



## Behavioral Health and Adjustment to College Life for Student Service Members/Veterans

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### ABSTRACT

“Increasing numbers of student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) are enrolling in college. However little is known about how their previous military experience affects their adjustment to this new role. The present study tested the hypothesis that SSM/Vs who report adjustment problems in college have a higher incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other behavioral health problems compared to those who do not report adjustment problems. SSM/Vs (n=173) at a large, Southeastern public university completed online surveys that included well-validated screens measuring substance use, depression, PTSD, and other mental disorders. Those reporting difficulties adjusting to university life (28%) reported significantly higher frequencies of behavioral and health problems while in the military, and significantly higher levels of PTSD, depression, and mental health disorders, but no difference in substance use. Implications for improved behavioral health screening and coordination of university behavioral health services with veterans’ health systems are discussed.”

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- In this study, the researchers identify how prior military experience affects the transition to academic life for student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) at a large southeastern university. Through an online survey, they assess the severity of past and present behavioral health issues and the SSM/Vs adjustment to student life. They hypothesize that SSM/Vs who have trouble adjusting to academia will have a higher incidence of behavioral health problems, including depression and PTSD than those who do not report adjustment issues.
- Nearly half of SSM/Vs reported mild or greater levels of depressive symptoms, and approximately 20% reported moderate or high levels of depressive symptoms. Consistent with prior research on veterans, one-third of SSM/Vs demonstrated positive screening for PTSD.
- Findings show that a significantly high proportion of SSM/Vs who reported have difficulty adjusting to college were more likely to have had a mental health issue in the past than those who did not report difficulty adjusting.

## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

SSM/Vs who are having trouble adjusting to college life should seek help available to them through on-campus services and resources, particularly if they have had mental health issues in the past. To improve overall social integration of SSM/Vs on college campuses, campus administrators should increase awareness of veterans' issues. University administrators should offer training to help faculty and staff identify when a student (SSM/Vs and civilians) might be having a hard time adjusting to academic life. Additionally, faculty and staff should be acquainted with the resources and services the college offers students to help with readjustment. Further integration can be accomplished by creating a campus-wide dialogue to educate civilian students about the experiences of SSM/Vs. Some SSM/Vs perceived a gap between themselves and civilian students. Campus-wide dialogue might also help to bridge the gap between civilian students and student veterans. SSM/Vs might benefit from specialized learning communities that allow them to discuss shared experiences in safe environments, and allow for faculty and staff to quickly identify students experiencing difficulty with college life. Institutions of higher education should support and foster veteran student organizations, organize peer mentorship programs, and create physical spaces on campus for SSM/Vs. Faculty should refrain from publicly requesting SSM/Vs to share their military experiences unless the student has explicitly stated that they are comfortable sharing their experience(s).

### FOR POLICY

The VA should forge stronger partnerships with academic institutions so SSM/Vs might easily identify off-campus VA mental health services. Policymakers might also ensure that SSM/Vs with a history of mental health illness have the resources they need to successfully adjust to college life. Ensuring such resources might include requiring statewide training for counselors to include additional units on mental health and college life. Policymakers should consider mandating that training for counselors includes units on veteran-specific issues, such as readjustment, trauma, PTSD, and depression issues. Currently, there is no universal method for assessing adjustment difficulty for SSM/Vs in higher education. Policymakers might mandate educational institutions offer universal surveys that screen for mental health issues to all SSM/Vs.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To reduce self reporting bias in future studies, researchers should gather data from additional verifiable sources. To improve generalizability to all SSM/V populations, future researchers should draw from both private and public universities across the United States. This study surveyed about 10% (173 out of 1,700) of SSM/Vs at one southeastern university. To improve generalizability, researcher should also sample a larger percentage of SSM/Vs at each university. This study does not include a control group of non-SSM/Vs to determine if reported SSM/V adjustment attitudes are comparable to civilian students. Future studies would benefit from larger and more diverse sample sizes. Further research on this subject should utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to better guide practices and policies regarding adjustment for student service members and veterans in academic environments.

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