



The Veteran Education to Workforce
Affinity and Success Study



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RESEARCH BRIEF

Identifying the Unique Cultural
Strengths of Student Service
Members and Veterans:
An Interview Study

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SUMMARY

Since the establishment of post-9/11 GI state and federal higher education benefits, student military service members and veterans (SSM/Vs) have been one of the fastest-growing groups of nontraditional students in American universities. Despite their expanded enrollment and potential to diversify university departments and the workforce, discussions on SSM/Vs typically center on psychological trauma, alienation, and other student challenges on campus. A focus on SSM/Vs' unique cultural strengths, however, may better support these students as they make their way through university and into civilian careers.

Using interviews ($n=35$), this research brief from the Veteran Education to Workforce Affinity and Success Study (VETWAYS) outlines the military-oriented cultural strengths that current and former SSM/Vs associate with their academic and early career success and how these strengths have been useful.

Key Findings:

- SSM/Vs mentioned five major strengths they bring from the military to the university and workplace: service orientation, time on-the-job, interactional fluency, active fortitude, and systems for living.
- **Service orientation** refers to an SSM/V focus on volunteering one's time, energy, ability, or knowledge to uphold the safety of other people, important values, and/or common goals; interviewees said this orientation gave them a sense of purpose and direction in their civilian lives.
- **Time on-the-job** refers to SSM/V work in military occupations that provided in-depth, hands-on educational and training experience, including transferrable technical competencies and/or exposure to various career path options.
- **Interactional fluency** refers to the ability and confidence to express oneself, ask questions, and/or empathize and develop rapport with a wide variety of people.
- **Active fortitude** refers to SSM/V willingness to jump into and complete the task at hand using a mix of determination, initiative, patience, decisiveness, resilience, and ability to stay cool under pressure.
- **Systems for living** refers to deeply engrained, military-based principles, routines, methods, and/or organizational schemes that encourage SSM/V success in multiple areas of life.
- Results affirm that (1) SSM/V cultural strengths can and should be further recognized; (2) asset-based, instead of deficit-based, narratives should be used across campus and workspaces; and (3) these strengths can be harnessed to improve academic and career advising, community-building, and cultural training on campuses and in workplaces focused on current and former SSM/Vs.

Introduction and Background

Nearly three million U.S. service members have been deployed to military conflicts abroad since 2001 (Bilmes, 2021). Subsequent post-9/11 GI higher educational benefits have spurred enrollment growth among college student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs), defined here as undergraduates on active duty, in the National Guard or Reserves, or who have completed military service (Barry et al., 2014). Importantly, this group of students are diversifying universities and the workforce. Data show they are proportionally older, more often African American, more likely to be married and have children, more often first-generation students from low-income backgrounds, and more likely to report physical and cognitive disabilities than traditional students (American Council on Education, 2014; Cate et al., 2017; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010; Student Veterans of America, 2020). SSM/V success is vital to public interests.

Contemporary research tends to focus on the obstacles SSM/Vs face that exacerbate their college difficulties, including moral, physical, and psychological trauma, coping behaviors, and communicative and cultural discrepancies (Borsari et al., 2017). These are significant challenges, and much of this research has helped practitioners better support these students on campus. The persistent focus on student deficiencies, however—particularly the perception that SSM/Vs are isolated and psychologically “broken” (Morales et al., 2019)—promotes stereotypes that can exclude SSM/Vs on campus or the workplace and impede student confidence, performance, and satisfaction (Mastrocola & Flynn, 2017). While institutions often valorize SSM/Vs, there is also a tendency for well-meaning university faculty and staff to rely on these deficit-minded ideas when they make crucial decisions about support services (Blaauw-Hara, 2016).

Study Purpose

These shortcomings present an opportunity to further support SSM/Vs on their college-to-career paths as well as to advance scholarship. Little research has sought to use “asset-based” perspectives, which emphasize the strengths students bring to their education, to document military-based strengths among these students. Similarly, little research has asked SSM/Vs themselves how particular strengths positively influence their academic/career experiences. Further, though numerous studies have identified skills SSM/Vs bring from the military to college life—including, for example, leadership, self-discipline, and time management (Southwell et al., 2018)—few have focused on the cultural nature of these strengths that may significantly impact SSM/V transitions from the military to civilian university and professional life.

To address these gaps, this research brief uses an asset-based perspective and interviews of current and former SSM/Vs ($n=35$) to answer one research question:

What military-based cultural strengths do SSM/Vs think they bring to university and the workplace, and how do they use these strengths?

While institutions often valorize SSM/Vs, there is also a tendency for well-meaning university faculty and staff to rely on deficit-minded ideas about SSM/Vs when they make crucial decisions about student support services.

Asset-Based Perspectives

This research is inspired by scholars who focus on the cultural strengths and assets brought to educational spaces by marginalized college students. Two frameworks—funds of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005)—have been widely utilized and help situate this work.

Funds of knowledge (FoK) refers to knowledge, skills, and values among marginalized communities that, when used as the basis for school curricula, underline the value of local cultural resources (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). FoK was first developed as an avenue for documenting household traditions; educational practices were then developed based on these traditions. FoK recognizes that local culture should be central to knowledge formation in school (Rodriguez, 2013). Community cultural wealth (CCW) refers to collectively formed cultural assets that have developed among Communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). CCW seeks to reframe deficit-oriented narratives by drawing attention to (1) several unique, cultural and social strengths that have given People of Color agency, and (2) the power these strengths afford for reorienting and opposing systemic racism (Colina Neri et al., 2021).

FoK and CCW are not appropriate for an analysis focused on documenting SSM/V cultural strengths. FoK centers on local community assets and K–12 curricular tools (Colina Neri et al., 2021) while CCW focuses on strengths and resistance within Communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). Many SSM/Vs identify with multiple marginalized identities, but they are predominantly White males whose military virtues are often celebrated (Cate et al., 2017; Student Veterans of America, 2020).

Both frameworks, however, are informative here. First, they underline the damage that can be done by focusing on what students from marginalized communities lack. Second, the frameworks offer a model for overcoming deficit-mindedness that seeks to recognize—and document—the academic and professional importance and value of assets among marginalized student groups. Indeed, though service experiences widely vary from individual to individual, SSM/Vs move to civilian life from a military space that operates with its own set of norms, rituals, symbols, and traditions (Reger et al., 2008; Segal, 1986; Zurcher, 1965). A large body of research has focused on combat-oriented trauma, physical ailments, and social struggles SSM/Vs incur in civilian life from their time in the military. But what distinct cultural strengths do students bring from the military into much different university and workforce spaces? With research knowledge on these kinds of cultural assets, scholars can help reverse stereotypes and assist university faculty and staff in better supporting these students.

A large body of research has focused on SSM/V combat-oriented trauma, physical ailments, and social struggles. Few studies, however, have asked what distinct cultural strengths these students bring from the military into civilian university and workforce spaces.

Research Methods

I take a case study approach (Yin, 2013) to investigate SSM/V views on military-based cultural strengths. The analysis is part of a larger longitudinal study of SSM/V college-to-workforce trajectories from five Wisconsin public universities referred to as College 1, College 2, and so on.

Sampling

Within each university, I followed a purposeful, nonprobability sampling process by asking veteran service coordinators to email study information and a link to an online survey to all listed SSM/Vs in their institutions. A subset of survey respondents were asked if they wanted to participate in interviews. Those interested ($n=54$) were first interviewed in spring 2020. This analysis is based on a second round of interviews I conducted in fall 2021. Thirty-five current or former SSM/Vs, who were at various stages in their college or early careers, participated in this second round (Table 1).

Thirty-five current or former SSM/Vs, who were at various stages in their college or early careers, participated in Zoom interviews for this research study.

Analysis

I conducted 1-hour Zoom interviews using a semi-structured protocol based on student veteran higher education literature and tested through cognitive interviews with experts. The questions of interest asked interviewees what military skills, knowledge, or attitudes, if any, had helped them in college and/or the workplace. Follow-up probes asked how these assets were helpful.

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and loaded into NVivo 12 for analysis. Here I went line-by-line through all statements and developed open codes representing different SSM/V cultural assets (Charmaz, 2014). After completing this process, I combined and redefined these open codes by similarity into broader categories, renaming these categories to encompass newly merged ideas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I then applied these codes to all the SSM/V statements through a second round of analysis. After this, I reorganized and combined the statements within these codes into categories to develop themes, each representing a semi-discrete set of military-based SSM/V cultural strengths. As a last step, I counted how many interviewees spoke about each of these five themes and developed a table reporting theme counts, definitions, and representative statements.

Findings

What Military-Based Cultural Strengths Do SSM/Vs Think They Bring to University and the Workplace, and How Do They Use These Strengths?

Interview findings are reported in Table 2. Because of space limitations, I provide details on the three themes mentioned most often among the resulting five themes: service orientation, time on-the-job, and interactional fluency.

Table 1. Interview Sample (n=35)

Measure	N	%
Gender		
Female	14	40.0
Male	20	57.1
Nonbinary	1	2.9
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	8.6
Black or African American	1	2.9
Hispanic or Latina/o	1	2.9
Native Hawaiian of Pacific Islander	1	2.9
White or Caucasian	30	87.0
<i>White Students</i>	28	80.0
<i>Students of Color</i>	7	20.0
College/Employment Status		
Bachelor's Degree Student	17	48.6
Graduated and Postbaccalaureate/Graduate Degree Student	4	11.4
Graduated and in Full-Time Employment	12	34.3
Unemployed/Not in College	2	5.7
Military Service Status		
Discharged or Retired Veteran	23	65.7
In Reserves or National Guard	10	28.6
On Active Duty	2	5.7
Military Branch		
Air Force	4	11.4
Army	18	51.4
Marine Corps	4	11.4
Navy	11	31.4
First Generation Student Status	14	40.0
Disability Status		
Cognitive Impairment	5	14.3
Mobility Impairment	4	11.4
Sensory Impairment	2	5.7
<i>Impaired Students</i>	9	25.7
Mean Age	31.9	(SD= 9.3)

Service Orientation

Twenty-four SSM/Vs said they gained a sense of self-sacrifice, volunteerism, and/or altruism from their time in the military that was important to their academic and professional lives. This kind of selflessness is implicitly and explicitly cultivated in the military, not only to teach trainees deference to authority, but also to stress the importance of the greater good—including the welfare of the team, the unit, the branch, or the nation—over the welfare of the individual (Meyer & Wynn, 2018).

SSM/Vs said the military had helped them see the importance of working towards goals that were bigger than oneself.

Interviewees evoked this selflessness in different ways. SSM/Vs suggested, for instance, that their military experience had fostered in them a desire to enter careers focused on helping others, through health and medical work, counseling, or benefits or academic advising. “We were always told to leave your watch station better than you found it,” one male veteran at College 2 said. Through his job working with other SSM/Vs, he told me, he was able to do work of real value. For some interviewees, “service” meant taking up extra duties without being asked, during lunch hour or their time off, to help others or make things run more smoothly in their organizations. Whether they were based locally, nationally, or internationally, SSM/Vs also said the military helped them see the importance of working towards goals that were bigger than themselves. For one veteran at College 3, leaving the military simply meant “redefining” the mission in this way. “Now that I’m out...climate change and the environment are what I view as my mission,” he explained. “I think having an opportunity to bridge community and mission, that just to me strikes the chord.”

Time On-the-Job

Twenty-two interviewees reported that their time in the military had given them hands-on educational and work experience that set them apart from fellow students or job candidates. Across the military branches, when enlisted recruits finish basic training, they move on to advanced programs in their military occupation that provide specialized education lasting from a few weeks to over a year. After training, personnel report to their units to perform these duties, often taking on considerable responsibility for equipment, processes, and/or fellow service members for years at a time (Redmond et al., 2015).

Interviewees said that multiple aspects of the military training and work process were valuable. Several SSM/Vs, for instance, spoke about the professional skills and knowledge they picked up in military technical, management, and communication spheres. For some, specific job skills they used in the military related directly to their chosen career paths and could either help them be more proficient in their civilian work or give them something to mention in job interviews. For others, simply being exposed to formal work environments gave them experience they could parlay in later campus or off-campus jobs. One College 2 veteran working in an IT office said he learned “the way you’re expected to act as an adult in an office.” Additionally, a handful of interviewees reported that their military jobs allowed them to explore or “try out” different professional paths, experiences that were especially helpful when they were deciding what majors or careers to pursue. One SSM/V, for example, said that her experiences working as a medic in the military helped her realize she would be more satisfied as an emergency medical technician than as a doctor. “I was able to work in the military...and I realized that, ‘Oh no, I don’t want to go to med school.’” College students do not often receive such opportunities until they are further along in their degree paths and when they do, they are typically for short periods of time (e.g., Hora et al., 2020).

Table 2. SSM/V Cultural Asset Themes From Interviews (n=35)

Theme	Definition	Representative Statement	N
Service orientation	A focus on volunteering one's time, energy, ability, knowledge, or safety for other people, important values, and/or common goals, including through the support of one's friends or family, colleagues, or patients/clients as well as to larger entities like the team, organization, community, state, country, or planet	"I think it's just something innate. I get some type of pleasure knowing that I can help somebody be their better self or I can help somebody... I think nursing gives you that chance to continue serving, to help others who cannot help themselves. I think it definitely gives you more opportunity as a service member." -Female service member, College 3	24
Time on-the-job	Work in a military occupation that has provided in-depth, hands-on educational and training experience; opportunities for professional collaboration, communication, and management; transferrable technical competencies; and/or exposure to various career paths	"The military gave me an opportunity to realize that I was not a hardware person in IT. And that's why I geared towards IT software, is because when the military started teaching me programming languages, after me having a hardware job, I was like, 'I'm going over here.' This is way more up my alley." -Female service member, College 2	22
Interactional fluency	Verbal and dispositional ability and confidence to express oneself, ask questions, adjust to, and/or empathize and develop rapport with, a wide variety of people—including authority figures, coworkers, student peers, and others—in a wide range of situations	"[My military experience has helped with] just getting along with people. A lot of the people, at least at this workplace... there's a certain sense of humor to them. When they bust your chops and stuff, you don't get all offended. You know how to respond. You throw it right back at them and then all of a sudden they like it. So, the people skills still definitely help." -Male veteran, College 1	20
Active fortitude	The willingness to jump into and complete the task at hand despite (or, sometimes, because of) the challenges, using a mix of determination, initiative, patience, decisiveness, resilience, and the ability to stay cool under pressure	"The big thing for me is always moving forward. Don't stand still. Don't try to look back...You just have to find a rhythm and just keep driving forward and try different things. If they don't work, you abandon that plan. Basically, adapting and overcoming—the Marine Corps motto." -Male veteran, College 2	17
Systems for living	Deeply engrained military-based principles, routines, methods, and/or organizational schemes that have become habits and encourage success in multiple areas of life, from reverse planning on assignments to physical fitness	"Time management's been a huge thing. I know a lot of the students struggle with it, but it's just finding priorities at work. You know what I mean? Like you have, 'This is most important, this is what I need to get done. This is the most immediate thing. This is deadlines coming up.' Priorities of work has helped." -Male veteran, College 3	14

Interactional Fluency

Twenty SSM/Vs said they developed interaction skills in the military that allowed them to better “read,” speak to, and develop rapport with, different people in numerous contexts. The U.S. military is an exceptionally diverse organization that brings individuals from a wide range of backgrounds into close contact (e.g., Kamarck, 2019). Because collaboration and social cohesion are thought to be foundational to operational success, interaction is also the subject of intense regulation, training, and focus (Reger et al., 2008).

Many SSM/Vs said the range of personalities with which they worked in the military helped them be more flexible, empathetic, and understanding. This in turn helped them get along with many different people.

These interviewees primarily attributed their well-developed interpersonal skills to the geographic, socioeconomic, racial, and dispositional diversity of their fellow service members. Many SSM/Vs said the range of personalities with which they worked helped them be more flexible, empathetic, and understanding, which in turn allowed them to get along with almost anyone. Interviewees said this military experience influenced their exchanges in various ways. Many said they were better able to collaborate because they could more easily interact with classmates or colleagues. Several interviewees also told me their time in the military had taught them not to be intimidated when they spoke to people in positions of authority. This ability, in many cases, had been nurtured by a military culture that not only brought them into frequent contact with superior officers, but also trained them how to communicate with these officers efficiently and with respect. Many of these exchanges were verbal, one College 2 veteran told me, requiring them to express their message clearly, professionally, and succinctly. “If you could speak the knowledge,” this SSM/V said, “that was more important than writing it down.” Relatedly, SSM/Vs also reported that their military experiences had helped them become more assertive and confident interpersonally. This often applied to authority figures, particularly professors.

Conclusions and Implications

Contemporary studies often focus on SSM/V deficiencies. Though studies on SSM/V challenges have helped improve campus support services, there is a continued need for scholarship that recognizes and documents the cultural strengths these students bring to campus and employment settings.

Findings in this research brief not only provide a foundation on which more widescale SSM/V research can be based, but also material that can be incorporated into various initiatives, including

- “green zone” campus training meant to better inform campus communities about SSM/V challenges and cultural strengths (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012);
- academic and career counseling that assists SSM/Vs in better articulating and harnessing their service-oriented, communicative, and other cultural strengths for individualized majors, internships, and job paths;
- community-building programs connecting current SSM/Vs and faculty/staff, alumni, and other key stakeholders on campus and in the workforce;
- public campaigns that further seek to broadcast these important assets, counter stereotypes of current and former SSM/Vs as “broken,” and instead recognize and celebrate SSM/V strength, resilience, determination, and value across academic and employment spheres.

Resources

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About

The Veteran Education to Workforce Affinity and Success Study (VETWAYS) is a three-year National Science Foundation-funded project focused on the social support networks and career pathways of an increasingly important segment of the U.S. college student population: military service members and veterans.

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