Do military veteran and civilian students function differently in college?

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**ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** The authors sought to assess military veterans' functioning in college by comparing their experience with that of civilian students. **Participants:** The study, conducted from April 2012 to February 2013, included 445 civilian and 61 student service member/veteran (SSM/V) undergraduates, drawn from a community college and two 4-year Catholic colleges, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. **Methods:** Participants completed anonymous online surveys. Six areas of functioning in transition to college were examined: Health, Fitting In, Emotional Adjustment, Productivity, Perceived Career Support, and Social Engagement. **Results:** Students, both SSM/V and civilian, with past exposure to a potentially traumatic event fit in worse than students without such exposure. Past exposure to trauma was associated with poorer emotional adjustment in civilian students, but not in SSM/V. **Conclusions:** Implications of results were discussed.

Recent reviews\textsuperscript{1,2} show that student service members/veterans (SSM/V) experience significant social and emotional difficulties. Some authors have suggested that they may feel comfortable only with other SSM/V.\textsuperscript{3} When compared with their civilian peers, SSM/V have more problems with hostility and anger,\textsuperscript{4,5} experience a higher burden of work and family obligations,\textsuperscript{6} and feel less supported.\textsuperscript{7} Studies show that SSM/V engage in binge drinking\textsuperscript{8} and substance abuse,\textsuperscript{9} and experience depression and suicidality.\textsuperscript{10} US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data from more than 298,000 Operation Iraqi Freedom/Afghanistan Operation Enduring Freedom veterans show that nearly 37% had received mental illness diagnoses.\textsuperscript{11}

Because the culture of institutions of higher learning is quite dissimilar to the culture of the military, SSM/V may face many challenges in college.\textsuperscript{12} Rather than focus on one specific area, we examined SSM/V functioning across 6 separate areas that are likely to be important to their adjustment in college.

We report on a pilot study of undergraduate students at 3 colleges in the northeastern United States. We used a survey method to compare the functioning of SSM/V and civilian students in college. We hypothesized that SSM/V and civilians would differ in 6 domains of functioning (described below) and that social engagement of SSM/V would be different with SSM/V and civilian students. We also hypothesized that functioning would differ between students who had experienced trauma and those who had not.

**Methods**

After receipt of institutional review board (IRB) approval from Felician University, a survey of SSM/V and civilian students was conducted at 3 colleges/universities in the Northeast.

As no instrument currently exists for assessing SSM/V functioning in college, a questionnaire was constructed using 3 sources: a literature review of research on SSM/V adjustment to college, the authors’ experiences with SSM/V in the classroom, and the first author’s clinical experience in the VA. This questionnaire was used to form 2 separate versions. One version, for civilian students, consisted of 24 items, using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, strongly agree), dealing with 6 domains: Health, Fitting In, Emotional Adjustment, Productivity, Perceived Career Support, and Social Engagement—General. The version for SSM/V students included the same domains as well as an additional domain, Social Engagement—Veterans, which consisted of 2 extra items.

The Health domain included 2 items: students were asked whether they felt physically healthy and whether
they were neglecting to maintain their health. The Fitting In domain included 7 items that asked students whether they liked being a college student, felt part of the college community, felt comfortable on campus, respected the authority of their professors, felt their colleges were responsive to their needs, felt it was a mistake to attend college, and felt they fit in. The Emotional Adjustment domain included 5 items that asked students whether anxiety interfered with school work, they felt depressed, they were able to control their temper, they had difficulty managing stress, and they were ensuring they remained emotionally healthy. The Productivity domain included 4 items that asked students whether they had difficulty managing time demands, felt well organized, participated in the classroom, and had difficulty getting class assignments done. The Perceived Career Support domain included 4 items that asked students whether they wished the college offered more help in choosing a career, wished they had more help choosing courses, had access to good faculty advice in choosing a major, and felt the college offered career counseling that met their needs. The Social Engagement—General domain assessed social engagement with the general student body, and included 2 items, which were worded slightly differently for SSM/V and civilians. One item asked whether students enjoyed attending college social events, with the qualifier "even if they are not specifically for veterans" added for the SSM/V version only. The second item asked civilian students if they got along with fellow students, and asked SSM/V if they got along with students who were not veterans. The Social Engagement—Veterans domain was present only in the SSM/V questionnaire. It assessed social engagement with SSM/V, and included 2 items that asked whether SSM/V students were friends with 1 or more SSM/V at their college, and whether they liked to go to SSM/V social events at their college.

Internal reliability, using Cronbach’s alpha, was high for both the SSM/V (α = .85) and civilian (α = .86) versions of the questionnaire.

Both questionnaire versions included demographic items relating to gender, college year, living status, and employment status. Both questionnaire versions also contained 3 items that assessed potential trauma by asking whether students had been exposed to combat or life-threatening situations, dealt with killed or wounded people, or experienced sexual violence or extreme sexual harassment.

E-mails detailing informed consent and inviting study participation were sent to all undergraduate students enrolled at the 3 colleges. Students who wished to participate were directed to an anonymous online questionnaire for either SSM/V or civilians, depending on each student’s status.

Demographic data were summarized into frequencies or means and standard deviations, as appropriate.

After reverse-scoring of negatively worded items, a summary score was derived for each of the domains, by calculating the mean of each domain’s item scores. A dichotomous Trauma score was assigned to each student based on their answers to the 3 trauma items; a student was designated as having experienced trauma if they reported at least 1 kind of trauma. A chi-square test was used to determine the relationship between Trauma score and student status (SSM/V or civilian). Independent-samples t tests were used to compare SSM/V and civilian students in the first 6 domains, and a paired-sample t test was used to compare SSM/V students’ social engagement with the general student body (Social Engagement—General) and their social engagement with other SSM/V students (Social Engagement—Veterans). Independent-samples t tests were used to compare the first 6 domains in students with trauma with those without. All tests were 2-tailed. Dummy variables were created for student status (SSM/V vs civilian), trauma (present vs not), gender, living status (alone vs with other[s]), employment, college class (freshman/sophomore vs junior/senior), and multiple regression was used to determine if these demographic variables predicted adjustment in the 6 domains.

The sample included 445 civilian students and 61 SSM/V students, of whom 24% were freshmen, 30% juniors, 26% sophomores, and 19% seniors. Gender was 31% male and 69% female. Age was 61% 18–21, 11% 22–25, 7% 26–29, and 21% 30+. Six percent lived alone, and 72% were employed.

Results

SSM/V students functioned worse in the Fitting In domain (t(504) = 1.989, p = .047) than civilian students. There were no significant differences between SSM/V and civilian students in the Health (t(504) = -0.119, p = .905), Emotional Adjustment (t(504) = 0.019, p = .985), Productivity (t(504) = -1.122, p = .554), Career Support (t(504) = -1.458, p = .145), Social Engagement (t(504) = 1.17, p = .827) domains. SSM/V students did not differ significantly in Social Engagement with the general student body versus with other SSM/V students (t(60) = 1.917, p = .060).

Multiple regression analysis indicated a significant model for the Fitting In domain, with trauma being the only significant predictor (Table 1).

Comparison using a t test showed that students with trauma, regardless of SSM/V status, functioned worse in the Fitting In domain than students without trauma (t(488) = -3.359, p = .001, but did not differ in the other domains, although there was a trend towards worse Emotional Adjustment in those with traumatic experiences (t = -1.896, p = .059). Levene’s test indicated
Table 1: The enter method of multiple regression analysis to examine demographic variables and student’s adjustment to college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>$r^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Engagement (SSM/V)</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>0.722</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Engagement (Civilian)</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>1.692</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Career Support</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>1.274</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>2.091</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Adjustment</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>1.811</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting In</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>2.465</td>
<td>6.463</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Student status</th>
<th>Trauma</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>College level</th>
<th>Living status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting In</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>-.118*</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05.

unequal variances ($F = 4.421$, $p = .036$) so degrees of freedom were adjusted from 488 to 273.

SSM/V students (88.14%) were more likely to have trauma than civilian students (24.36%) ($\chi^2 = 96.931$, $p < .0001$). When civilian students alone were considered, functioning in the Emotional Adjustment domain was worse in students with trauma than in those without trauma ($t(429) = -2.319$, $p = .021$). On the other hand, when SSM/V students alone were considered, there was no significant difference in the Emotional Adjustment domain between those with and without trauma ($t(57) = -0.192$, $p = .848$).

Comment

Although research shows that SSM/V experience alienation, our study shows that it is trauma rather than SSM/V status that predicts students’ sense of fitting in. A previous study showed no relationship between trauma symptoms and any academic correlates, but trauma has been found to be correlated with readjustment difficulties in civilian life. Interestingly, SSM/V students are unlike civilian students in that the former do not have worse emotional adjustment if they have a history of trauma. This finding could be the result of an expectancy effect, as SSM/V may have higher expectations of encountering traumatic events and may have a degree of immunization to trauma. SSM/V may also be more likely to have received treatment for trauma.

Surprisingly, we found that SSM/V were no different than civilians in engaging with other students, and that they did not show different levels of engagement with SSM/V and civilian students. It must be noted that this finding could be due to the inadequacy of the assessment instrument to pick up differences, as only 2 items were used to measure each kind of social engagement.

Given that SSM/V who have experienced trauma appear to manage emotional adjustment better than civilian students with traumatic experiences, they might prove helpful to civilian fellow students in peer groups. This is particularly likely to be true if further studies confirm that SSM/V engage as well socially with civilian students as with SSM/V students.

Limitations

Although this study provides new information about how SSM/V function in their transition to college, limitations of the methods employed should be noted. First, the questionnaire used is not a standardized instrument; development of such an instrument is recommended for future research. Second, the sample of SSM/V was relatively small in comparison with civilian students. Third, the sample may not be representative of all students, as only 3 of the colleges contacted gave permission for the study. Finally, one of the colleges is a community college, so third- and fourth-year students were not sampled from that institution.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study may help guide further research and allow colleges to better assist SSM/V in their transition to college. In-depth interviews with SSM/V might well prove more revealing of the quality of adjustment to college.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. The authors confirm that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements.
of the United States and received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Felician University.

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References