

# A Needs Assessment for Developing a Web-based Social Support Program for Student Veterans

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## Introduction

According to the United States Office of Accountability,<sup>1</sup> more than 5 million members will transition out of the military by the year 2020. Many of these veterans are looking to higher education as their next step to re-enter civilian life. Since 2009, more than 1.4 million military veterans have taken advantage of their Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits and entered institutions of higher education.<sup>2,3</sup> This growing population on college and university campuses is faced with a unique set of challenges. Researchers indicate that student veterans often experience a sense of vulnerability and social isolation. They have been separated from systems and people they relied upon for years, and they do not feel that they can relate to traditional civilian students due to differences in age, maturity, and lack of understanding of the military experience.<sup>4,5</sup>

How do student veterans overcome this sense of alienation and isolation? How do they find and stay connected with one another, and what mechanisms do they use to accomplish this? Are there measures we might take to assist them? The purpose of this study is to examine student-veteran perceptions concerning what is needed to integrate successfully into campus life, specifically regarding social support, by identifying the type and frequency of communication most often used by student veterans. Given the availability of social media and technology in society, the study seeks student-veteran perceptions concerning the development of a web-based social-support program whose function would be to connect, support, and maintain communication with, and among, student veterans on a college campus.

## Literature Review

There is a wealth of information regarding student veterans and their transition to college. Many address

the different roles student veterans have to balance<sup>6,7</sup> while others address some of the psychosocial issues student veterans face during reintegration to civilian and college life.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Semer and Harmening<sup>7</sup> identified seven factors that impacted student veterans' academic success and challenged institutions of higher education to be more empathic and receptive to the issues with which student veterans grapple and cope. Selber et al,<sup>11</sup> recognised the need for student veterans to feel a sense of belonging on the college campus as well as develop awareness of the social services available to them in the local community. They worked with the social work program at a local university to develop a course training Master's-level social work students to assist student veterans on campus as a way to address this need. It is clear that within higher education much remains to be done to assist this special student population to achieve academic success.

There are several studies that examine the use of web-based interventions to provide support for special populations, particularly people with specific medical conditions. Austrom, et al<sup>12</sup> discussed the use of a web-based videoconference support group for family caregivers with relatives who had Alzheimer's Disease. Kaltenbaugh et al<sup>13</sup> explored the option of using web-based interventions to support caregivers of patients with cancer, while Damianakis et al,<sup>14</sup> examined the use of a web-based social support group with caregivers who had a relative with traumatic brain injury. In all of the studies, the authors found that the group was helpful and provided an alternative to in-person support, but acknowledged that there is a need for much more research in this area. Additional studies explored the psychological benefits of participation in support groups. Binford, et al.<sup>15</sup> studied the use of video chat support group for parents of adolescents in an eating-disorder treatment program. This study found that the sessions allowed parents to talk openly and honestly about feelings, and felt that it was an effective tool

to use, in conjunction with family-based therapy, to treat the disorder. Mo and Coulson<sup>16</sup> studied the correlation between use of an online support group and psychological health for individuals with HIV/AIDS. They found that those individuals who actively participated often in the online group tended to have higher levels of psychological health compared to those who had lower levels of group participation.

Preliminary studies validate the use of web-based interventions to assist people in coping with specific medical concerns; however there is little research that discusses the use of web-based groups for social support in non-clinical areas. It is well documented that student veterans have challenges in the transition from military life to campus life.<sup>2,6,17,18</sup> Several authors also have supported the use of support groups to assist veterans in this transition.<sup>5,19</sup> Groups like the Student Veteran Association of America (SVA) have been formed to assist with student veteran needs as well. However, currently there is no specific research that explores the use of web-based support groups for student veterans specifically for the purpose of maintaining communication.

### Methods

This qualitative, exploratory study sought to understand student veterans' perceptions regarding the development of a web-based support group. The population for the study was the student veterans attending a midsize, mid-western university. The student veterans were contacted via email by the researchers, as well as the campus staff member responsible for veteran services. They were provided with the rationale for the study and also the dates of focus groups, so they could select the date and time that were most convenient for them. Three focus groups were moderated by trained facilitators following a set of interview questions or prompts, and the groups lasted 90 minutes. The questions used in the focus groups were derived from discussion among the researchers when determining the focus for the study. Each group was posed a series of questions regarding the type and frequency of communication they have with fellow veterans, as well as their views concerning the feasibility of implementing a web-based support group. At the conclusion of each respective focus group meeting, participants in attendance were given a twenty-five dollar gift card to compensate them for their time and their contribution to the project.

The group proceedings served as the primary data-collection instrument and were audio-recorded. During the focus groups, facilitators took notes

individually. After the conclusion of the focus group meetings, facilitators compared observations of the group dynamics and comments. Each researcher summarised his/her notes and distributed them via email to other members of the research team for review and comment. Audio files were transcribed by a professional service.

Each researcher was provided with a copy of the transcripts and notes to review and use to identify themes independently. The research team then met and compared their notes, discussing the common trends and themes they found in the data. They listed all the responses to each of the questions per group, then transferred all group comments for each question to a spreadsheet and identified key words and phrases. They then looked for commonalities among the responses, and developed groupings and identified common themes.

There were multiple sources of reliability and validity used to analyse the data. First, the transcripts were reviewed by each research team member independently to look for errors. Once the transcripts were complete, the coding procedures were reviewed for consistency. One source of validity used in this study was triangulation. This involves the use of multiple sources of data to build a coherent justification for the themes of the study.<sup>20,21</sup> According to Carter et al.,<sup>22</sup> the method triangulation includes interviews, observations, and field notes. The transcripts of the focus groups, as well as the individual research team members' notes and observations, provided the data required for this method of validation. Researcher triangulation was also used in this study. This involves "the participation of two or more researchers in the same study to provide multiple observations and conclusions"<sup>21,23</sup> The researchers in this study come from different disciplines (Social Work and Theatre and Film), and thus view the study from different perspectives. Their respective disciplines and training provide a lens through which the group participants and overall importance of the study is viewed. In addition, the researcher-level of experience with veterans' issues is varied. One of the researchers has spent most of his academic career studying veterans' issues - particularly those of student veterans. Another has been researching veterans' issues involving older adults, while the third has had limited experience regarding veteran concerns. The research team brings different perspectives to the study, and each viewed the results from the lens through which they practice. However, all three researchers in this project independently identified similar themes and concepts, which reinforces the study's validity. Another validation strategy used

was member checking, which involved having each member of the research team present compare his/her results to the other team members' results, looking for commonalities in analysis and coding strategies.

The study obtained the approval of the Midwestern University Human Subjects Review Board. This process provided verification that the process was ethically sound, that the participants of the study were treated with respect, and that the participants would not suffer any undue hardship or unethical treatment as a result of their participation. To maintain confidentiality, the identities of the participants remained anonymous in any reporting of the data. Although excerpts or passages from conversations are embedded in the final document, the participants' identities are not disclosed.

### Results

A total of 21 student veterans participated: 76.2% (16) were male, 23.8% (5) were female, and they ranged in age from 20-63. Three participants (14%) were Hispanic, and nineteen (86%) were Caucasian. Twelve of the participants were first-generation college students, while eleven of them came from families who had previous college experience. All branches of the military, except the Coast Guard, were represented. This included active military, as well as National Guard, members.

Communication was identified as a central component for many participants in the transition to civilian life, as well as maintaining contact with military friends. While communication frequency and type were umbrella themes throughout, several specific themes emerged from the study. The first was that participants felt a need to maintain communication with other veterans. The reasons for communication included needing practical information, such as a letter of recommendation or advice about college, and/or finding comfort in the realisation of shared experiences (children, divorce, returning to school). One subject stated,

*"I've got interests in common with a number of my former colleagues, and we are interested in each other's projects."* Another said, *"I found that a lot of them [veterans] find themselves in the same situation I'm in now where a lot of them have divorced, they have families, they're single parents, whether it's a male or female friend."* One participant, who was a military supervisor stated, *"I get a lot of requests if they need from me a letter of recommendation whether they should get out [of the military] or go to college,"* while another commented that communication was

important for assisting others, *"...for the telephone number for somebody that they might be trying to get a job and they need an old supervisor to talk on their behalf."*

While the student veterans were in agreement that it is important to maintain contact with other veterans, they were very diverse in the methods by which they communicate. The type of communication employed depended upon the degree to which they wanted a relationship. All of the participants used Facebook as a way to stay connected, but they also agreed that Facebook's purpose was more for superficial contact. They described it more as an "advertising forum" or a way to "catch up" with people without really talking to them, although they agreed that it is convenient for maintaining contact with international friends. Participants discussed the distance and time constraints that prevented face-to-face contact, as well as the convenience of social media like Facebook and Twitter. They also agreed that this type of social media, although providing some degree of communication, provided a boundary that permitted superficial contact and prevented more intense, or more personal, interaction.

*One aspect of communicating with other veterans is involvement in established veteran focused organisations. The participants discussed participation in various groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and veteran-support groups on the university campus and in the community. For example, they stated that their commanding officers, prior to discharge, encouraged them to join the local VFW posts. It is important to stress that while two participants were active in their local VFW posts, the majority of student veterans did not participate in the VFW, primarily because they felt out of place. The participants felt that while the organisation was important for older veterans, it did not provide the necessary camaraderie and support the younger veterans craved. A male participant offered,*

*"The reason I joined is members of the VFW are those who deployed and they can relate. So I don't have to sit there and try to explain things to people who don't have any idea what I'm talking about"* while another admitted, *"I would say I'm not so much engaged with that [the VFW] unless it's going to like a Thursday drawing and drinking beers. It seems outdated to me. It's not guys or girls that I would relate with personally."* And while a third admitted *"I mean we share a little bit of stories cause, you know, we're all war or whatever. But it's not the same to me,"* a third member underscored the idea that *"They are just so different than our generation I think."*

Several of the participants were active in developing and recruiting members for on-campus student veteran organizations, or participation in community-based support groups for student veterans. But many other participants were unaware that these groups existed. In addition, they all expressed frustration in the lack of time they had for social commitments. They had demanding academic schedules, and many of them had family responsibilities that prevented, or limited, their participation in social activities. Furthermore, some did not want to establish relationships that were transient.

*"I am a mom and we don't have the flexibility of being single and a student. You know, we have other stressors that go with it,"* stated one female veteran, while a male veteran offered, *"I have relationships that I have enough trouble maintaining as it is with all the people I served with. Why would I create new ones and then have that much more trouble maintaining relatively thin relationships?"* An additional contribution clarified this position: *"I didn't feel any real desire to be a transient friend to anybody."*

One of the most significant themes related to the participants' contact with former "battle buddies." All of the student veterans in the study stated that they had a select group of people with whom they deployed and with whom they kept in regular contact primarily for personal reasons. They referred to other veterans as "family members" and close friends with whom they wanted to maintain a connection following service. In addition to being friends, student veterans also felt some allegiance and responsibility for their well-being. They expressed the need to be available to friends requiring support or experiencing a personal crisis. One veteran commented:

*"I mean I do get those phone calls at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning where people have nightmares and stuff. Or, if my husband's PTSD comes in then, you know I call my friends and talk to them or we'll talk about things that have happened. "Another stated: "I was having a rough time and I called him. It was like 3:00 in the morning here and I called him. He was down in Texas. And he picked up the phone immediately. Talked to him for two hours and calmed me down... hearing his voice...if I can just hear him say like chill out, it's fine, that's good enough for me."*

The student veterans overwhelmingly preferred face-to-face contact, whenever possible, to maintain friendships and provide intimate, personal contact. This included social gatherings at bars, vacationing at one another's homes, or just spending time with one another. The participants acknowledged that, while face-to-face contact is most preferred, it is also

the least realistic given the distance between them and their friends. As one veteran noted,

*"We tried to get together every year, which failed spectacularly after the second year"* due to distance. Phone calls, text messages, and e-mail messages were the next preferred method of communication. Participants in the focus groups stated repeatedly the importance of being able to hear one's voice and vocal tone.

*"I personally prefer calling or texting, mainly calling. I know I can tell if they're bullshitting me or if they're giving me the straights,"* one said. Another agreed, adding *"you can get tone, inflexion...all the things you can't get from reading a text message."*

A third subject admitted, *"we kinda like a group text thing going that all my buddies are in."* And another cited e-mail as being important: *"for me, the advantage of email is this is how I operate, as opposed to taking a call at any particular time, I know that email will always be there and I can respond if it's 2:00 in the morning when I've got some time and can think of what I'm doing."*

Finally, written correspondence was a method of communication that was appreciated, but rare. The participants expressed the joy they experienced when receiving handwritten letters or cards, and acknowledged that it was partially because they are so rarely received that such correspondence was treasured.

Developing a sense of identity as a student veteran is another aspect of communication that was identified in the study. The student veterans were generally non-traditional students who had family and work responsibilities, unlike many of their civilian peers. Even those without families perceived themselves as more mature than the average civilian undergraduate student. In fact, the student veterans voiced frustration about their peers' perceptions of unfairness, entitlement, and lack of boundaries. Participants also felt a lack of trust in the civilian student population and a need to protect their privacy.

*"I don't think the population is so sensitive and so nice. People are like, oh you guys get benefits or you guys get discounts, or you guys get that...the word that bothers me most is lucky. Oh, you're lucky you get a free education."* Another voiced concern over a fellow veteran who could not cope with civilian student peers. While *"he can't get a normal job because he doesn't have an education...he's sick and tired of dealing with kids that complain about mom and dad not giving them enough money. He's like,*

*I can't stand these damn kids no more, so he just dropped out of school.*" Drawing attention to the age difference among student peers, a veteran added, *"And now I'm here and I really don't know anybody... and feel really weird talking to some of them cause we're like a ten year age gap is so hard to deal with."*

These comments clearly demonstrate the differences in perception between civilian and veteran students, and support the need for a mechanism to assist student veterans in transitioning from the military to the university.

The idea for the web-based program originated in comments from younger veterans involved in previous reintegration research conducted by the research team and was enthusiastically supported by the study participants. All of them stated they were literate in the use of social media, and felt that a web-based group would provide them with the connectedness they desired, without the barriers of distance. They wanted a mechanism to identify colleagues and support systems specific to student veterans, and acknowledged that nothing like that currently exists on any college campus in which they had been students. They suggested having a format similar to the Blackboard or Canvas programs utilised on campus, but insisted that access would be private. Specifically, the participants voiced concern about discussing matters such as suicidal ideation, symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues on a format accessible to civilian students. The veterans wished to protect the privacy of their personal struggles from the general public, and yearned for access to specific people or professionals who would not judge them, but could assist them in accessing appropriate resources and care. Ultimately, they feared their conversations would become public and potentially misinterpreted by the non-military population, which is a key concern given their perceptions about civilian students. They also suggested having different files or forms that supported specific areas important to the student veterans: places for information on GI (Government Issue) benefits, community resources, study and mentoring opportunities, student veteran organisations and activities on campus, and other areas of interest. One participant said,

*"Some people we don't know are veterans on this campus and they could be needing assistance that they may not know how to reach out."* A second admitted *"it's so hard to find, like where do I go for this, what do I need to do with this? But having it at your fingertips without having to go [to a specific office would be valuable]."* *"Having something like this, structured like that, and having the links and*

*separate discussions and separate area, separate entities, would be completely beneficial for somebody like me,"* stated another student veteran.

The participants felt that encouraging the web-based format in some type of student veteran orientation or course would be an important first step in gaining comfort using it. If it was initially an expectation, then once they became proficient at using it, they felt they would want to continue. Many of the participants stated that they use Canvas and Blackboard because it is an expectation for a course or university communication. They admit being hesitant to use it for other things. However, the participants felt that once a student veteran was able to see the benefits of a web-based support program, he/she would be much more likely to utilise it more effectively. Also, if the idea was presented in an orientation, and then encouraged in an academic course, the participants noted that they would feel more connected to resources and other student veterans, thus making their adjustment to, and their stay within the university much better.

Since only student veterans, or specific university staff who work with them, would have access to the program, the veterans would be able to chat with one another and have more open communication, knowing that the civilian population would not be involved. A major concern voiced by the groups was that the site be available after graduation, re-assignment, or deployment so that communication could be maintained without interruption. The participants felt that this type of program would allow them more ongoing relationships and reduce the "transient nature" of student veterans' relationships on campus because they could still maintain connections even after leaving the university. They also felt it would strengthen the campus student-veteran organisation because it would be easier to provide information concerning meetings and activities with other student veterans who were regularly using the program.

Overall, participants felt the proposed program would strengthen communication among student veterans on campus which would, in turn, assist them in their transition to higher education and civilian life. Initially we would develop a web-based communication program to meet the needs of student veterans on our campus. This program could later be standardised for employment by other institutions.

## Conclusions

This study addressed issues of support and communication among student veterans. Although

the sample size was very small, and therefore not able to be generalised to the larger student veteran population, it provided rich qualitative data that can be the basis for ongoing research in this area. The study validated veterans' need to maintain communication with their "battle buddies" and comrades with whom they have significant relationships, as well as the need to maintain a sense of identity and privacy as a student veteran. Although the methods of communication varied depending upon the type of relationship addressed, all veteran participants agreed that face-to-face contact is the preferred method of interaction whenever possible.

All participants agreed that it is important to maintain contact with those with whom they deployed to provide support and assistance when needed. They articulated a sense of loyalty, camaraderie, and concern for one another's mental and emotional health, and felt a sense of responsibility to be available to talk with friends, no matter the time of day. They acknowledged the prevalence of depression, suicidal ideation, symptoms of PTSD, and feelings of loneliness that are common following re-entry into civilian life, and realise that formal services such as the VA (Veterans' Administration) or traditional outpatient counselling may not be available to fully address the need. Those who had experienced a friend's loss due to suicide felt passionate about the need to have services available at any time to assist them with coping.

In addition to providing support, the student veterans also suggested that universities need to be more cognisant of veteran needs. Traditional approaches for addressing student success have not proven to be

effective with student veterans for many reasons. The lack of a coordinated and easily navigated service-delivery system, the need for a specific location to access services (including emergency housing and food) and interact with other student veterans, a specific veteran-focused orientation to campus, and a one-stop shop website with information relevant to student veterans were all suggestions proposed as ways to better serve student veterans.

Overall, the development of a web-based student-veteran support system was a suggestion supported by all participants. The format would utilise common educational software, like Blackboard or Canvas, to provide a framework that was familiar to the student veterans and easily accessible. The system would provide restricted access so that veterans could feel comfortable discussing personal issues without fear of retaliation or ridicule from civilians who do not understand them. Links to various social service agencies and university offices providing information, support, and resources were essential. Finally, participants indicated that if such a program was presented during a veteran orientation, they would be much more likely to utilise it.

As the population of student veterans continues to grow, universities must discover avenues to address the needs of this special population. This study provides a foundation from which to build and engage in additional research concerning this important topic.

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