

The Development and Implications of Peer Emotional Support for Student Service Members/Veterans and Civilian College Students

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Although overall levels of university peer support increased over time for veteran and non-veteran students, veteran students indicated that the level of emotional support received, in particular, was lower compared to that of their civilian counterparts.
- For both student veterans and civilians, higher levels of emotional support were linked to higher grade point averages (GPA), increased academic motivation, academic persistence and educational self-efficacy. It was not, however, related to student veterans' mental health.

AUTHORS: Shawn D. Whiteman, Ph.D.; Adam E. Barry, Ph.D.; Daniel K. Mroczek, Ph.D.; Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT:

“Student service members/veterans represent a growing population on college campuses. Despite this growth, scholarly investigations into their health- and adjustment-related issues are almost nonexistent. The limited research that is available suggests that student service members/veterans may have trouble connecting with their civilian counterparts and be at risk for social isolation. The present study compared the development and implications of emotional support from peers among 199 student service members/veterans and 181 civilian students through 3 distinct occasions over the course of 1 calendar year. Data were collected via electronic survey. Measured constructs included perceived emotional support from university friends, mental health, alcohol use, and academic functioning. A series of multilevel models revealed that student service members/veterans reported less emotional support from their peers compared with their civilian counterparts; yet, emotional support from peers increased similarly for both groups over time. Although, increasing peer emotional support was generally related to better academic and mental health outcomes for both groups, the links between emotional support and mental health were stronger for civilian students. Results suggest that mental health practitioners, particularly those on college campuses, should be prepared to deal with veteran-specific experiences that occur before and during college.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Many student veterans are older than typical university students and may find it difficult to identify with other students on-campus, which can result in their feeling socially isolated. While this situation improves over time, the level of emotional support from university peers for civilians remains higher than the emotional support experienced by student veterans. For student veterans, strong emotional support from university peers was closely related to their academic outcomes, including motivation and self-efficacy. Since there are many benefits to establishing supportive relationships, student veterans will need to exert additional effort to create a strong peer support network. Since student veterans report more difficulty developing and maintaining supportive peer relationships at the university level compared to civilians, university administrators should work to facilitate the development of these relationships as well. Campus groups like student veterans associations or graduate student organizations may put student veterans in touch with other veterans and older, more mature students. University administrators should do as much as possible to ensure that these groups have funding, visibility and space on campus to create a strong social network for student veterans. University faculty and staff members assigned to assist with veteran financial aid might also identify veterans looking for peers, and connect them with peer groups and organizations when possible. Joining active groups with a common interest such as an outdoor adventure group, athletic team, service organization, or campus ministry can also provide opportunities for emotionally supportive relationships. Supportive relationships from family members and spouses remain important as well, and may supplant the need for some of the peer supports that benefit other students. However, this study indicates that all students can benefit from emotionally supportive relationships with peers, especially young, single student veterans most at risk for social isolation.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers may wish to work with university administrators to evaluate the ability of campus counseling centers to meet the unique needs of student veterans, and the resources which these on-campus centers may need in the future. Only 56 percent of U.S. colleges and universities currently have on-campus psychiatric services available, which may cause significant limitations for veterans attending these institutions. Psychiatric problems are common in this age group for all students, so expanding on-campus psychiatric services can benefit the greater university population as well. Colleges and universities should also seek to hire more counselors with experience supporting veterans specifically, as the number of veterans returning from service and enrolling in colleges and universities will increase over the next few years.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this was the first longitudinal study to focus on student veterans, future studies should examine student veterans' outcomes over a more extended time period, as this one only covered three semesters. Research examining veterans' university experiences from enrollment to graduation, or throughout their first years of post-graduate employment, could provide important information about their career trajectories and the impact of their experiences. In the future, student samples should be larger and more diverse, and results should be analyzed according to class standing so that the different challenges of freshman and upperclassman participants are captured. Researchers should also further examine the role of emotional and social support from spouses, family, friends and university peers in terms of the quality and nature of the most significant forms of support for student veterans, and the role of emotional support systems for veterans with significant psychological challenges.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Shawn D. Whiteman, Ph.D.
Department of Human Development
and Family Studies
Purdue University
sdwhitem@purdue.edu

Adam E. Barry, Ph.D.
University of Florida

Daniel K. Mroczek, Ph.D.
Purdue University

**Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth,
Ph.D.**
Purdue University