



The Veteran Education to Workforce  
Affinity and Success Study



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# RESEARCH BRIEF

A Quantitative Comparison  
of Student Service Members/  
Veterans and Non-Military  
Students: Undergraduate  
Characteristics and  
Perspectives

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# SUMMARY

Student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) have been one of the fastest-growing groups of nontraditional undergraduates in U.S. higher education in recent years. SSM/Vs are supported by significant public spending and often have intersecting marginalized identities that can diversify higher education. Their success, therefore, is critical to higher education and the workforce. Yet more quantitative evidence is needed regarding how, if at all, the attributes and university experiences of SSM/Vs are unique compared with those of their adult, non-military peers.

Using survey data from undergraduate SSM/Vs and non-military students across four universities ( $n=1,255$ ), in this research brief we analyze how military experience associates with important undergraduate student “characteristics” and “perspectives” linked to college and career success. Characteristics include first-generation, transfer, and commuter student status; high school and college grade point averages (GPAs); impairment status; and employment. Perspectives include financial stress; a sense of belonging on one’s campus and in one’s academic major; work volition; and institutional confidence and satisfaction.

## Key findings include:

- After controlling for age and other important nontraditional student attributes, results show that undergraduate survey respondents with military experience were not any more likely to be transfer or commuter students than their non-military peers.
- SSM/Vs were more likely to be first generation students and more likely to report cognitive, mobility, and sensory impairments than non-military students.
- Military experience significantly correlates with lower high school grades—confirming previous findings—but also significantly associates with higher first-year college grades.
- Military experience associates with a decreased sense of campus belonging as well as a decreased sense of belonging in one’s academic major.
- Students who have been in the military have significantly more confidence in their future career options, referred to as “work volition,” than students without military experience. Military experience also significantly associates with having less financial stress, likely because of the prevalence of GI Bill education benefits among SSM/Vs.
- SSM/Vs were significantly less satisfied than non-military students with their overall experience at their universities.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Results show real differences between nontraditional students and SSM/Vs that should be recognized in student services. We recommend (1) reaching out early and directly to SSM/Vs arriving on campus, (2) ensuring provision of dependable, efficient, and authentic veteran services, and (3) accentuating SSM/V skills and knowledge through asset-oriented language, “Green Zone” trainings, and reminders for SSM/Vs about the strengths they bring to the university—and their future careers—from their time in the military.

## Introduction and Background

Over the last two decades, undergraduate military service members/veterans (SSM/Vs)—students who are on active U.S. military duty, in the Reserves or National Guard, or retired/discharged veterans (Barry et al., 2014)—have been one of the fastest-growing groups of nontraditional students in U.S. universities (SVA, 2020). In addition to their advanced technical, problem-solving, and communication skills, SSM/Vs nationwide are proportionally older, more often disabled, and more often first-generation students from low-income backgrounds than traditionally aged college students (e.g., Cate et al., 2017). SSM/Vs are supported by significant institutional and governmental GI Bill spending, and often have intersecting marginalized identities that can diversify higher education. Their success in college is critical to public interests.

SSM/Vs, however, face many obstacles in college, including commuter, transfer, and first-generation status, off-campus employment, and family responsibilities—factors common among nontraditionally aged college students (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Molina & Morse, 2015). Other challenges are specific to SSM/Vs. Numerous qualitative studies have pointed to the military-to-civilian cultural transition as a source of strain for this population (e.g., Benbow, 2020; McAndrew et al., 2019). Indeed, this work suggests that the gulf between the highly structured, team-focused life of the military and the more casual, individualistic life of the university results in cultural marginalization. This marginalization, in turn, manifests itself through troubled communication between SSM/Vs and peers and faculty (DiRamio et al., 2008); widely held stereotypes of SSM/Vs as violent, psychologically damaged, or intellectually inferior (Benbow & Lee, 2022; Borsari et al., 2017); and SSM/V feelings of loneliness and alienation on campus (Elliott et al., 2011).

Because of significant gaps in available data on SSM/Vs (see Cate, 2014, pp. 10–18), few studies outside the field of health have quantitatively analyzed whether military experience—separated not only from age but also other nontraditional student characteristics such as first-generation, transfer, or commuter status (e.g., Bergman et al., 2014; Dill & Henley, 1998)—associates with varied student characteristics and perspectives that are important in higher educational research. While scholars have compared samples of SSM/Vs and non-military students, these studies typically limit analyses to single institutions, focus on subsets of SSM/Vs, or are not able to control for a number of significant factors known to influence nontraditional student success in college (Barry et al., 2021; Sansone & Segura, 2020; Steidl et al., 2020; Werum et al., 2020).

**Scholars have quantitatively compared student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) to non-military students before, but many studies limit analyses to subsets of SSM/Vs or are not able to control for various important factors.**

More understanding of how SSM/Vs are unique, particularly as they may differ from other older, nontraditional students, could not only help scholars continue to build a base of knowledge focused on SSM/Vs, but also inform university inclusivity efforts seeking to better support these students.

## Study Purpose

With these needs in mind, this study used a quantitative correlational analysis of student surveys ( $n=1,255$ ) from across four regionally and demographically varied public universities to investigate associations between student experience in the U.S. military and important attributes and outcomes associated with university persistence and satisfaction. We frame our analysis using field theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to conceptualize a process by which military culture and student backgrounds influence university perspectives. With this framework we answer two research questions (RQs):

**RQ1. How, if at all, does military experience associate with important undergraduate student characteristics commonly linked to academic success?**

**RQ2. How, if at all, does military experience associate with undergraduate perspectives related to academic success?**

## Field Theory

Based on SSM/V literature (e.g., Lim et al., 2018; McAndrew et al., 2019), we view military experience, and SSM/Vs' transitions from the military into the university, as significant influences on college experience in ways that cannot be connected simply to age or other nontraditional student characteristics (e.g., first-generation, commuter, or transfer status). We use field theory to theorize the process that takes place as SSM/Vs move between these two cultural spheres.

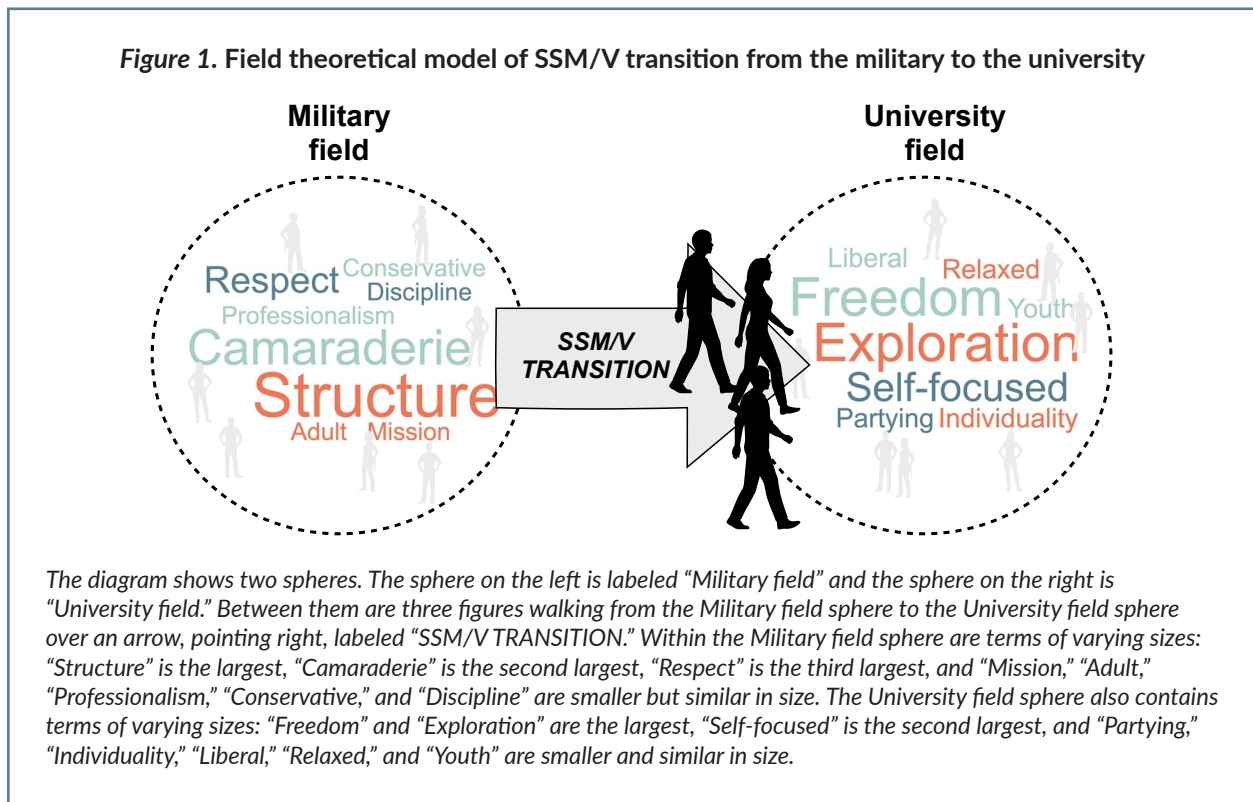
Perceived as symbolic plains of social interaction, “fields” are bounded, social, and cultural orders comprised of individuals (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Each field, whether a country, business, softball league, or book club, can be viewed as a unique cultural constellation with its own history, values, and rules. Coupled with each individual’s background, a field extends or constricts possibilities for action. Importantly, fields both mold and are molded by the characteristics and perceptions of the people operating within them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Each field is therefore a dynamic and contested space on the one hand, but also a set of beliefs and norms ingrained in its members, on the other. Group members acting in a field are enculturated with particular habits, tastes, ways of thinking, and even postures that they carry with them to other fields through life. These predilections, in turn, influence their experiences and perspectives in these other fields (Ferrare & Apple, 2015).

Field theory is useful here because it provides a way to culturally ground SSM/V experiences in the military (or “the military field”) and the university (“the university field”), each with their own sets of hierarchies, customs, and norms. Indeed, after spending significant time in the military field, SSM/Vs carry a host of engrained predilections from the all-encompassing cultural space of the military into the university field, which may color their perceptions of college. Previous research, for instance, shows that SSM/Vs typically feel less of a social connection on university campuses due to the military’s strong atmosphere of camaraderie and common purpose (Bodrog

**Field theory is useful here because it provides a way to culturally ground SSM/V experiences in the military and the university, each with their own traditions, customs, and norms.**

et al., 2018). Field studies also suggest that SSM/Vs see university life as unstructured compared to the controlled uniformity of the military (McAndrew et al., 2019). Such inter-field cultural inconsistencies, we believe, have implications not only for students' feelings of social fit and self-assurance, but also the satisfaction and confidence they have for their higher educational institutions.

A model of this theoretical process, including SSM/V-reported military and university cultural field aspects from other work (Benbow et al., 2024), is displayed in Figure 1.



## Research Methods

This is a quantitative correlational study testing the statistical association between independent and dependent variables gathered through student surveys.

### Sampling

Data collection took place in spring 2023 at four public U.S. universities chosen for their geographic and student demographic diversity. University 1 is a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the South enrolling 19,000 undergraduates; University 2 is a majority minority Hispanic serving institution (HSI) in the Southwest enrolling 16,000 students; University 3 is a large, majority minority, HSI in a military-heavy region of the Southwest, enrolling almost 30,000 undergraduates; and University 4 is a small PWI in the Midwest enrolling about 7,000 students. Universities 2 and 3 have Carnegie “Doctoral University: Very

High Research Activity” designations, while Universities 1 and 4 have “Doctoral University: High Research Activity” designations.

We used a purposeful, nonprobability procedure to recruit SSM/Vs by asking veteran service directors in the four universities to email all identified undergraduate SSM/Vs study information and a link to our online survey. After SSM/V surveys were collected, the research team analyzed the age of the university’s SSM/V sample. Using non-military student email information provided by each university, the research team then sent recruitment emails to randomized subsets of non-military students in each age category, aiming for similar age distributions among SSM/Vs and non-military students. The corpus ultimately includes survey responses from 531 SSM/Vs and 724 non-military undergraduate students (n=1,255). Sample demographics are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for student survey sample (n=1,255)**

Measure	SSM/Vs (n=531)		Non-Military Students (n=724)	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	145	27.4	470	65.0
Male	377	71.1	221	30.6
Transgender	5	0.9	11	1.5
Nonbinary	3	0.6	21	2.9
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
American Indian or Alaska Native	29	5.5	40	5.5
Asian or Asian American	27	5.1	55	7.6
Black or African American	56	10.6	82	11.4
Hispanic or Latino	168	31.7	257	35.6
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	5	0.9	8	1.1
White or Caucasian	316	59.6	396	54.9
<i>White Students</i> <sup>1</sup>	263	49.6	325	45.1
<i>Students of Color</i>	267	50.4	396	54.9
<b>Undergraduate Major</b>				
Arts and Humanities	56	10.5	108	14.9

1 “White Students” include students who only identified as White or Caucasian. “Students of color” include students who identified as mixed race or as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Measure	SSM/Vs (n=531)		Non-Military Students (n=724)	
	N	%	N	%
Biological and Life Science	44	8.3	57	7.9
Business	52	9.8	55	7.6
Education	7	1.3	51	7.0
Engineering	73	13.7	59	8.1
Finance	46	8.7	37	5.1
Health	52	9.8	74	10.2
Math and Computer Science	47	8.9	33	4.6
Physical Science	12	2.3	17	2.3
Social Science	66	12.4	147	20.3
Other	72	13.6	84	11.6
Undeclared	4	0.8	2	0.3
<b>Enrollment Status</b>				
First Year or Freshman	50	9.4	45	6.2
Second Year or Sophomore	93	17.5	54	7.5
Third Year or Junior	153	28.8	187	25.8
Fourth Year or Senior	192	36.2	316	43.6
Fifth Year or Higher	43	8.1	122	16.9
Transfer Students	419	78.9	533	73.6
<b>Service Status</b>				
Discharged or Retired Veteran	371	69.9	--	--
In Reserves or National Guard	128	24.1	--	--
Active Duty	51	9.6		
<b>Military Branch</b>				
Air Force	130	24.5	--	--
Army	248	46.7	--	--
Marine Corps	68	12.8	--	--

Measure	SSM/Vs (n=531)		Non-Military Students (n=724)	
	N	%	N	%
Navy	88	16.6	--	--
Coast Guard	7	1.3	--	--
Space Force	1	0.2	--	--
First Generation Students <sup>2</sup>	259	49.8	314	43.7
Disability Status				
Cognitive Impairment	125	23.5	114	15.8
Mobility Impairment	111	21.0	48	6.6
Sensory Impairment	46	8.7	30	4.1
<i>Impaired Students</i>	186	35.0	159	22.0
Institution				
University 1	106	20.0	172	23.8
University 2	67	12.6	130	18.0
University 3	283	53.3	323	44.6
University 4	75	14.1	99	13.7
Mean Age	32.1 (SD = 8.7)		30.8 (SD = 9.3)	

**Data Sources and Analysis**

We designed and piloted online surveys as part of a wider national study on SSM/V trajectories through scientific fields. Surveys were designed to collect student demographic information (e.g., military status, race/ethnicity, age) as well as student “characteristics” (e.g., transfer status, high school GPA) and student “perspectives” (e.g., financial stress, feelings of belonging) commonly linked in the literature to undergraduate academic experiences and success. Focal survey items and research literature support for each variable are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> “First-generation students” are those reporting that their parents/guardians had not obtained a college degree.



**Table 2. “Characteristic” variables, literature sources, and survey items**

Variable	Literature sources	Survey item
Military status	Borsari et al., 2017; Kim & Cole, 2013; McAndrew et al., 2019; Villatte et al., 2015	Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the United States military? (For the purposes of this study, cadets and those who have not completed basic/initial training do not qualify as having served in the U.S. military.)
High school GPA	French et al., 2015; Noble & Sawyer, 2004; Sawyer, 2013	What was your overall/cumulative high school grade average upon receiving your high school diploma or equivalent?
First-year college GPA	Crisp et al., 2009; Dika & D’Amico, 2016; Reason, 2003	What was your grade average during your first year of college? (If you are currently in your first year, please estimate what your cumulative grade point average will be for this first year.)
First-generation status	Means & Pyne, 2017; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Wurster et al., 2013	Please indicate your mother/female guardian and father/male guardian’s highest level of education.
Transfer status	Townley et al., 2013; Umbach et al., 2019; Wang, 2009	Did you transfer to this college from another college or university? (Here we define “transfer” as leaving one undergraduate institution for another, typically bringing class credits from the former institution to the new institution.)
Hours employed	Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bers & Smith, 1991; Lee, 2017	How many hours per week, if any, are you currently employed?
Impairment status	Hartley, 2013; Hebert et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2012; Madaus et al., 2021; Schuck et al., 2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you have a <b>sensory impairment</b>, such as blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment, that has lasted for 6 months or more?</li> <li>2. Do you have a <b>mobility impairment</b> that has substantially limited one or more basic physical activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying, for 6 months or more?</li> <li>3. Do you have a <b>cognitive impairment</b> that has caused difficulty in remembering, concentrating, or making decisions for 6 months or more?</li> </ol>

**Table 3. “Perspective” variables, literature sources, and survey items**

Variable	Literature sources	Survey item
Financial stress	Baker, 2019; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Xing & Rojewski, 2022	<p>Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements below regarding your personal finances.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel stressed about my personal finances in general. (Mean=3.7, SD=1.22)</li> <li>2. I worry about being able to pay my current monthly expenses. (Mean=3.34, SD=1.34)</li> <li>3. I worry about having enough money to pay for school. (Mean=3.26, SD=1.46)</li> </ol> <p>(Overall Mean=3.43, SD=1.18)</p>
Campus belonging	Bettencourt, 2021; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Saelua, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018	<p>Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I see myself as part of the campus community. (Mean=3.21, SD=1.1)</li> <li>2. I feel that I am a member of the campus community. (Mean=3.25, SD=1.08)</li> <li>3. I feel a sense of belonging to the campus community. (Mean=3.24, SD=1.08)</li> </ol> <p>(Overall Mean=3.23, SD=1.03)</p>
Academic major belonging	Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Çivitci, 2015; Holland Zahner & Harper, 2022; Wilson et al., 2015	<p>Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am committed to this major’s community. (Mean=3.85, SD=1.05)</li> <li>2. I am supported in this major’s community. (Mean=3.86, SD=0.99)</li> <li>3. I am accepted in this major’s community. (Mean=3.89, SD=0.93)</li> <li>4. I am a part of this major’s community. (Mean=3.59, SD=1.08)</li> </ol> <p>(Overall Mean=3.79, SD=0.09)</p>

Variable	Literature sources	Survey item
Work volition	Allan et al., 2023; Blustein, 2008; Duffy et al., 2012a; Duffy et al., 2012b; Jadidian & Duffy, 2012	<p>Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I will be able to choose the jobs I want. (Mean=3.93, SD=0.88)</li> <li>I feel total control over my future job choices. (Mean=3.69, SD=1.04)</li> <li>I will be able to do the kind of work I want, despite external barriers. (Mean=3.89, SD=0.9)</li> </ol> <p>(Overall Mean=3.84, SD=0.83)</p>
Institutional confidence	Bean & Metzner. 1985; Boyd et al., 2022; Davidson et al., 2013; Tinto, 1987	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How confident are you that this is the right university for you? (Mean=4.28, SD=1.0)</li> <li>Please rate your level of satisfaction with the education you have received at this university. (Mean=4.07, SD=0.83)</li> <li>Please rate your level of satisfaction with your overall experience at this university. (Mean=4.04, SD=0.87)</li> </ol> <p>(Overall Mean=4.13, SD=0.8)</p>

Using these data, we answer RQ1 by fitting ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to examine how military status, with the addition of important control variables, associates with important student characteristics. We answer RQ2 by estimating the OLS regression models of students' perspectives of fit and confidence on individual military and control variables. For RQ2, we add two more control variables to the model (impairment status and hours employed) that displayed significant results regarding SSM/V and non-military student differences in RQ1 findings. We conducted data analyses using R and Stata.

## Results

### **RQ1. How Does Military Experience Associate with Important Undergraduate Student Characteristics Commonly Linked to Academic Success?**

Attribute regression findings are displayed in Table 4. We describe findings regarding our focal independent variable of military experience.

Table 4. Regression of undergraduate student attributes on significant characteristics

	First generation status	Transfer status	Commuting distance	High school GPA	First-year college GPA	Impairment status	Hours employed
Military experience	0.28* (0.14)	0.12 (0.16)	0.21 (0.18)	-0.23** (0.08)	0.28*** (0.09)	0.63*** (0.15)	-1.01*** (0.18)
Male	-0.11 (0.13)	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.34* (0.17)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.10 (0.15)	0.12 (0.17)
White	-1.10*** (0.13)	-0.18 (0.16)	-0.05 (0.17)	0.09 (0.08)	0.41*** (0.08)	0.42** (0.14)	-0.34 (0.17)
Age (log)	1.06*** (0.27)	3.45*** (0.39)	0.84* (0.35)	-1.13*** (0.15)	0.06 (0.17)	1.17*** (0.28)	0.89** (0.34)
Transfer status	0.27 (0.15)		0.47* (0.19)	-0.25** (0.09)	0.08 (0.09)	0.16 (0.17)	0.18 (0.19)
First generation status		0.25 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.17)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.03 (0.08)	-0.14 (0.14)	0.15 (0.17)
First-year college GPA	0.01 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)	0.13*** (0.03)		-0.03 (0.05)	-0.11 (0.06)
Marriage status	0.39** (0.14)	0.36 (0.19)	0.56** (0.18)	0.02 (0.08)	0.16 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.15)	-0.16 (0.18)
Institution							
University 2	0.36* (0.16)	-0.41* (0.19)	1.27*** (0.21)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.35 (0.18)	0.40 (0.21)
University 3	0.21 (0.18)	-0.66** (0.21)	-0.11 (0.23)	0.03 (0.10)	0.10 (0.11)	0.04 (0.19)	0.22 (0.23)
University 4	-0.08 (0.20)	-0.43* (0.21)	0.42 (0.25)	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.18 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.21)	0.44 (0.25)
N	1233	1233	1217	1212	1233	1232	1233

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard errors are in parentheses

After controlling for covariates, results show that transfer and commuter statuses among students are significantly associated with age and other nontraditional student characteristics, but not military experience. Findings do show, however, that SSM/Vs were significantly more likely to be first generation college students than non-military students. They also indicate that SSM/Vs had significantly lower high school grades, a common issue among military enlistees (e.g., Bachman et al., 2000), but significantly higher first-year college grades, perhaps a result of resilience, discipline, and work ethic imparted in the military field (e.g., Benbow, 2022). Due to injuries sustained in the military field, SSM/Vs also are significantly more likely to report physical and cognitive impairments than non-military students, confirming previous findings (Borsari et al., 2017). Additionally, students with military experience work significantly fewer hours than non-military students, likely because many SSM/Vs receive post-9/11 GI educational benefits that cover their college expenses (e.g., Holian & Adam, 2020). All in all, despite similarities between SSM/Vs and their adult, nontraditional peers, results show that SSM/Vs traverse the university field with several different characteristics due to their military experience.

**After controlling for age and other important covariates, results indicate that student military experience significantly correlates with first generation status, student disability, lower high school grades, and higher college grades.**

**RQ2. How Does Military Experience Associate with Undergraduate Perspectives Related to Academic Success?**

Perspective regression results are displayed in Table 5.

**Table 5. Regression of undergraduate student attributes on significant perspectives**

	Financial stress	Campus belonging	Academic major belonging	Work volition	Institutional confidence
Military experience	-0.63*** (0.07)	-0.36*** (0.07)	-0.19** (0.06)	0.15** (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)
Male	-0.16* (0.07)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.13** (0.05)
White	0.05 (0.07)	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.11 (0.06)	-0.16** (0.05)	-0.12* (0.05)
Age	-0.36** (0.14)	0.17 (0.13)	0.26* (0.11)	0.14 (0.10)	0.46*** (0.10)
Transfer status	0.15* (0.08)	0.10 (0.07)	0.10 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
First generation status	-0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)

	Financial stress	Campus belonging	Academic major belonging	Work volition	Institutional confidence
First-year college GPA	-0.01 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Marriage status	-0.18* (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.00 (0.06)	0.09 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Impairment status	0.18* (0.07)	-0.13 (0.07)	-0.19** (0.06)	-0.17** (0.05)	-0.14** (0.05)
Hours employed	0.05*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Institution					
University 2	0.12 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	0.13 (0.07)	0.25*** (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)
University 3	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.08)	0.06 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)
University 4	-0.11 (0.10)	0.10 (0.09)	0.15 (0.08)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.14* (0.07)
N	1232	1232	1226	1232	1232

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard errors are in parentheses

Findings indicate that SSM/vs have significantly lower levels of financial stress than non-military students, also likely a result of SSM/V educational benefits (e.g., Holian & Adam, 2020). While they have fewer financial concerns in college, however, SSM/Vs are significantly less likely to feel like they belong on campus than non-military students—confirming previous findings (Barry et al., 2021)—and significantly less likely to feel like they belong in their academic major community, suggesting difficulty socially integrating into college. This could be the result of cultural incongruities between the military field, where interaction is the subject of intense training and focus (Reger et al., 2008), and the university field, where individuality and competitiveness are more highly valued (Stephens et al., 2012). SSM/Vs, further, showed significantly higher levels of work volition, or confidence in their future career options, which connects to higher job satisfaction and self-efficacy after college (Duffy et al., 2013). This perspective likely links SSM/V work experience in the military field: across the branches, after intensive job training, personnel perform specialized duties, often taking on considerable responsibility for equipment, processes, and/or fellow service members for years at a time (e.g., Redmond et al., 2015).

**Even after accounting for important nontraditional student attributes, SSM/Vs are significantly less likely to feel like they belong on their campuses and in their academic major communities than non-military students.**

Finally, while several student characteristics are significantly associated with overall institutional confidence, military experience itself is not associated. SSM/Vs were, however, significantly less satisfied than non-military students with their overall experience at their universities—one of the three items in the institutional confidence scale (see Table 3). This could perhaps relate to subtleties in SSM/V experience, with SSM/Vs having similar levels of confidence in their choice of university as well as their education to other older, nontraditional students, yet lower satisfaction with their overall university experience because of the social and cultural issues described above. Further research is needed.

## Conclusions and Implications

While a handful of studies demonstrate the value in exploring SSM/V educational experiences through comparisons to non-military students (e.g., Albright et al., 2019; Southwell et al., 2018; Whiteman et al., 2013), little research compares important characteristics and perspectives between SSM/Vs and non-military peers while controlling for several factors known to markedly influence nontraditional student persistence. This study responds to calls for more of this research across varied institutions (Fernandez et al., 2019; Harcey et al., 2022; Sansone & Segura, 2020) to help better understand the unique characteristics of SSM/Vs. Moving forward, more research is needed not only to test these associations among larger numbers of SSM/Vs nationwide, but also to explore qualitatively how intersecting identities, military and otherwise, influence these factors and academic and career pathways over time.

This knowledge, in turn, can help university educators better comprehend and support these students, particularly as their service needs may differ from other adult students on campus. Results show that SSM/Vs bring unique assets to university, as military experience significantly associates with higher first-year college grades and a greater sense of confidence in one's career choices, even after controlling for age and other important nontraditional student attributes. Evidence also shows that SSM/Vs report a significantly higher prevalence of physical and cognitive impairments, lower levels of belonging on campus and in academic majors, and less satisfaction with their higher educational institutions than non-military students of the same age. With more evidence suggesting that SSM/Vs' feelings of separation on campus are due not only to their age, first-generation status, or off-campus responsibilities, but also their military experience, we recommend that educators consider:

- (1) Reaching out early and directly to SSM/Vs arriving on campus, to establish contact and show students that they have a real, authentic support system at their university;
- (2) Providing dependable, efficient, and genuine—or empathetic, understanding, and straightforward—veteran services. SSM/Vs have complex support needs, and value forthright communication;
- (3) Accentuating SSM/V skills and knowledge through asset-oriented language, “Green Zone” trainings to teach others about military culture and SSM/V strength, and reminders to SSM/Vs of the wealth of knowledge and strengths they bring to the university—and their future careers—from their time in the military.

**Recommendations include reaching out early and directly to new SSM/Vs on campus; empathetic, understanding, and straightforward veteran service; and a purposeful emphasis on SSM/V skill and knowledge.**

## Resources

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The Veteran Education to Workforce  
Affinity and Success Study

## About

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

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