

The Well-Being of Student Veterans: A Feasibility Study Using the Well-Being Inventory in the Academic Setting

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ABSTRACT

Background: Veterans are using the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits for post-secondary education more than ever. Military life experiences, including combat deployments and the visible and invisible wounds from their time in the service, affect Student Veterans’ (SV) well-being and may complicate their transition to a student role and the road to academic success.

Aim: The aim of this pilot study was to investigate the educational well-being among SV. A secondary aim was to determine the feasibility of measuring well-being in SV with the Well-Being Inventory (WBI), a validated tool that measures four domains of well-being in veterans: (1) vocation, (2) health, (3) financial, and (4) social well-being.

Methods: In this cross-sectional pilot study, the WBI was completed by SV ($N = 58$) via an electronic survey platform. The status, functioning, and satisfaction of the domains of well-being were scored. Correlational statistics were calculated to detect relationships of educational well-being with vocation, work, health, financial, and social well-being domains.

Results: Educational well-being was associated with vocation, work, health, and social well-being. SV exhibited the least well-being in the financial and health domains.

Conclusions: Academic settings that offer support to SV in relation to their vocation, work, health, and social well-being may enhance SV academic success.

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Keywords: military student, veteran student, military culture



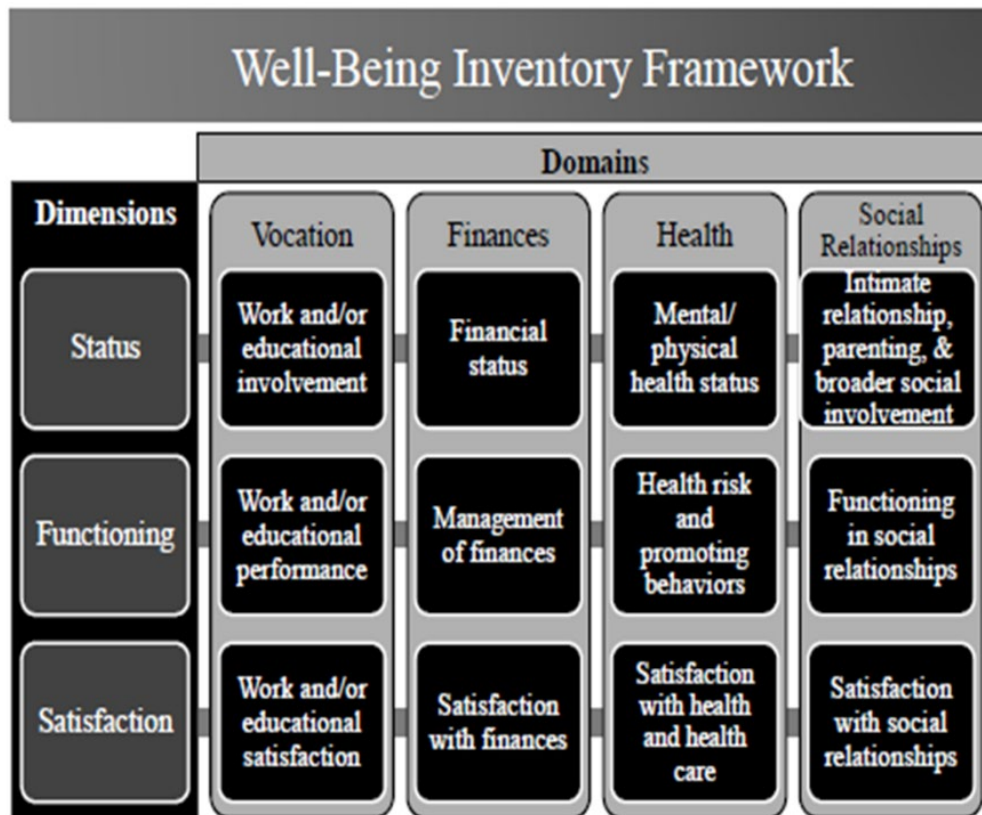
BACKGROUND

Veterans have had a notable presence in higher education since the GI Bill was passed in 1944, which afforded them the opportunity to pursue a career after service to their country. Data since the Post-9/11 GI Bill suggest that Student Veterans (SV) exhibit increased educational attainment and decreased race/ethnicity gaps in degree attainment relative to other students (Wenger & Ward, 2022). Yet, in one nationally representative sample of SV, more than half had at least one positive mental health condition screening and a higher prevalence of suicidal ideation than the general United States (U.S.) population aged 18-54 years (Valenstein, 2022). Similarly, nearly half of all students in a national sample of post-secondary schools screened positive for depression or anxiety (Healthy Minds Study, n.d.). Melnyk (2023) described this trend as a mental health crisis among the general student population that puts them at high risk for not enrolling in school or completing coursework. However, the literature indicates that SV may be particularly vulnerable to disruptions in academic progress, as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety are associated with educational difficulty in SV (Farmer et al., 2022; Medley, 2017; Morris 2022; Morrissette, 2019).

SV are at a higher risk of mental health disruptions due to the complex health needs associated with their time in the service, often because of traumatic injuries (Hinkson et al., 2021; Hoffmire et al., 2023). According to Dyar (2019), complex health needs in veterans can be defined as a combination of physical and psychological conditions such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, insomnia, alcohol or substance misuse, and suicidal thoughts or attempts. Despite psychological conditions being so prevalent in this population, it may be difficult for SV to seek help related to mental health, and faculty may overlook the consequences due to the rigors of the academic environment (Hinkson et al., 2021).

The high comorbidity of traumatic brain injury (TBI) with mental health conditions adds additional challenges for SV, which is especially relevant for post-9/11 veterans who exhibit high rates of TBI and psychological and physical trauma. Shackleford (2019) found that a TBI diagnosis significantly contributed to educational disruption among SV. While it is evident that health conditions may predispose SVs to challenges with education, multiple factors contribute to academic progression. SV civilian life experiences, including involvement in work, family, and community activities, combine with their military experiences to create unique circumstances for each SV. Military service and its far-reaching consequences impact SV and may require academic faculty to extend appropriate accommodations or student services as needed.

Recognizing that much of the research on challenges that post-9/11 veterans face when transitioning out of the military has focused solely on the impacts of military-related health consequences on quality of life, the Million Veteran Initiative (TMVI) research team endeavored to investigate other domains of life that contribute to their overall well-being (Vogt, Perkins et al., 2018). The Well-Being Inventory (WBI) was developed to measure four domains of life that contribute to well-being in veterans: (1) vocation, (2) finances, (3) health, and (4) social relationships (Vogt, Taverna et al., 2018). The conceptual framework of the WBI includes the dimensions of status, function, and satisfaction in each domain (Figure 1).

Figure 1*Well-being Inventory Framework*

Note. Adapted from “Manual for the Well-Being Inventory (WBI): A Multidimensional Tool for Assessing Key Contributors to Well-Being (p.18) by D. Vogt, E. C. Taverna, Y. I. Nillni and F. A. Tyrell, (2018), National Center for PTSD. <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/documents/WellBeingAssessmentManual.pdf>

The Well-Being Inventory (WBI) is a 126-item tool that assesses status, function, and satisfaction of veterans across the four domains of well-being. The WBI has been developed and validated over a three-year period in a large cohort of veterans who separated from the military (Vogt et al., 2022). Of particular interest to the SV population, the vocation domain consists of two subdomains, one for work (paid & unpaid) and one for education. The latter specifically assesses educational well-being by measuring educational status, function, and satisfaction. Conceptually, a lack of overall well-being may impact the ability for a veteran to thrive in an academic community.

The purpose of this study was to test the feasibility of measuring the well-being of SVs with the WBI. A secondary purpose was to explore the relationships between educational well-being and the remaining domains of well-being in SV. The long-term goal of this research is to develop recommendations for post-secondary campuses to improve the higher education experience and outcomes of SVs.

Methods

In this cross-sectional pilot study, the WBI (Vogt et al., 2019) was administered to a SV population attending a western U.S. university system with four campuses that will be referred to as campus A, B, C, and D. Campus A is a medical campus with over 4,000 students. Campus B is the flagship liberal arts campus with over 36,000 students. Campus C and D are also liberal arts focused with a student population ranging from 10,000-15,000. All campuses offer undergraduate and graduate programs and have an Office of Veteran and Military Student Services (VMSS). SVs were eligible for this study if they were a U.S. military veteran and had taken a course for credit within the past 12 months at one or more of the four campuses. Participants were recruited via email sent by the VMSS at each campus and anonymously completed the WBI via Redcap (Harris et al., 2009). This study was approved by the Principal Investigator's academic Institutional Review Board.

Status for each domain is categorically measured by degree of involvement in that domain. Functioning and satisfaction scores were calculated for each of the four domains, including the subdomains of work and education. Refer to the WBI Manual for detailed scoring instructions (Vogt, Taverna et al., 2018). Descriptive and correlational statistics were computed with SAS version 9.4. Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationship between educational well-being and the other domains; significance was determined at $\alpha < .05$ for all models.

Results

Participants ($N = 58$) were mostly enlisted (87.9%), white (72.3%), male (58.5%), and 25-34 years of age (49.3%). Most participants were in the Army (57.6%) and 53.8% had been deployed (the mean number of deployments was 2.5). At the time of completing the WBI, more than three quarters of the participants were separated from military service and the remaining indicated they were attending college while still serving (i.e., in Active, Reserve, or National Guard units). Sample demographics were representative of the Vogt et al. (2022) initial WBI cohort with the addition of those currently serving. Characteristics of domain status germane to SV academic progression and scores for the WBI are reported in Table 1.

Table 1*Selected Status Characteristics and Mean Functioning and Satisfaction Scores of Well-being in Student Veterans (N = 58)*

Dimensions	Domain				
	Vocation Work (n=51)/Education		Finances	Health	Social Relationships
Status	90.2% engaged in a full-time vocation	65.5% enrolled full-time 17.2% enrolled part-time	67% are at risk to some extent financially	51% experience both chronic physical and mental health conditions	12.1% report no regular contact with friends, extended family, or community
Functioning M, (CI)	4.23 ^a (4.00, 4.45)	4.10 (3.85, 4.34)	3.75 (3.57, 3.94)	3.81 (3.66, 3.96)	3.69 ^b (3.50, 3.88)
Satisfaction M, (CI)	3.94 ^a (3.59, 4.28)	4.11 (3.87, 4.35)	3.18 (2.87, 3.48)	3.01 (2.79, 3.24)	3.43 ^b (3.19, 3.68)

Note. The vocation domain is scored separately by the work and education subdomain scores. Functioning and satisfaction are measured on a Likert scale of 1-5. Higher scores in functioning and satisfaction indicate a better sense of well-being. CI = confidence interval.

^aReflects paid work score.

^bReflects broad social well-being score.

In an exploratory analysis, the education subdomain was compared to each well-being domain (including the work subdomain) to investigate relationships with educational well-being. Educational *status* was correlated with work *functioning* ($\rho = -0.41, n = 43, p = .006$), i.e., the higher their reliability and quality of their efforts and relationships in work settings, the lower their educational involvement. Educational *functioning* was correlated with work *functioning* ($\rho = 0.40, n = 38, p = .01$) indicating that the more they exhibit reliability and quality in their educational efforts and relationships, the more they exhibit in work settings.

Educational *functioning* was correlated with health *functioning* ($\rho = 0.31, n = 45, p < .05$), indicating that the better their engagement in health promoting/risk behaviors with respect to diet, exercise, substance use, sexual activity, self-care, and personal fulfillment the higher reliability and quality of their educational efforts. Educational *functioning* was also correlated with broad social *functioning* ($\rho = 0.40, n = 45, p < .01$) and broad social *satisfaction* ($\rho = 0.41, n = 46, p = .005$). These findings indicated that the higher the reliability and quality of educational work, as well as their

interpersonal relationships in educational settings, the more they engaged in behaviors that supported positive social relationships and have higher satisfaction and sense of belonging with friends, extended family, and the broad community (i.e., gets along with community members, available to provide support or help to extended family members or friends). Broad social *satisfaction* was also associated with educational *satisfaction* ($Q = 0.39, n = 47, p < .01$), indicating that the higher their satisfaction with educational experiences, advancement of career goals, and learning environment, the higher their social satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Well-Being Domains

While the impact of health on academic progression has been studied previously, this is the first study to include further dimensions of well-being for SV. Trends in the data reveal that SV involvement in each domain of well-being and interrelationships between the four domains may be related. Even though half of the SVs in this sample reported a chronic physical condition(s) in addition to a mental health condition(s), the WBI scores in each of the four domains indicated that they were generally well in vocational, financial, health, and social life dimensions. These findings may reflect SV resilience as a result of integrating the various aspects of academic and personal challenges (Reyes et al., 2018).

The SV health satisfaction was markedly lower than any of the other satisfaction scores. Yet, the existence of health issues alone did not necessarily negatively impact educational experience. SVs educational experience appears to be related to students' ability to maintain health *functioning*. Thus, health promotion efforts from the academic campus that focus on SV specific health risks may promote their educational quality and outcomes.

The financial well-being of SVs calls for attention. More than half the SV were enrolled in college full time and nearly all were working full time. Yet, more than two thirds were financially insecure or at risk financially. SVs demonstrated a need for paid employment while pursuing higher education. Although limited by a small sample size, there was an inverse relationship between work and educational involvement. Given that Vogt et al. (2022) found veterans' paid employment increased over time since separation, SV full time enrollment may be in jeopardy over time.

Paradoxically, while the scores for financial well-being were low, there was no relationship between financial and educational well-being. This is not surprising as SV using the Post 9/11 GI Bill were more likely to be working while enrolled and more likely to complete their post-secondary education than the general population (Cate et al., 2017). For those on active-duty status, their military service is their employment. However, those in the National Guard and Reserve forces have both military duty and civilian employment obligations that they must fulfill. Federal law stipulates military duty is non-negotiable and SV academic status is protected when on duty. Just as employers are required to preserve military members' employment, faculty should be prepared to offer accommodations to preserve student status when SV are called to service.

Implications

The results provide insight into the work, health, and social aspects of SV that can be addressed in the academic setting to foster educational well-being. Campus-wide, faculty, staff, and students can enhance the academic experiences of student veterans through interpersonal relationships and cognizance of cultural differences and biases related to military service. A supportive academic environment is not only generated by those who interact with SVs, but also through academic systems, rules, and regulations. These dynamics will be explored in the context of the SVs educational well-being.

Relationships

High SV educational functioning, which includes interpersonal relationships in the academic setting, was related to high social satisfaction at home and in their community. However, Vogt et al. (2022) noted that over a three-year timeframe since exiting the military, community involvement declined. Although participants reported high satisfaction within their social relationships, 12.1% reported having no social connections including family or friends. This finding could be detrimental as social isolation places SV at greater risk for mental health conditions and suicide; loneliness has been identified as the number one trigger for mental health crises among veterans (Graham, 2022). Although a crisis may be experienced differently for every person, loneliness is a significant predictor of depression severity and suicidal ideation in veterans (Teo et al., 2018). Social involvement and relationships can be fostered by academic institutions through opportunities for SVs to socialize, which encourages satisfactory interpersonal relationships both on campus and at home in the community.

Blending Cultures

SVs are transitioning from military to civilian cultures or balancing the two - finding ways to belong and establish an identity within these cultures (Joseph et al., 2022). Maximizing SV military life experience, which is characterized by focusing on the whole rather than self, may foster socialization and academic success (Kartchner, 2023). Including team-based assignments in coursework and the opportunity to work with peer students more frequently may increase camaraderie and lead to SV satisfaction in the academic community. Capitalizing on their military experience as applicable to the material that is being discussed provides affirmation of their life experience and heightens the educational experience for themselves and their peers. Furthermore, working while enrolled in college promotes self-discipline and life skills that are beneficial to academic progression (Schneider, 2022). Ingrained in military values, SVs bring these skills to the classroom. Encouraging SVs to share their knowledge, skills, and abilities garnered in military life can support socialization in the academic setting and may also increase SV broad social functioning.

Supportive Academic Environment

SVs have a wealth of life experience and can be resilient. Yet, transitioning to the academic environment may require SVs to develop a new set of skills. Unfortunately, although more than 95% of faculty and staff surveyed at over 20 geographically disparate campuses believe that it is part of faculty, staff, and administration's role to create a supportive

environment, more than 75% of faculty do not feel prepared to discuss SVs' concerns (Albright & Bryan, 2018). Faculty sensitivity to understanding military life experiences, physical and psychological conditions associated with service, and financial and family stressors can support SVs in progression through their academic programs. Faculty should observe SVs with behaviors such as restlessness and agitation as indicators of academic difficulty and initiate a conversation; often, it just takes a willingness to be present and listen to their story. Asking open-ended questions, mentioning specific behavioral concerns, and normalizing any follow-up referrals can communicate faculty concerns while respecting SVs' personal experiences.

Sensitivity to SVs' unique needs is required of the academic community to foster success. It is essential that faculty are informed of federal regulations that protect Veterans and service members (Readmission Requirements for Servicemembers, 2009). Veteran status is one of the protected classes in anti-discrimination law, initially related to labor practices with the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 (VEVRAA) and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA), which offered employment protections for Veterans and Servicemembers. Readmission Requirements for Servicemembers (2009) requires educational institutions to readmit students in the same academic status at the same point where they left off when, as members of the uniformed services, they left to fulfill their obligations. The law further states that this includes all members of the service, delineating that National Guard and Reserve servicemembers in any status are included in these protections. This law, while focused on readmission to educational programs, demonstrates that military obligations supersede academic obligations. Faculty should respect SVs' military obligations and endeavor to find ways for them to complete their academic requirements. See Supplemental Material for more information on federal regulations.

Biases

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion of SVs on campus requires academia to address the explicit and implicit biases against veterans in general society and academia. Motl et al. (2022) found that SVs perceive both positive and negative biases due to their military background. Stereotypes of veterans being mentally ill, stuck-in-the-past, and tense can lead to social challenges, and stereotypes of veterans as leaders and disciplined may produce higher academic expectations. Furthermore, SVs' understanding of stereotypes aimed at veterans are important to understand, as these perceptions influence how this population is perceived in the academic environment.

Stereotypes of veterans may create implicit or explicit biases in faculty. Research on bias among teachers found that this can create invisible barriers to students' opportunities, let alone their success in school (DeCuir-Gunby & Bidra, 2022). SV cultural competency training for faculty would not only support SV transition to and success in the academic environment but would also assist faculty in understanding their own implicit and explicit biases (Knoer, 2023; Lim et al., 2018; St Pierre, 2017; Treadaway, 2022).

Systems Approach

As suggested by the literature, a comprehensive approach to SVs across the academic enterprise would be most supportive of this population (Eakman et al., 2019; Klaw et al., 2021; Rattray et al., 2019). This support would include developing a campus-wide culture that promotes SV well-being, dedicated spaces for social support, central coordination of Veteran services, and faculty and staff awareness to meet the challenges and issues unique to SVs.

Faculty could promote social, educational, and emotional well-being in SVs by completing training on military cultural competency and veteran health (Albright & Bryan, 2018), assisting SVs in finding meaning in their military experiences in relation to their academic studies (Sullivan et al., 2021), and fostering inclusion in cohorts (Barry et al., 2021). Further suggestions for supporting SV health can be found in the Veterans Affairs “College Toolkit” which is available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/student-veteran/index.asp>.

Limitations

Generalizability of the findings to other academic settings is limited by the small sample size, lack of statistical power, and the short duration of data collection that is inherent in a feasibility study design.

CONCLUSION

Service members make sacrifices to serve their country and there are times faculty may not understand the issues or concerns that these individuals experience. The WBI is a feasible option to assess educational well-being of SVs at a post-secondary institution. It is notable that SVs face financial instability, health conditions, and social isolation while attending college, yet the results of the WBI in this study indicated a general state of well-being in SVs. Future studies should consider financial stability, health, and other vulnerabilities and how these relate to academic success, faculty awareness, sensitivity, and accommodations. SVs have accumulated extensive life experiences and capabilities that offer much to the academic environment, despite less-than-optimal well-being in other dimensions of life.

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Supplemental Material

Excerpts from 34 Code of Federal Regulations Section 688.18 Related to Higher Education and Protections for Servicemembers

C.F.R. 34 § 688.18 Readmission requirements for servicemembers.

(a) *General.*

(1) An institution may not deny readmission to a person who is a member of, applies to be a member of, performs, has performed, applies to perform, or has an obligation to perform, service in the uniformed services on the basis of that membership, application for membership, performance of service, application for service, or obligation to perform service. ...

(4) The requirements of this section supersede any State law (including any local law or ordinance), contract, agreement, policy, plan, practice, or other matter that reduces, limits, or eliminates in any manner any right or benefit provided by this section for the period of enrollment during which the student resumes attendance, and continuing so long as the institution is unable to comply with such requirements through other means. ...

(b) *Service in the uniformed services.* For purposes of this section, service in the uniformed services means service, whether voluntary or involuntary, in the Armed Forces, including service by a member of the National Guard or Reserve, on active duty, active duty for training, or full-time National Guard duty under Federal authority.

Note. Code of Federal Regulations Title 34 Section 688.18. Readmission requirements for servicemembers.

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-VI/part-668/subpart-B/section-668.18>