there was no one I could turn to for guidance when I was stressed.
  4. In the last week, there were people who depended on me for help.
  5. In the last week, there were people who enjoyed the same social activities I did.
  6. In the last week, other people did not view me as competent.
  7. In the last 7 days, I felt personally responsible for the well-being of another person.
  8. In the last week, I felt like I was part of a group of people who shared my attitudes and beliefs.
  9. In the last week, I did not feel like other people respected my skills and abilities.
  10. In the last week, I felt like if something went wrong, no one would come to my assistance.
  11. In the last 7 days, my close relationships provided me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.
  12. In the last week, there was someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.
  13. In the last week, my competence and skills were recognized.
  14. In the last week, I had no one to share my interests and concerns with.
  15. In the last week, there was no one who relied on me for their well-being.
  16. In the last week, there was a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice when I was having problems.

17. In the last week, I felt a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.

18. In the last 7 days, there was no one I could depend on for aid when I really needed it.

19. In the last week, there was no one I felt comfortable talking about my problems with.

20. In the last week, there were people who admired my talents and abilities.

21. In the last week, I lacked a feeling of intimacy with others.

22. In the last week, no one enjoyed doing my favorite activities with me.

23. In the last week, there were people I could count on in case of an emergency.

24. In the last 7 days, no one needed me to care for them.

## Appendix D

### Perceptions of Campus Services

- | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 1                 | 2        | 3       | 4     | 5              |
1. Having a veteran student orientation would or had been helpful in transitioning to WOU.
  2. Having a transitional one unit course for veteran student would have assisted me in learning about services, what I may be eligible, and meeting other veterans.
  3. I believe WOU is a military friendly campus.
  4. I feel that my professors can guide me to the right person if I was in need of military services.
  5. I am comfortable talking to my professors when I need assistance in areas that may not pertain to the class material.
  6. I have various non veteran student friends.
  7. I believe that non veteran students know about the military community.
  8. I can talk to my professors and peers without feeling judged.
  9. I participate in veteran student events at WOU.
  10. I'm able to participate in veteran student events as much as I would like.
  11. I am very familiar with military services offered at WOU.
  12. I believe having a peer to peer mentorship program can assist me in my transition to WOU and/or in my academic success.
  13. I believe that having a veteran staff to veteran student mentorship program can assist me in my transition to WOU and/or in my academic success.
  14. Having an internship program at WOU for veteran students can assist me with my future goals.
  15. WOU provides me with appropriate resources and/services to meet my physical and mental health needs.
  16. I'm satisfied with the military services provided at WOU.
  17. I'm satisfied with the veteran center operating hours.
  18. I'm satisfied with the school environment as a whole.