

Increasing the sense of belonging and services for veteran students

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Abstract

At Penn State Harrisburg, veterans and military personnel constitute between 3-6% of student enrollment. About 26% of these students are enrolled in engineering majors and another 8% are enrolled in other STEM fields. To serve this population with intentionality and purpose, as well as enhance student success, we find it essential to explore the social and academic gaps for our students, and what types of programming could best address those needs. Past and current surveys of this student body have proven to be effective due to a higher than usual response rate. Questions assessed a range of topics, including recruitment pathways, experiences with a variety of student services, desire for veteran-specific programming/services, and perceptions regarding the campus's veteran-friendliness. The survey finding pointed out that most veteran students did not recognize many student services applied to them since they considered themselves a separate, more non-traditional group of students.

Results from a 2019 survey showed that most students (79%) enrolled in the college through reputation. Of the respondents, only 3% attended a recruitment-specific event, such as an open house. Veteran students showed a strong awareness of the services on campus, with three specific offices being overwhelmingly utilized (financial aid, advising, and veterans affairs) while others were utilized minimally. Additionally, the majority of respondents answered affirmatively that the campus was veteran-friendly (92%), but several respondents identified areas for growth, such as more veteran-specific programming, affinity groups, services specific to veteran students, and a better understanding of military culture, and what their service means within a broader campus context.

An updated survey was disseminated at the beginning of the spring 2025 semester. Similar to the 2019 survey, the majority of respondents enrolled in the college through reputation (85%), as opposed to attending a recruitment-specific event. Regarding academic and social support resources, awareness and satisfaction remained high, but utilization of said services was relatively low at 41%. Additionally, no statistically significant relationships were found between student's major and levels of satisfaction with academic support or social support. Results from this survey will build on the work noted above to provide more concrete information needed to support veteran and military students, particularly in engineering and STEM fields. Findings from this study will help guide programming and outreach efforts targeted at closing socialization gaps for our veteran students.

Background

Over the last ten years, the percentage of student veterans at the college has ranged from 3-6% of the total student population-- slightly higher than the national average [2]. Figure 1 shows the

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recent enrollment data of students who pursue their degrees entirely at our campus, showing total enrollment and the enrollment in engineering. Our data shows that about 26% of veteran students are enrolled in engineering majors and another 8% are enrolled in other STEM fields. The campus houses the largest population of veteran students within the university's state-wide campuses, excluding the flagship campus and the online campus, (high point: 311 veteran students in 2017/18). To serve this population with intentionality and purpose, as well as enhance student success, we find it essential to explore the social and academic gaps for our students, and what types of programming could best address those needs.

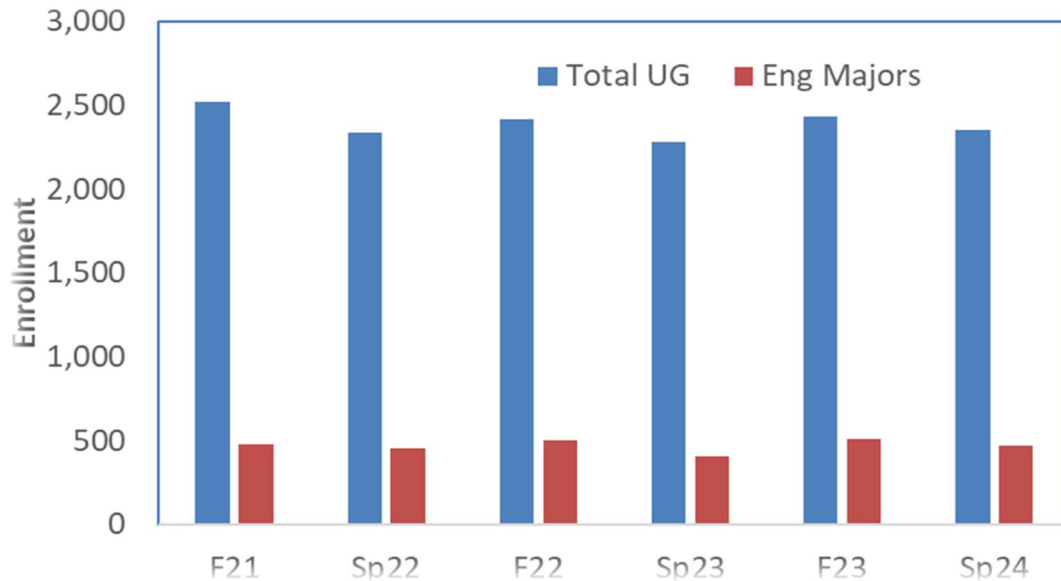


Figure 1 – Undergraduate Four-year degree enrollment (excludes pre-majors or those who intend to transfer to other campuses of the university) trend in all undergraduate degrees vs. engineering

The Office of Veterans Affairs conducted a needs assessment in the fall of 2019 as part of their 2020-2025 strategic planning cycle. The survey was disseminated via email to 255 self-identified veteran students with a completion rate of 30% (N=72). The survey assessed pathways to enrollment at the college, familiarity and satisfaction with key student support offices, perceptions of veteran friendliness at the campus, and queried types of veteran-specific programming desired by veteran students. Data from this survey has guided new outreach and programming efforts implemented to enhance the veteran student experience.

Results from the survey showed that the majority of students (79%) enrolled in the college through reputation. Of the respondents, only 4% attended a recruitment-specific event, such as an open house. Veteran students showed a strong awareness of the services on campus, with three specific offices being overwhelmingly utilized (financial aid, advising, and veterans affairs) while others were utilized minimally. Additionally, the majority of respondents answered affirmatively that the campus was veteran-friendly (92%), but several respondents identified areas for growth, such as more veteran-specific programming, affinity groups, services specific to veteran students, and a better understanding of military culture, and what their service means within a broader campus context.

Additionally, quantitative academic data from years 2021/22 through 2023/24 were analyzed to examine DFW rates in key gateway courses, levels of remedial coursework, and academic warning/suspension rates for veteran students versus their traditional college-age peers. An updated survey has been disseminated at the start of spring 2025 as a follow-up to the original survey. Questions remain in line with the original iteration, and examine pathways to enrollment, awareness and satisfaction with academic and support services, engagement with campus activities, perceptions regarding veteran friendliness, and types of veteran-specific programming students are interested in seeing on campus. New questions added to the survey include more demographic information, including degree program, as well as questions surrounding perceptions of sense of belonging at the college. The added demographic information will allow the researchers to delve deeper into major-specific areas, and whether STEM majors experience unique challenges in those fields.

Overview

According to the 2023 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), in the academic year 2019/20, veterans comprised approximately 3.7% of all enrolled undergraduate students [2]. While the overall number of veterans has declined nationally, they still comprise a significant part of the college student population [2],[5]. While veteran/student service member (SSM) students bring a unique set of skills, abilities, perspectives, and experiences that can enhance and enrich the classroom experience, they can also present with challenges that can hinder their ability to meet their academic, social, and career goals [3]. With a better understanding of these challenges, as well as how their strengths can be integrated into the larger pedagogy, strategic and intentional interventions can be implemented at the institutional level to enhance retention, academic and social success, and overall degree completion.

Academic Barriers

Of the veteran students who pursue a baccalaureate degree, national data shows only 16.9% of them reach degree completion versus 37.1% of nonveteran students [2]. As previously stated, veteran students bring a unique set of skills, training, and education to the classroom. While these past experiences may have proven invaluable in the military, it can often be difficult for students to translate them into the civilian world, particularly in an academic setting [2],[4].

In addition to translating their military training and experiences, transition challenges are the most cited barrier for veteran students [3],[5],[8]. Those in the military are accustomed to the strict, hierarchal, and community-oriented nature of their service, which can often be antithetical to the individualistic and less structured nature of academia [9]. While their service was predominantly centered around team-driven initiatives and accomplishments, many struggle in the academic world where so much is centered on individual achievements [5],[9].

For many veteran students, there may be a significant gap between their entrance to college and the last time they took a high school or college-level course. Not only can this lead to feelings of anxiety, low self-efficacy, and low self-esteem, but it can also mean that they require additional academic interventions to get them back to baseline [10]. According to Hodges [3], veteran students are almost twice as likely to be required to complete remedial coursework (particularly in math and writing) as non-veteran students. They may also need tailored advising, tutoring, and assistance with translating their military training and experience into college credits [4],[5].

Social Barriers

According to the 2020 NPSAS survey, veteran students are significantly less likely to engage in activities deemed non-essential for the completion of their coursework, however, veterans who were meaningfully engaged in on-campus activities are more than twice as likely to be retained [1],[2]. As previously stated, many veterans have competing time interests through work and family obligations, which can make extracurricular engagement a challenge. While finding meaningful social activities can be an additional time commitment, they are essential to building community and fostering a sense of belonging [6].

Without the necessary social support, the college-going experience can be extremely isolating for a veteran/SSM student [3],[9]. Feelings of isolation are the most cited social barrier for this student population for a variety of reasons. For some students, they are significantly older than their non-veteran peers. Even if the age gap is relatively small, students report feeling like they're in a different stage of life as a result of their service [3]. These real and perceived differences can create challenges in finding a community or building affiliation [5].

In addition to navigating the social scene on college campuses, there can also be confusion with navigating their benefits and the various social supports available to them [6]. Similar to peer interactions, there can also be a perception that key support offices are unfamiliar with veteran/SSM students and therefore do not understand the complexities associated with this transition [3],[4],[6]. The lack of understanding or use of available support services can be further exacerbated when combined with a lack of or ineffective use of external supports, such as other social supports available to them through Veterans Affairs (healthcare, mental health support, vocational support) [1],[4]. Internal, external, social, and community supports are critical to mitigating attrition risks, including academic support needs, existing mental health diagnoses, and even navigating the day-to-day challenges of balancing competing life demands [3],[5].

Methodology

Initial survey conducted in 2019

The 2019 portion of this study utilized a descriptive mixed methods approach, which combined quantitative Likert-type questions with phenomenological-type open-ended questions to add context and individual perspective to the survey data. The survey explored areas such as pathways to enrollment at the university, knowledge of and experience with key student support offices on campus, perceptions of campus veteran friendliness, and interest in veteran-specific programming.

Recruitment utilized a convenience sampling method. Participants were identified using a campus-specific Peoplesoft query, which included all self-identified veteran/SSM students and dependents utilizing a VA educational benefit. A recruitment email was sent to 255 students. It explained the purpose of the survey, explained the risks, and emphasized that participation was optional. Two email reminders were sent to students to complete the survey prior to the end of the fall 2019 semester.

Seventy-two (72) veteran/SSM students completed the survey in its entirety. Results were analyzed using a series of independent t-tests to examine factors such as gender, race/ethnicity,

and age, but no meaningful differences were found. Overall percentages were reported for quantitative questions, and basic themes and illustrative quotes were pulled from open-ended questions.

Academic Data

A request for ad hoc retrospective data was submitted to the appropriate University's Office to provide the data. The request included academic data from the previous three academic years (2021-22 through 2023-24). Academic data included aggregate grades of D, F and withdraw (DFW) rates in "gatekeeper" courses (English 15, Math 110, Math 140), remedial coursework, and academic warning/suspension for the veteran/SSM population versus the general student population. A list of de-identified veteran/SSM students was sent to the referenced office, who ran the analysis. Results were reported in aggregate by population. Over the reporting period, the veteran population constituted about 5% of the overall student population who are pursuing a four-year undergraduate (UG) degree-seeking at the college. The total UG enrollment at the campus is about 4500. Slightly more than 50% of these students stay at the campus to earn a degree and the remainder transfer to the flagship campus or other campuses, particularly in engineering disciplines. It is remarkable that the total number of veterans who may be in suspension or academic warning are less than 10 for the data that was analyzed.

2024 Survey

The 2024 survey is closely related to the 2019 iteration. The overall sections have remained the same, but some questions have been truncated for clarity and ease of answering, particularly regarding academic and social support services. Additionally, new demographic questions have been added, including major, so new analyses can be run to determine issues/challenges unique to Engineering/STEM students. Lastly, an open-ended question, gauging perceptions around sense of belonging was added to the end of the survey.

Utilizing the same sampling and recruitment methods as the 2019 survey, a recruitment email was sent to 167 students. It explained the purpose of the survey, explained the risks, and emphasized that participation was optional. Two email reminders were sent to students to maximize completion. Thirty-five (35) students started the survey, and twenty-eight (28) students met the participation criteria (they are the veteran/SME, and they're over the age of 18).

A series of independent sample t-tests was run on a variety of demographic data points, including major, comparing awareness/satisfaction with academic and social support services. No statistically significant relationships were found between any of the variables.

Results

The results in Table 1 show the demographic breakdown of participants from the 2019 and 2024 surveys in terms of age, gender, race, and degree type. Demographic questions were at the end of the survey and were optional and were therefore not completed by all 72 respondents. As shown in Table 1, respondents broke down into the following age ranges: 18-24 (19, 25), 25-34 (38, 43), 35-44 (8,18), and 45-54 (4,14). The majority were male (43,75), with significantly fewer female respondents (23, 21), and a limited number who chose not to identify (4, 4).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants from the 2019 and 2024 surveys (N=69, 28)

	2019 Survey Frequency (N=69)	2019 Survey Percentage (%)	2024 Survey Frequency (N=28)	2024 Survey Percentage
Age				
18-24	19	27.5	7	25
25-34	38	55.1	12	43
35-44	8	11.6	5	18
45-54	4	5.8	4	14
Gender				
Male	43	62.3	21	75
Female	23	33.3	6	21
Prefer not to answer	3	4.4	1	4
Race				
White	55	77.5	22	79
Black	5	7	2	7
American Indian/Native	3	4.2	1	4
Asian	1	1.4	3	11
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	2.8	0	0
Prefer not to answer	5	7.1	3	11
Degree Type				
Undergraduate	62	89	28	100
Graduate	7	10	0	0
Major				
Business			5	18
Engineering			11	39
Sociology			1	4
Communications			1	4
Kinesiology			4	14
Computer Science			1	4
Other			5	18

Table 1 also shows that respondents broke down into the following age ranges: 18-24 (19, 25), 25-34 (38, 43), 35-44 (8,18), and 45-54 (4,14). The majority were male (43,75), with significantly fewer female respondents (23, 21), and a limited number who chose not to identify (4, 4). Racially, respondents were White (55, 79), Black (5, 7), Native American (3, 4), Asian (1, 11), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2, 0), and five (5) who chose not to identify in 2019. Academically, the majority were enrolled at the undergraduate level (62, 100), with some graduate-level students (7, 0).

Results shown in Figure 2 demonstrate the pathways to enrollment at the college. The majority of students applied to and enrolled at the college due to reputation/word of mouth—56.9% from prior knowledge about the campus, and 22.2% from family and friends. 9.7% had originally applied to the flagship campus but were offered admission at the campus. Approximately 4% entered through traditional recruitment events including attending an open house (2.8%), or other recruitment event (1.4%). 6.9% indicated other, but no additional information was provided.

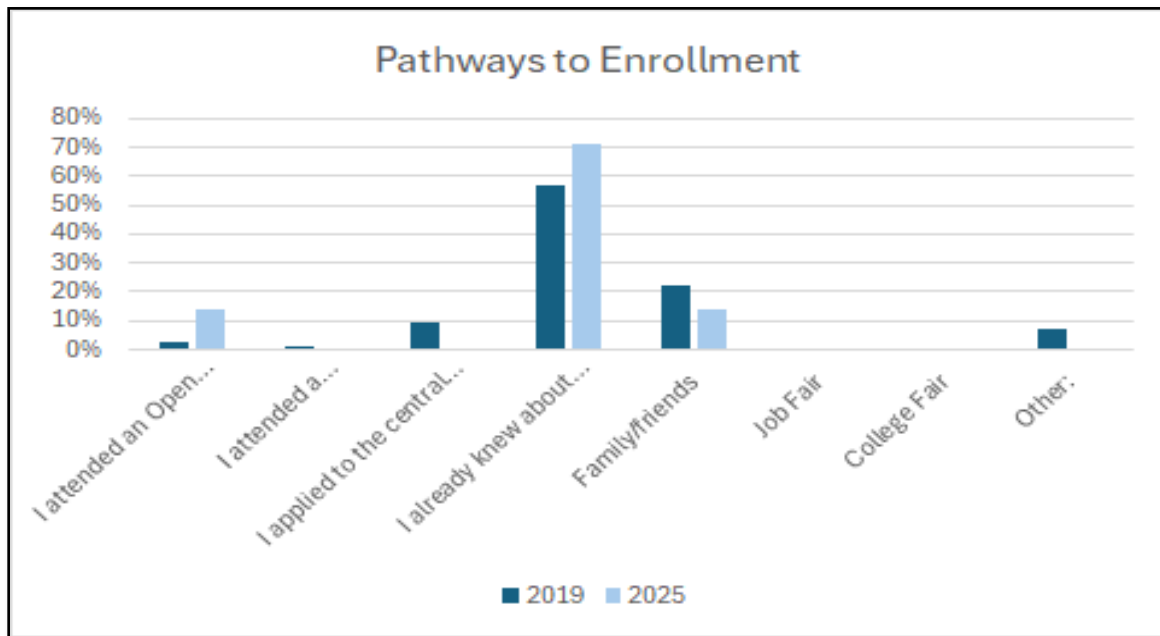


Figure 2. Pathways to enrollment by percent (N=72, 28)

Results reported in Figure 3 demonstrate the levels of awareness versus the levels of use of key student support offices at the campus. Respondents could select as many options as were applicable for both use and awareness-gauging questions. The awareness of veterans of the available services is almost all at or above 70%. However, interestingly the level of use of such services varies greatly and appears to be very pragmatic. The level of usage of services are all less than 50% except for advising, financial aid and veterans affairs. It is noteworthy that the disability services and counseling services are the two lowest used services provided.

In terms of actual use of the aforementioned services, the results were as follows: Advising (76%), Career Services (20%), Health Services (20%), Counseling Services (6%), Disability Services (8%), Financial Aid (55%), Learning Center/Tutoring (37%), Student Engagement (20%), Student Life (15%), Veterans Affairs (81%).

In terms of the 2024 survey, reputation was once again the strongest factor in students' decisions to apply/enroll. 71% stated they already knew about the college, with another 14% hearing about the college from family and friends. Slightly more students indicated attending a recruitment event from 2019, with 14% of respondents.

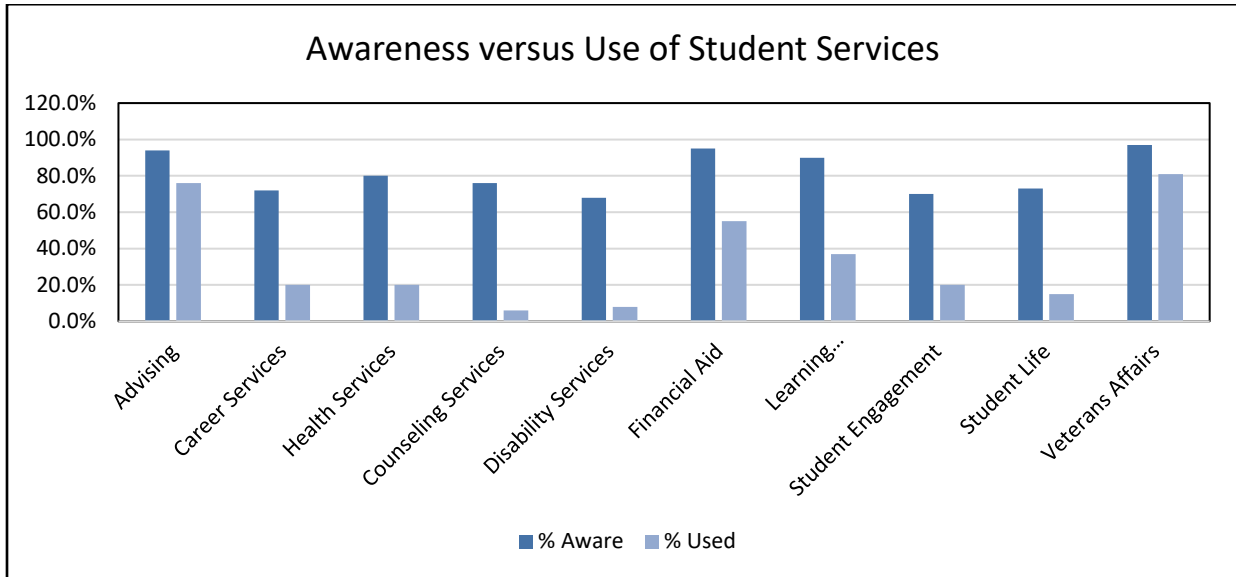


Figure 3. Awareness versus use of campus student services by percent (N=72)

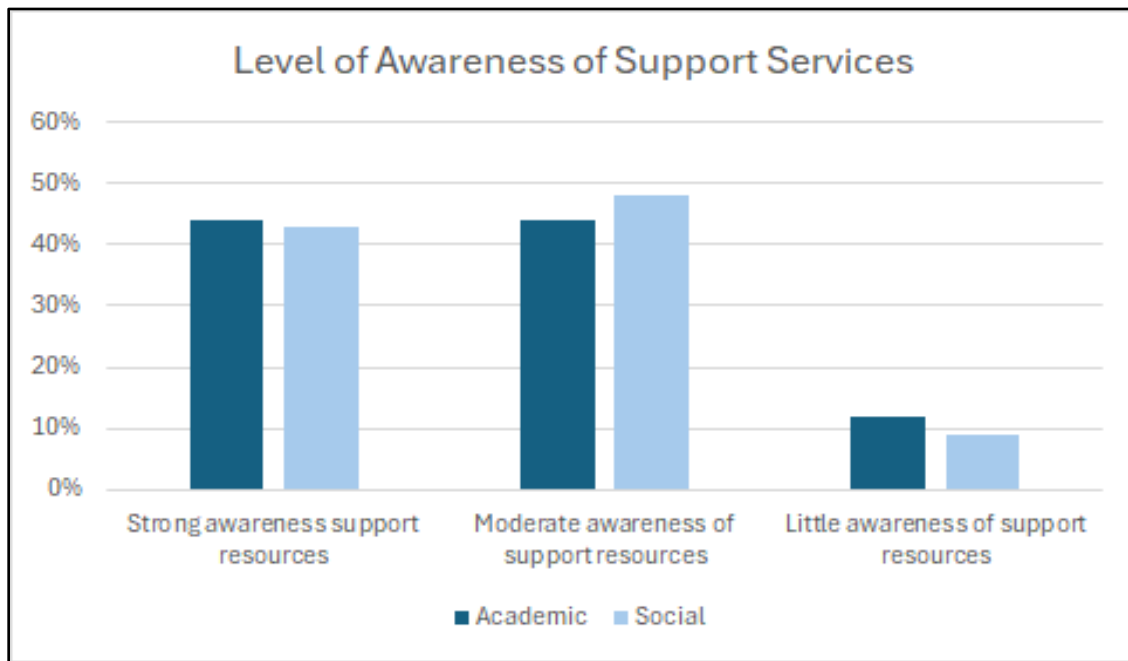


Figure 4. Level of awareness of support services by percent.

Results from Figure 4 illustrate the levels of awareness that veteran/SSM students have of on-campus academic and social support services. Each area listed several examples, such as advising, tutoring, financial aid, counseling and psychological services, and career services.

Similar to the 2019 survey, the vast majority of students expressed at least a moderate level of awareness of these services (88% for academic and 91% for social support).

Results from Figure 5 demonstrate the reported levels of satisfaction with academic and social support resources. As opposed to capturing use of services like was used in 2019, level of satisfaction was substituted, along with an open-ended question, pertaining to ways those services could be improved. Respondents reported being generally satisfied with academic and support services, with 76% of students being satisfied or extremely satisfied with academic resources and 78% with support services. 22% and 24% of students indicated they were neutral to extremely dissatisfied.

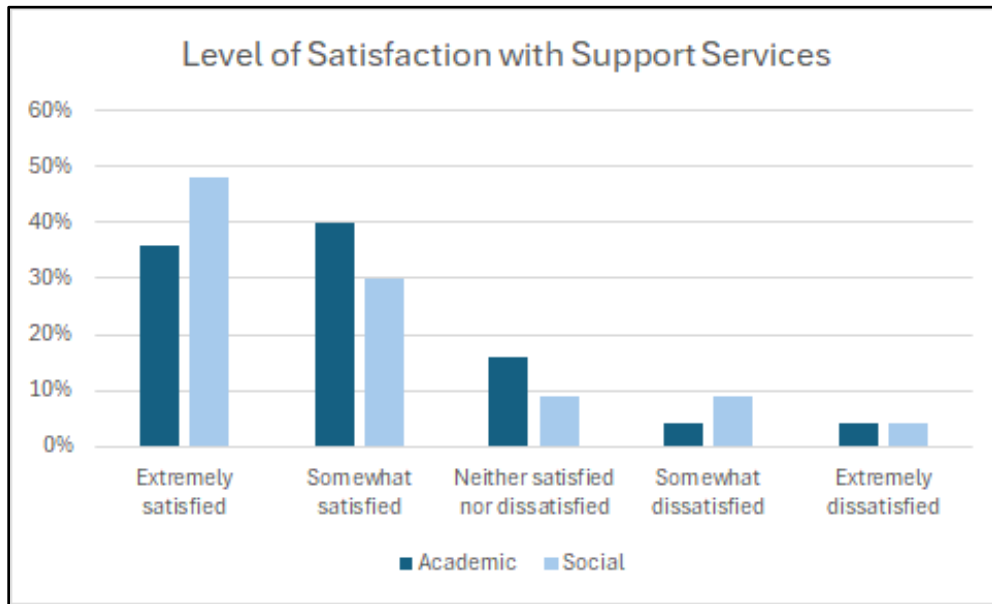


Figure 5. Levels of satisfaction with support services by percentage.

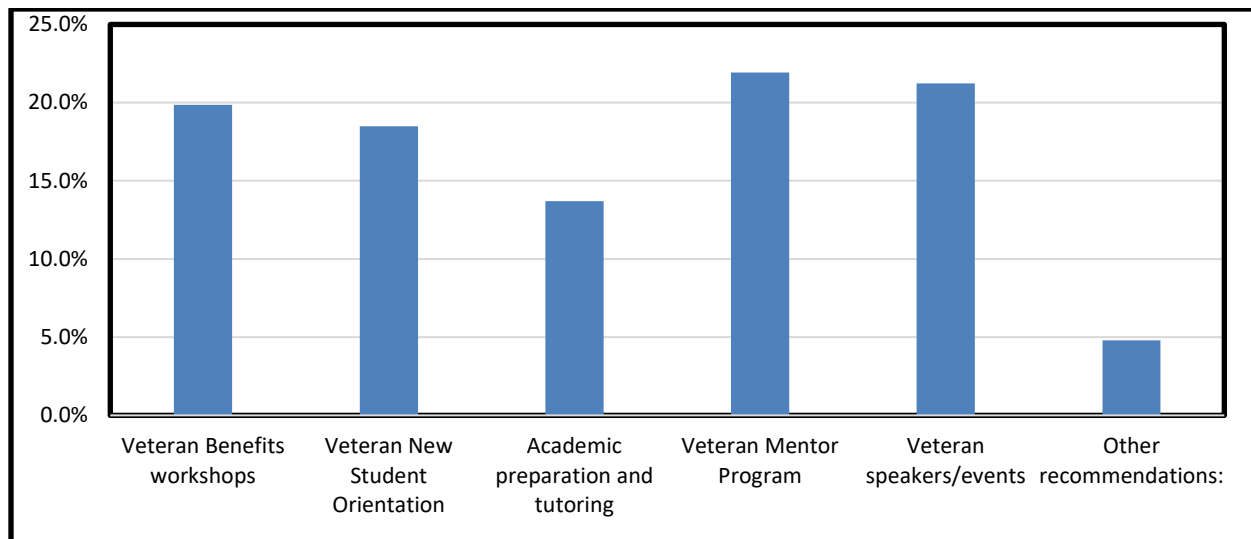


Figure 6. Types of veteran-specific programming student respondents are interested in seeing on-campus

Results from Figure 6 illustrate the types of veteran-specific programming students indicated they were interested in seeing on-campus. Responses were relatively equally distributed amongst the types of programs listed, indicating a wide level of interest in a variety of programming. Interest in a veteran mentor program ranked the highest (21.9%), followed by veteran speakers/events (21.2%) and veteran benefits workshops (19.9%). Interestingly, the lowest ranked of the named options was academic support (13.7%). Under other, students identified having a veteran's club on campus.

In response to the question regarding the perceived veteran friendliness at the college, 91.6 percent of respondents answered affirmatively, and 8.4 percent indicated “no” in 2019. On the 2024 version, results were similar. 91% of respondents indicated they felt the college was veteran friendly, and 9% answered “no.” In addition to perceived veteran friendliness of the college, a question was added to the 2024 survey regarding the college fostering a sense of belonging. 73% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the campus enhanced sense of belonging, and 27% indicated feeling neutral to strongly disagreeing, although with so few respondents, disagree and strongly disagree only received one response each.

Discussion

Gaining a better understanding of the barriers and obstacles to academic and social success experienced by veteran/SSM students at the collegiate level is something that has been well investigated. This study aimed to take that a step further by understanding the unique experiences of students at the college, specifically, those within Engineering and other STEM majors. Additionally, it sought to explore avenues for creating more equitable spaces for veteran/SSM students to enhance retention, persistence, and sense of belonging. This study's results align with previous research findings regarding pathways to enrollment, perceptions of belonging on campus/vehicles for building a sense of belonging, social barriers, and engagement in extracurricular activities. Areas of variability include academic barriers and utilization of key support offices.

The majority of respondents (79% in 2019 and 85% in 2025) identified the reputation of the campus as the determining factor in applying/enrolling with only 4% attending a recruitment-specific event. Similar to questions regarding lack of attendance at New Student Orientation, several students, regardless of age, identified scheduling conflicts, work and family obligations, and not feeling like the event applied to them as reasons for not attending. These findings are consistent with existing findings in the literature, which demonstrated that veteran/SSM students assume that these types of events are designed and geared toward a traditional college-age demographic—containing information that they don't feel they need [3]. Timing is also an essential piece of designing better community outreach within this group as family and work obligations can make attending a full- or even half-day event challenging [3]. Hosting veteran/SSM-centric recruitment events can open the door to demonstrating a welcoming, understanding, and culturally competent campus environment [3], [5].

In terms of the campus environment, respondents overwhelmingly found the college to be a veteran-friendly campus (91.6% and 91%). Respondents cited such attributes as feeling welcome and appreciated, easy access to knowledgeable staff that helped navigate the transition to campus, and flexibility to complete their training obligations without interfering with their coursework as clear indications that they belonged. Despite all of the positive attributes,

however, respondents expressed perceptions of not fitting in with their college-age peers; identifying that they were in a different stage of life than most of them. Their sense of identity and belonging came primarily from finding community amongst other veteran/SSM students. As the results demonstrate, 21.9% of respondents identified offering a peer mentoring program as the number one priority for veteran/SSM outreach and interest in a veteran club. Providing a platform for veteran/SSM students to form a community is critical to facilitating a sense of belonging [3], [5], [11]. Whether that platform is formal or informal, forming connections with other students at a similar stage of life with similar life experiences can alleviate feelings of isolation [6]. It can also help to foster a community-centered mindset, seeking to achieve common goals, which is an integral part of military service [5]. According to Buskirk-Cohen [11], a strong sense of belonging is the largest contributing factor to retention and persistence to degree completion, regardless of existing risk factors.

The equally high percentage of students identifying the college as a welcoming and veteran friendly environment was surprising in the 2024 survey results, and a factor we assumed would suffer post-pandemic. During the data collection phase in 2019, the college featured a busy veterans lounge, as well as an active veterans club. During the 18 months of remote work and instruction, the lounge was moved to a more remote location, and the student-led organization struggled to find its footing, meaning there are not currently any formal avenues for veteran/SSM students to connect and form a community. Many respondents cited accessible and knowledgeable staff, inclusive faculty, and ease of access to services as the primary factors in answering affirmatively. Some students did mention this lack of formal affinity space and a desire to see something reformed on campus, which is something that will be explored for future semesters.

Engagement with on-campus clubs/organizations, as well as participation in on-campus events, was also ranked relatively low in 2019, with 42% indicating that they participated in some level of activity outside of the classroom. This percentage increased slightly with the 2024 version, with 43% indicating they were moderately involved; however, it should be noted that none of the respondents indicated a high level of on-campus involvement. This is consistent with the previous research into this area, finding that veteran/SSM students were significantly less likely to engage in activities outside of what was required for their coursework, despite this type of engagement being an effective means of building a sense of belonging [1], [2]. As previously stated, this further highlights the importance of offering social outlets for veteran/SSM students. Offerings can range from affinity groups, veteran/SSM clubs, peer mentorship programs, and physical space for students to connect [5].

While many respondents indicated that they had a high awareness of the student services available, the majority were not utilizing them in any way. This was particularly striking in terms of Counseling Services, Disability Services, Tutoring, and Career Services where usage rates were as low as 6%. The high usage rate of offices like Advising, Financial Aid, and Veterans Affairs aligns with their importance as those offices are key to ensuring benefits are processed, tuition is paid, and they're following the correct academic track. It is surprising, however, that students would not make better use of offices that may be equally important to ensure they're meeting their academic goals, receiving necessary support both socially and academically, and working toward meeting their vocational and career goals post-graduation. According to Jenner [4], the veteran/SSM population is very future and career-oriented, placing a high degree of

importance on making efficient use of their college experience toward meeting those goals through internships and job-placement opportunities. One area for further exploration would be to examine why these services were underutilized at the campus, and what steps might be taken to make them more accessible and demonstrate more value to their overall college experience.

The 2024 survey sought to investigate awareness and utilization of academic and social support services. Overwhelmingly, most respondents reported both a high level of awareness, as well as satisfaction. While there were no meaningful statistical relationships between support services and any other demographic factors, including major, Engineering and the other STEM majors were the only students who expressed dissatisfaction with academic support services. The primary way they identified they could be improved was through tutoring. Many identified a lack of tutoring, particularly for STEM-related classes, as well as more skilled tutors.

Finally, in terms of academic metrics, the results showed that veteran/SSM students at the campus were required to take comparatively very few remedial courses between 21/22 and 23/24. This is contradictory to other findings that, often due to time away from school, veteran/SSM students are more than twice as likely to require remedial courses [3]. Similarly, veteran/SSM students at the campus also experienced very low rates of adverse academic standing (academic warning or academic suspension), particularly among Engineering majors. This may be partially attributed to the fact that many of our veteran/SSM students are considered transfer students and have therefore completed some level of college-level work. Examining what factors positively influence academic performance at the campus may be an area for future investigation.

Conclusion

The veteran/SSM student population can bring a diverse range of backgrounds, skills, and positive attributes to a university setting, but not without their unique challenges. This study utilized two surveys using a descriptive mixed methods approach and ad hoc academic data to investigate the academic and social barriers for students at the campus, particularly those in Engineering or related STEM majors.

Results showed that students largely had a positive opinion of the campus and the services they were provided. They also identified some key areas for growth (peer mentorship, veteran club, more veteran-specific programming). Findings largely aligned with previous research in this area regarding pathways to enrollment, levels of engagement in extra-curricular activities, perceived social barriers, and the importance of community toward building a sense of belonging. Areas of variability included the low use of key student support offices, low rates of remedial coursework, and low rates of veteran/SSM students in adverse academic standing.

Areas for future research would include a deeper investigation into why these support offices are underutilized and what can be done to enhance their accessibility. Particularly, exploring the barriers to veteran/SSM engagement in key services is crucial to enhancing their impact and effectiveness for continued student success [5]. For example, is lack of engagement due to a perceived lack of value, perceptions that these services lack awareness of the needs of veteran/SSM students, or perhaps they already have established services through other organizations, such as the VA. Additionally, results from this survey will be shared with targeted student support offices, so they can address areas for growth on a departmental level.

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